

## **MISERY LOVES COMPANY: A DYADIC APPROACH TO EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS ON FRIENDSHIP DISCORD**

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This study examined (1) whether individuals' depressive symptoms are related to their own and their friends' perceptions of friendship discord and (2) whether similarity or complementarity of two friends' depressive symptoms are related to both individuals' perceptions of friendship discord. Young adult same-sex friends ( $N=209$  pairs) completed self-report measures capturing their depressive symptoms and friendship discord. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) showed that individuals' depressive symptoms were associated with higher self-perceptions of friendship discord. In contrast, individuals' depressive symptoms were not significantly related to their friends' perceptions of friendship discord. Interestingly, results showed that friendship discord (perceived by both friends) was higher when a more depressive individual was paired with a less depressive friend.

**Keywords:** depressive symptoms; friends; friendship quality; Actor-Partner Interdependence Model; young adults

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Close friends are important sources of companionship and social support, especially during adolescence and young adulthood (Carberry & Buhrmester, 1998; Chow, Roelse, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2011). Therefore, it is important to investigate factors that may contribute to adjustment in friendships. Because depressive symptoms have been identified as an important indicator of relationship difficulties (Hames, Hagan, & Joiner, 2013; Rose et al., 2011), this study examined the associations between individuals' depressive symptoms and friendship discord (e.g., conflict; Hames et al., 2013; Rose et al., 2011). Within the framework of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), we examined whether individuals' depressive symptoms were related to their own and their friends' perceptions of friendship discord. Furthermore, we examined whether the combination of two friends' depressive symptoms would be more indicative of their relationship discord, beyond the effects of either one member's depressive symptoms.

## DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AND FRIENDSHIP DISCORD

Individuals with more depressive symptoms may experience increased risk of interpersonal difficulties (Coyne, 1976; Hames et al., 2013; Joiner, 2002; McCabe & Gotlib, 1993), including difficulties in friendships during adolescence and young adulthood (Prinstein, Borelli, Cheah, Simon, & Aikins, 2005; Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012; Sentse & Laird, 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck, Trevaskis, Nesdale, & Downey, 2014). For instance, research indicates that individuals with more depressive symptoms are more likely to report conflict in their close friendships (Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012). There are several possible explanations for the association between depressive symptoms and friendship discord. First, individuals with depressive symptoms may display undesirable interpersonal behaviors (e.g., excessive reassurance seeking, maladaptive conflict resolution strategies) that may elicit rejection and hostility from friends (Chango, Boykin McElhaney, & Allen, 2009; Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999). Second, based on self-verification process theory, individuals with depressive symptoms may seek out or even create maladjusted friendships that are consistent with their negative

world views (Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996). Third, individuals with depressive symptoms may view their social relationships in a negative light, which may bias their perceptions of interpersonal experiences (Coyne, 1976; Siegel & Alloy, 1990).

Because previous research on depressive symptoms and friendship discord has utilized a single-reporter design (e.g., Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012), researchers have yet to determine whether individuals with more depressive symptoms elicit more negative friendship experiences or whether their reports of friendship discord are colored by their subjective biases. In order to disentangle these two possibilities, a multiple-informant method can be used to capture friendship discord (e.g., Chow, Ruhl, & Buhrmester, 2013; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). For instance, an association between individuals' depressive symptoms and their friends' perceptions of friendship discord, while controlling for their friends' depressive symptoms, would indicate that perceptions of friendship discord are not purely due to self-report biases (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). Therefore, we argue that a dyadic design in which two friends' perspectives are considered simultaneously is important for understanding the links between depressive symptoms and friendship dynamics. Specifically, a dyadic design would permit the examination of depressive symptoms and friendship discord at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. At the intrapersonal level, for instance, it is possible that individuals' depressive symptoms are related to their own perceptions of more friendship discord. At the interpersonal level, individuals with more depressive symptoms may have friends who perceive more discord in the relationship (Coyne, 1976; Joiner et al., 1999).

## **SIMILARITY AND COMPLEMENTARITY OF FRIENDS' DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS**

According to interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Wickham & Knee, 2012), two partners constitute a unique dyadic system that is often beyond the "sum" of each individual's characteristics. Therefore, the combination of two partners' characteristics would be more indicative of their relationship quality, beyond the effects of either one member's characteristics. Although some studies have demonstrated a link between depressive symptoms and friendship discord in adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Ranney & Troop-

Gordon, 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2014), little is known about how the combination of two friends' depressive symptoms may explain perceptions of friendship discord.

According to research on dyadic coping, similarity in two partners' negative characteristics (e.g., maladaptive coping) is less desirable for relationship outcomes (e.g., Badr, 2004; Chow, Buhrmester, & Tan, 2014). Congruently, similarity in two partners' positive characteristics (e.g., approach coping) is related to better relationship outcomes (Kraemer, Stanton, Meyerowitz, Rowland, & Ganz, 2011). Extending these ideas to the current research, it is reasonable to argue that dyads in which both friends are high in depressive symptoms will experience more friendship discord than dyads in which both friends are low in depressive symptoms. In addition to the similarity effect, a complementarity effect in friends' depressive symptoms is also plausible (Badr, 2004; Chow et al., 2014). Specifically, although individuals' depressive symptoms are expected to be related to their own perceptions of more friendship discord, having a friend who is low in depressive symptoms may buffer against such an association. Similarly, an individual's own low levels of depressive symptoms may buffer against the effects of a friend's high depressive levels on the individual's perceptions of friendship discord. Because similarity and complementarity effects have received little attention in this area of research, the current study represents an important step towards better understanding the dyadic nature of depressive symptoms and friendship discord.

## ACTOR-PARTNER INTERDEPENDENCE MODEL

The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006) is a statistical model that examines how an individual's perceptions of a relationship outcome are simultaneously and independently predicted by their own characteristics and their partner's characteristics. In this study, it is possible to examine how friendship discord is shaped by an individual's own depressive symptoms (actor effect), as well as a friend's depressive symptoms (partner effect). Most importantly, this model also permits the examination of how similarity or complementarity of two friends' depressive symptoms may contribute to different levels of friendship discord (actor-partner interaction effect). The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

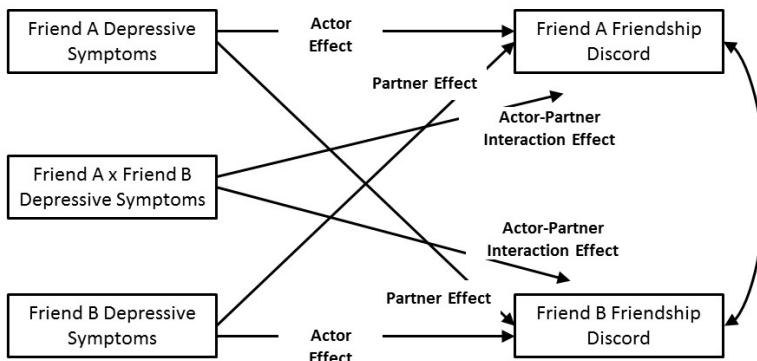


FIGURE 1. Graphical representation of the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. Although not shown, gender and friendship duration were included as covariates. Also, although not depicted, all predictors were allowed to covary.

As depicted in Figure 1, we hypothesized that individuals with more depressive symptoms would report more relationship discord in their friendship. We also hypothesized that friends' depressive symptoms would be related to individuals' perceptions of friendship discord. Consistent with interdependence theory, we hypothesized that individuals' own depressive symptoms and friends' depressive symptoms would interact to predict both individuals' perceptions of friendship discord. Two hypotheses based on similarity and complementarity effects were examined. The hypothesis for a similarity effect postulates that dyads in which both friends are high in depressive symptoms will have the most friendship discord perceived by both friends. In contrast, dyads in which both friends are low in depressive symptoms will have the least friendship discord perceived by both friends. The hypothesis for a complementarity effect postulates that when two friends' depressive symptoms are complementary, the negative effect of individuals' depressive symptoms on their own perception of friendship discord will be buffered by their friends' lower depressive symptoms. Furthermore, the negative effect of friend's depressive symptoms on individuals' own perceptions of friendship discord will be buffered by their own lower depressive symptoms.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Participants were 209 pairs of same-sex friends attending a mid-size Midwestern university ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.93$  years;  $SD = 1.31$ , 66% female). Participants were asked to bring a close friend with them to participate in the study and received course credits. Both friends completed a computer-administered survey in a laboratory using separate computers located in separated spaces. The duration of friendships varied ( $M = 3.55$  years,  $SD = 4.46$ ). The final sample was 83.9% Caucasian, 5.6% African American, 4.9% Asian, 2.4% Hispanic, 0.2% Native American, 0.2% Middle Eastern, and 2.4% other/mixed.

### MEASURES

*Depressive Symptoms.* Participants completed the 6-item depressive symptoms subscale of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). Participants read a list of problems and complaints and reported on how often they experienced that problem (e.g., "Feeling no interest in things") on a scale ranging from 1 (Almost never) to 4 (Almost always). For this study, the reliability of the subscale was excellent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

*Friendship Discord.* Participants' perceptions of friendship discord were assessed with the Network of Relationships Inventory-Relationship Quality Version (NRI-RQV; Buhrmester, 1992). Specifically, discord was measured with 15 items assessing five features of relationship discord (i.e., conflict, criticism, dominance, pressure, exclusion). An example item is, "How often do you and this person argue with each other?" Participants responded on a scale from 1 (Never or hardly at all) to 5 (Always or extremely much). Composite scores for discord were computed by averaging the 15 items. For this study, the reliability of the discord scale was excellent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

### PLAN OF ANALYSES

According to Kenny et al. (2006), same-sex friends are considered indistinguishable dyads because Friend A and Friend B play equal

**TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between the Key Study Variables**

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender (0 = M, 1 = F)	—					
2. Friendship Duration	-.12*	—				
3. Self-Depressive Symptoms	.03	-.09	—			
4. Friend-Depressive Symptoms	.03	-.09	.02	—		
5. Self-Friendship Discord	-.21**	.17**	.19**	-.07	—	
6. Friend-Friendship Discord	-.21**	.17**	-.07	.19**	.28**	—
<i>M</i>	—	3.55	1.59	1.59	1.75	1.75
<i>SD</i>	—	4.46	.53	.53	.58	.58

Note. Coefficients were computed based on double-entry data; thus, the means, standard deviations, and correlations for study variables were equal for both friends. Significance tests were based on number of dyads ( $N = 209$ ). \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

roles in the relationship. Therefore, based on Kenny et al.'s (2006) recommendation, the dyadic data were restructured using the pairwise method (for examples, see Chow et al., 2013; Chow & Tan, 2013). Therefore, Friend A and Friend B have identical means, standard deviations, and correlation matrices. With the restructured data, descriptive analyses were first conducted (i.e., means, standard deviations, correlations). Then, the main APIM hypotheses were examined using multilevel modeling implemented by SPSS 20.0's Mixed Models (Kenny et al., 2006). To facilitate interpretation of results, all predictors were standardized to the grand mean. An interaction term was formed based on the standardized predictors (Aiken & West, 1991). Pseudo- $R^2$  was also calculated to indicate the approximate amount of variance explained by the predictors. Significance of the pseudo- $R^2$  was tested with a chi-square difference test.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. An APIM based on the theoretical model (Figure 1) was estimated. Because gender and friendship duration were related to friendship discord, they were included as covariates in the APIM. The overall model fit for the APIM was significant,  $\chi^2(5) = 54.62$ , Pseudo- $R^2 = .13$ ,  $p < .01$ ; the predictors together explained approximately 13% of the variance in friendship discord. The actor effect showed that individuals who were higher in de-

pressive symptoms reported more relationship discord with their friend ( $b = .12$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The partner effect showed that depressive symptoms were not significantly related to friends' perceptions of discord ( $b = -.03$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p = .21$ ). The interaction between actor depressive symptoms and partner depressive symptoms was found significant ( $b = -.10$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p = .002$ ).

In order to display this interaction, Figure 2 presents a graphical representation derived by calculating the simple slopes corresponding to one standard deviation above and below the mean for depressive symptoms (Aiken & West, 1991). Simple slopes analysis showed that the effect of individuals' depressive symptoms on their own perceptions of friendship discord was no longer significant when both friends were high in depressive symptoms ( $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .58$ ). In contrast, the effect of individuals' own depressive symptoms on their own perceptions of friendship discord was significant when their friend was low in depressive symptoms ( $b = .22$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Inspection of Figure 2 shows that the similarity and complementarity hypotheses were only partially supported. Consistent with the similarity hypothesis, friends who were both low in depressive symptoms also had the lowest level of friendship discord. Although we proposed that friends who were both high in depressive symptoms would experience the highest level of friendship discord, this hypothesis was not supported. Consistent with the complementarity hypothesis, individuals with lower depressive symptoms also reported lower friendship discord, despite their friend reporting more depressive symptoms. Contrary to our expectation, friends' low depressive symptoms did not buffer against the effect of individuals' depressive symptoms on their own perceptions of friendship discord. Surprisingly, individuals' depressive symptoms had the largest effect on their own perceptions of friendship discord when their friend was low in depressive symptoms.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the interdependence of depressive symptoms and friendship discord among same-sex friends. With its dyadic design, the current study makes two important contributions to the existing literature. First, this study addressed whether perceptions of friendship discord are solely influenced by self-report bias by ex-

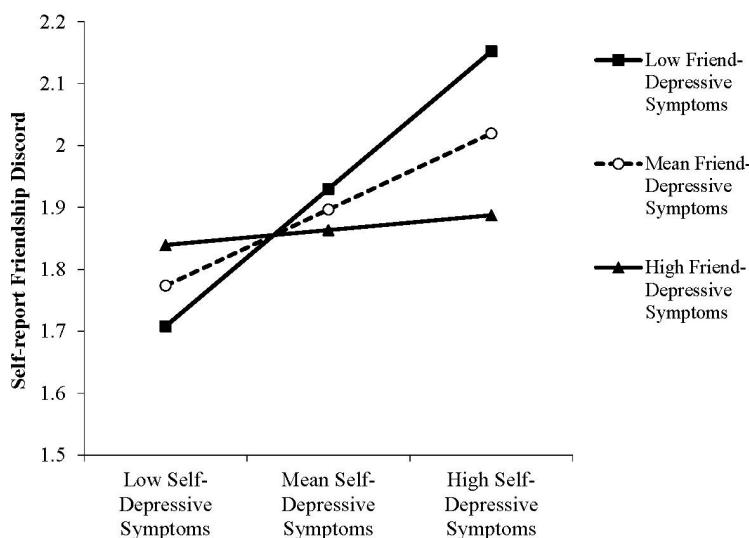


FIGURE 2. Interactive effect of individuals' own depressive symptoms (actor) and friends' depressive symptoms (partner) on individuals' own friendship discord. Simple slopes show one standard deviation above and below the mean for depressive symptoms.

amining partner-level associations between depressive symptoms and friendship discord. Second, an examination of an actor-partner interaction of depressive symptoms on friendship discord shows that the characteristics of two friends combined are more predictive of relationship discord, above and beyond each person's individual characteristics.

## DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AND FRIENDSHIP DISCORD

As expected, individuals who experienced more depressive symptoms reported more friendship discord, which is consistent with previous research (Sentse & Laird, 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2014). This within-individual association (actor effect) implies that individuals with more depressive symptoms may view their social relationships through negative lenses and, thus, perceive that their friendships are higher in discord. Alternatively, it is possible that individuals with more depressive symptoms exhibit behaviors (e.g., excessive reassurance-seeking) that are undesirable or frustrating to their partner. In this context, individuals with more depressive

symptoms may feel that their friend is unavailable for their desired level of social support and possibly critical of their attempts to seek comfort, explaining the actor-level association between depressive symptoms and friendship discord.

This study shed light on whether the link between depressive symptoms and friendship discord was purely due to individuals' negative world views. Past research on college students showed that individuals with a depressive roommate perceived their relationships to be more negative (Siegel & Alloy, 1990), suggesting that individuals with more depressive symptoms may experience actual negative interactions in their relationships. Surprisingly, we found little support for this claim in that the partner effect showed that individuals' depressive symptoms were not significantly related to their friends' perceptions of friendship discord. Because friendships may be less interdependent than roommate relationships, in which the dyads live together, it is possible that individuals' depressive symptoms may have a less robust direct influence on friends' perceptions of relationship discord.

Although we did not find support for the partner-level association between depressive symptoms and friendship discord, it cannot be assumed that individuals' depressive symptoms do not play a role in their friends' perceptions of friendship discord. Indeed, an actor-partner interaction effect was found to be significant. These findings suggest that relationship quality is often the outcome of two individuals' characteristics combined, rather than each individual's own characteristics (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). In support of the similarity hypothesis, friends who were both low in depressive symptoms also had the lowest level of friendship discord. Surprisingly, friends who were both high in depressive symptoms did not experience the highest level of friendship discord. Instead, their friendship discord was, on average, only moderate. In support of the complementarity hypothesis, individuals with lower depressive symptoms also reported lower friendship discord, despite their friend reporting more depressive symptoms. Surprisingly, however, individuals with more depressive symptoms reported the most friendship discord when their friend was low in depressive symptoms.

There are several possible explanations for the actor-partner interaction effect. First, previous research on friendships and marital relationships found that individuals with more depressive symptoms were more likely to exhibit maladaptive conflict resolution strate-

gies when dealing with problems in their relationships (e.g., Chango et al., 2009; Du Rocher Schudlich, Papp, & Cummings, 2011). Thus, discrepancies in friends' depressive symptoms may manifest as differences in two individuals' strategies for dealing with challenges in the friendship, which could potentially escalate relational challenges. Second, individuals with more depressive symptoms tend to have excessive needs for closeness, appearing clingy and overly dependent upon their partners (Whiffen & Aube, 1999). In other words, discrepancies in friends' desires for closeness may explain the association between differences in depressive symptoms and friendship discord. Third, research on co-rumination suggests that when two friends share their negative moods and problems, a sense of intimacy and validation may emerge, leading to closer ties between the friends (Rose, 2002). In other words, two friends who are high in depressive symptoms may have more intimate friendships that shield them from experiencing higher discord.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several limitations of the study that should be considered when reflecting on the findings. First, because this study was based on a cross-sectional data set, it is impossible to draw causal links between depressive symptoms and relationship discord. Indeed, the interpersonal theory of depression suggests that reciprocal associations between depressive symptoms and interpersonal difficulties may exist over time (Rehman, Gollan, & Mortimer, 2008). Therefore, future research should consider a longitudinal design for examining the directional influences of depressive symptoms on friendship discord, and vice versa. Second, because this study was based on self-report data, objective assessments of depressive symptoms were not obtained. Thus, although the dyadic design captured perspectives on relationship discord from both members, future research should consider adopting a more objective measure of depressive symptoms. For instance, future research could include both individuals' reports of each friend's depressive symptoms. Finally, this study was based only on a young adult sample. Intimate friendships play an important role in psychological development during adolescence as well as young adulthood (Chow et al., 2011). Therefore, future research should focus on the similarity

and complementarity of interpersonal dynamics across these two developmental periods.

## CONCLUSION

Although there are numerous studies on the links between depressive symptoms and marital quality (Rehman et al., 2008), limited research has focused on friendships, despite the important social support functions that friendships serve during young adulthood (Chow et al., 2011). The current study represents the first effort to adopt a dyadic framework in the investigation of depressive symptoms and friendship discord. Results highlight the notion that the depressive symptoms of two friends combined may influence relationship outcomes beyond each friend's individual depressive symptoms. The dyadic framework exhibited in this study is an important stepping stone for examining relationship outcomes in other types of dyads, including marital couples and parent-child dyads.

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