

## **Early Adolescents' Significant Others: Grade and Gender Differences in Perceived Relationships with Familial and Nonfamilial Adults and Young People**

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*In order to provide a fuller and more satisfying description of the significant others in the social world of an adolescent, the Social Relations Questionnaire was developed and then administered to almost 3000 seventh- through tenth-graders in a midwestern suburban school district. The sample was randomly split in half and analyses were run on both halves separately to test for replicability. Results indicated that parents and siblings are almost always listed as significant others by adolescents in all four grade levels. Furthermore, the majority of adolescents listed at least one extended family adult and at least one nonrelated adult as important in their lives. The nonrelated adults lived closer to the adolescents and were seen more frequently and in more contexts than extended family members. Fewer extended family adults were listed in the older grades. Females listed more significant others than males both overall and in terms of both same- and opposite-sex nonrelated young people. As hypothesized, an increasing number of opposite-sex young people was listed as a function of grade level. Most nonrelated young people listed (a loose definition of peers) were from the same grade, same school, and same neighborhood as the respondent.*

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*The authors conclude that age-segregation in this community is not extreme (over 40% of the significant others listed were adults) and that the Social Relations Questionnaire provides a useful and holistic description of an adolescent's social world.*

## INTRODUCTION

Research on adolescent social relations has generally stressed the relative influence of parents versus peers (e.g., Berndt, 1979; Biddle *et al.*, 1980; Brittain, 1963, 1967; Bowerman & Kinch, 1959; Condry & Siman, 1974; Devereux, 1970; Kandel and Lesser, 1969); or peer group popularity and status and their effects (e.g., Cohen, 1977; Dunphy, 1963; Harvey and Rutherford, 1960; Sherif and Sherif, 1964); or the effects of parenting practices upon adolescent behavior (e.g., Baumrind, 1975; Elder, 1968). Such studies have provided insights into aspects of adolescents' social relations; but, whether taken separately or together, they do not provide a full or satisfying description of adolescents' social worlds. This statement is not intended so much as a critique of previous work as a realization that a more holistic approach may yield valuable new opportunities for understanding adolescents.

There are several reasons why our present understanding of adolescents' social worlds is unsatisfactory. One is that relations with adults other than parents have, for the most part, been ignored in empirical studies. Adult siblings and extended family members have generally not been considered in studies of adolescent social influence. The influence of teachers, youth leaders, and adult co-workers is widely debated in relation to adolescent work experience, drug use and abuse, and access to nonfamilial role definers and models. Yet there is little empirical information about the extent to which nonparental adults play significant roles in the social development of adolescents.

The role of siblings as potential significant others in adolescents' social relations and development also has been neglected. Siblings of about the same age or of secondary school age are not often implicated in policy discussions about "normal" or problematic adolescent behavior—let alone included in empirical research. Yet siblings may be especially important sources of information, advice, support, and supply (e.g., cigarettes, liquor, other drugs) to adolescents either directly or through access to the former's own (older) peers.

Although peers have long been recognized as influential significant others, what constitutes a "peer" has not received much attention. "Peers" sometimes means all other young people, as opposed to adults. Possible differential impacts of associations with older, same-age, and younger peers

have been rarely studied. In existing research, "peers" are defined most often by the classroom or school setting of the study. While school-based associations may be easier to study empirically, neighborhood or other outside-of-school associations may be just as important for the structuring of adolescents' relationships. In their pioneering effort, Montemayor and Van Komen (1980) observed 403 adolescents in 153 groups found on the campuses of three high schools and in seven out-of-school settings. Brief interviews were conducted to determine the ages and the type of relationship existing between a randomly chosen target adolescent and his or her companions in the observed interaction. Greater age differences between target adolescents and their companions were observed in out-of-school than in-school settings, and in mixed-sex than in same-sex groups. The age differences are clouded, however, since many of the adolescents' companions in out-of-school groups were parents (particularly mothers) rather than older youth or nonparental adults. Despite its failure to include more intimate social contexts, the Montemayor and Van Komen approach to examining companionship in a variety of actual public settings calls attention to the importance of setting differences for the structuring of adolescents' social relations and suggests the potential for evoking lists of significant others by setting.

Despite long-standing speculations about the nature and consequences of the composition of adolescents' social worlds, there have been few direct empirical attempts to describe them. As Montemayor and Van Komen (1980) note, speculations about the causes and effects of age segregation and associated family breakdown and the growth of adolescent peer cultures (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Coleman, 1974; Handlin and Handlin, 1971; Musgrove, 1964) have not generally been accompanied by suitable empirical documentation of these phenomena. The Montemayor and Van Komen study is said to demonstrate extensive age segregation, yet the method employed is biased against showing the extent of association with older adults, since no family, workplace, inside-school, or youth-activity group observations were made. Thirty-seven percent of the public companions of adolescents in out-of-school settings, in fact, proved to be adults. This percentage seems to be astonishingly high in relation to the assertions of the more pessimistic age-segregation theorists.

A recent study of Garbarino *et al.* (1978) also bears on these issues. Sixth-graders were asked to list the 10 most significant others in their social worlds. Nonparental adults comprised 19.1% to 33.3% of the sixth-graders' lists. Daily contact with adults was limited, however, with 60% of the suburban children reporting no daily interactions with adults. Moreover, when pubertal status was taken into account, preadolescent children reported 31% of their 10 most important persons to be adults, transitional adolescent children reported 20%, and early adolescent children reported

only 11%. The lower number of adults rated as important as a function of youth's pubertal status and suburban residence are cited as illustrative of the age segregation of adolescents in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1970; Musgrove, 1964). However, Garbarino *et al.*'s limitation of significant others to a list of 10 may have worked against including more adults, owing to the greater salience that relations with peers may have for adolescents. It is known that fluctuations in adolescent friendship relations are common (Thompson and Horrocks, 1947). Such fluctuations, along with the adaptations involved in defining social relations in increasingly heterosocial and heterosexual terms, may make other young people more salient than adults, and hence more likely to be mentioned on a short list of significant others.

The purpose of the present study is to provide a description of adolescent social relations that is responsive to the issues identified above, including the absence of information about differences in overall patterns of social relations during adolescence (a period when it is frequently assumed that major changes in young people's social worlds are occurring). The significant others of males and females from seventh through tenth grades are examined. Analyses also take into account the gender of the significant other in the reported relationships. Three questions are addressed:

1. Are those named as significant others principally adults or young people, of familial or non-familial status?
2. Do the types of persons named as significant others vary with grade level and gender of the adolescent respondent?
3. How do the different types of significant others named vary in terms of frequency and type of interaction, proximity of residence, and (for peers) school and grade level?

In addition, we advance two hypotheses on the basis of presently existing knowledge. These hypotheses, if confirmed in an initial analysis and in a replication, would not only demonstrate their robustness under a new method of inquiry but also lend some construct validity to the new instrument we introduce here. First, we hypothesize that more peers than adults will be named as significant others with increasing age, but this will not occur at the expense of parents. That is, findings from the literature on parent versus peer influence, largely employing techniques in which subjects are asked to judge vignettes where a baseline importance for both parents and peers is assumed, should also hold when respondents are free to nominate any and all significant others. Parents continue to be important sources of social influence in some (but not all) important domains during the second decade of life (see Hill, 1980, for a review). Given their continued influence, parents should be mentioned as significant others by a plurality of adolescents responding to instruments that enable the

spontaneous generation of a list of significant others. Second, we hypothesize that more opposite-sex peers will be nominated as significant others in the upper end of the age range studied in light of well-known increases in dating and sexual activity during this period (see Chillman, 1979, for a review). Moreover, this increase should be especially pronounced for girls, whose pubertal development is on the average two years ahead of that of boys, and who, therefore, are more likely to be seen and responded to as potential dating and sexual partners.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Over 2800 seventh- through tenth-grade male and female students in a rapidly growing midwestern suburban public school district were given a Social Relations Questionnaire (Blyth and Hill, 1980; Blyth, 1982) in the spring of 1979. Students included in the study represented 92% of the student population in grades seven through ten within the district. Only students who were absent on the day of administration (4%) or who lacked parent permission (4%) did not participate. Two junior high school buildings (containing grades seven and eight) and one intermediate high school (containing only ninth- and tenth-graders) were included in the study. The students were predominantly from middle class college-educated families, with a high degree of marital stability. For example, 60% of the respondents' fathers were college educated and 70% had middle to upper middle class occupations; 85% of the students reported their parents were currently married and living together.

### Instrument

The Social Relations Questionnaire consists of three parts: a few demographic questions; a sheet on which respondents are asked to list their significant others; and a set of questions about each significant other a respondent lists. *Significant others* is the term used here to refer to persons in an adolescent's social relations with whom there is a perceived attachment and/or social influence relationship. Instead of inquiring about friends or asking about others with whom one shares activities (the typical sociometric approach) or observing public companions (Montemayor and Van Komen, 1980), we chose, in part, to follow the course of Garbarino *et al.* (1978). Like them, we inquired about the significant others in adolescents' lives; unlike them, we did not restrict list size. Respondents were asked to

list important people in their lives, that is, people who meet one or more of the following conditions:

- People you spend time with or do things with,
- People you like a lot or who like you a lot or both,
- People who make important decisions about things in your life,
- People who you go to for advice, or
- People you would like to be like.

To partially control for differences in cognitive ability and to be sure that all possible important people would be listed, regardless of the setting they were seen in, respondents were asked to list important young people and adults who were from four contexts: their family, their school, their neighborhood, or activities outside of school. Finally, a fifth list consisting of any important others who did not fit the defined categories was elicited. By so structuring the instrument, we were able to make the task more uniform across subjects. Previous work in developing instruments of this type had shown this to be an important consideration (Blyth, 1982).

After all lists were completed, the student was asked a series of questions for each person listed. The questions included information on the important person's age, gender, residence, familial relationship to the respondent, grade and school attended (where appropriate), the frequency with which the person was seen by the respondent in various settings, and several questions on the nature of their relationship. In order to reduce any bias introduced by using a standard listing procedure, the age and setting characteristics used to define each list for elicitation purposes were not used for analysis except to resolve a few ambiguous cases. The categories of persons used in the analysis were derived from data supplied directly by the respondent on each person listed. For example, a person may have initially been listed as a neighborhood adult; but on the basis of more detailed relationship information supplied later in the questionnaire, this person may have been categorized as an extended family adult because he is an uncle of the subject. Thus, for the purposes of this article, a person is classified on the basis of information provided in the subject's description of the individual and not on where or how the person is initially listed.

### **Administration**

The questionnaire was given to students during regular classroom periods. Standard detailed instructions on questionnaire completion were relayed to students by trained questionnaire administrators using overhead transparencies to illustrate examples. Students were given approximately 50 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Only 14.8% of the questionnaires were judged unusable. Most of these unusable questionnaires resulted from respondents not following instructions or not taking the task seriously.

Using the Social Relations Questionnaire the 2,820 respondents in our study listed 46,202 persons. Since there were no restrictions on the number of persons listed, each subject had a variable number of important others or associates. For this analysis respondents, rather than their associates, will be the primary unit of analysis. Associates were classified into 14 categories based on whether the associate was of the same sex as the respondent, whether the associate was a young person or an adult, and the nature of the familial relationship (nuclear, extended, or nonrelated). A young person was defined as any person less than 20 unless that person was in a college or technical school. People in colleges and technical schools were considered adults because of potential ambiguity about their age. Nuclear family members are fathers, mothers, and siblings. Step-parents, foster parents, and step- and half-brothers and sisters are also included as nuclear family members. Extended family members are individuals related by blood (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) or marriage (e.g., in-laws) to the subject, but are not nuclear family members. An extended family member could live in the subject's house, although this was relatively rare. No nonrelated adults or young people were reported to have lived in the subject's home. Information on significant others was aggregated across persons listed for a given respondent to provide a description of an adolescent's social world in terms of the respondent's set of significant others. For example, a respondent listing 10 associates would have each associate classified into a particular category. The number of associates in each category would then be counted and averaged across respondents to obtain means or mean percentages.

After unusable questionnaires were deleted, a final sample of 2403 respondents was randomly split into two parts: one for primary analysis and one for replication. Although results from the primary analysis are presented throughout, only findings that were significant in both halves are presented. Replication results are noted only when they differ from those in the primary analysis.

## RESULTS

For ease in exposition, results will be presented in the following order: size and composition of lists of significant others, parents, siblings, extended family members, nonrelated adults, and nonrelated young people. (We will deal with our hypotheses and three questions more directly in the discussion section.)

In order to provide an overall view of the pattern of significant others listed by seventh- through tenth-graders, Table I presents the mean number

Table I. Mean Number and Mean Percent of Important Others Listed by Relative Gender, Age Group, and Familial Status for Males and Females<sup>a</sup>

	Males (N = 580)						Females (N = 621)					
	Same sex		Opposite sex		Total		Same sex		Opposite sex		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>YOUNG PEOPLE</b>												
Siblings	0.75 (0.8)	6.0 (7.5)	0.66 (0.8)	5.1 (7.3)	1.41 (1.2)	11.1 (10.7)	0.78 (0.9)	5.0 (6.1)	0.72 (0.8)	4.3 (5.2)	1.49 (1.1)	9.3 (7.8)
Extended family	0.54 (0.9)	3.6 (6.3)	0.28 (0.7)	1.8 (4.3)	0.83 (1.3)	5.4 (7.9)	0.70 (1.0)	3.8 (5.4)	0.46 (0.9)	2.4 (4.5)	1.16 (0.9)	6.2 (7.5)
Nonrelated	4.29 (2.8)	30.2 (16.7)	1.23 (1.7)	8.8 (12.0)	5.52 (3.4)	39.1 (18.6)	5.43 (2.8)	31.8 (13.0)	1.82 (1.9)	10.3 (9.7)	7.24 (3.5)	42.1 (14.8)
Total	5.59 (3.1)	39.7 (17.0)	2.17 (1.9)	15.7 (13.6)	7.76 (3.9)	55.5 (16.7)	6.90 (3.1)	40.7 (13.4)	3.0 (2.3)	17.0 (11.4)	9.90 (4.1)	57.6 (13.9)
<b>ADULTS</b>												
Parents	0.94 (0.4)	8.0 (6.2)	0.94 (0.3)	8.0 (5.7)	1.88 (0.6)	16.0 (11.1)	0.98 (0.3)	6.6 (3.8)	0.91 (0.4)	5.8 (3.5)	1.89 (0.5)	12.4 (6.3)
Adult siblings	0.19 (0.5)	1.4 (4.1)	0.18 (0.5)	1.4 (4.1)	0.37 (0.8)	2.8 (6.4)	0.22 (0.6)	1.5 (4.1)	0.20 (0.5)	1.3 (3.8)	0.41 (0.9)	2.8 (6.5)
Extended family	1.08 (1.2)	7.3 (7.9)	1.06 (1.2)	6.9 (7.5)	2.15 (2.1)	14.2 (13.0)	1.63 (1.4)	9.0 (7.0)	1.04 (1.2)	5.5 (5.8)	2.68 (2.3)	14.4 (11.0)
Nonrelated	1.33 (1.6)	8.3 (9.7)	0.56 (1.1)	3.2 (5.8)	1.89 (2.2)	11.6 (12.1)	1.37 (1.5)	7.6 (7.7)	0.94 (1.2)	5.2 (6.3)	2.31 (2.2)	12.8 (10.9)
Total	3.54 (2.2)	25.1 (12.0)	2.75 (1.8)	19.5 (10.5)	6.29 (3.5)	44.5 (16.7)	4.20 (2.2)	24.6 (10.1)	3.09 (1.8)	17.8 (8.5)	7.29 (3.4)	42.4 (13.9)
<b>OVERALL</b>												
Nuclear family	1.88 (1.1)	15.4 (10.7)	1.78 (1.0)	14.4 (10.4)	3.66 (1.6)	29.9 (17.4)	1.98 (1.0)	13.0 (8.6)	1.82 (1.0)	11.5 (7.2)	3.80 (1.5)	24.5 (12.2)
Extended family	1.63 (1.8)	10.8 (10.8)	1.35 (1.6)	8.7 (9.2)	2.98 (3.0)	19.5 (16.6)	2.33 (1.9)	12.8 (9.3)	1.51 (1.7)	7.8 (8.1)	3.84 (3.2)	20.6 (14.5)
Nonrelated	5.62 (3.6)	38.6 (17.9)	1.79 (2.1)	12.0 (13.2)	7.41 (4.6)	50.6 (20.2)	6.79 (3.3)	39.4 (13.7)	2.76 (2.4)	15.5 (11.5)	9.55 (4.5)	54.9 (15.3)
Total	9.13 (4.3)	64.8 (14.8)	4.92 (2.9)	35.2 (14.8)	14.05 (6.1)	100.0 (12.4)	11.10 (4.2)	65.2 (12.4)	6.09 (3.2)	34.8 (12.4)	17.19 (6.2)	100.0 (12.4)

<sup>a</sup>SDs are shown in parentheses.



of people listed and the percentage of those listed in a given category. This information is broken down by the gender of the significant other (same sex versus opposite sex), the age group of the significant other (young people versus adults), and by the familial status of the significant other (nuclear, extended or nonrelated).<sup>4</sup> On the average, males listed 14.5 significant others in their lives as compared to 17.19 significant others for females. Of the significant others listed by the average male and female, approximately two-thirds were of the same sex as the respondent (64.8% for males and 65.2% for females). Similarly, for both males and females over half of the significant others listed, when averaged across respondents, were young people rather than adults (55.5% for males, 57.6% for females). With respect to familial status, we found that on the average over half of the significant others listed by a respondent were not related to him or her. For males 29.9% of the significant others were members of their nuclear family, 19.5% belonged to their extended family, and 50.6% were not related. For females, we found an average of 24.5% of the significant others listed were members of their nuclear family, 20.6% were members of their extended family, and 54.9% were not related. The single most frequent type of significant other listed was nonrelated young people of the same sex (30.2% for males and 31.8% for females). Same- and opposite-sex young people who were not related to the respondent (a generous definition of "peers") made up only approximately 40% of the significant others listed by both males and females.

In order to test for both gender and grade level differences in the mean number of significant others listed in each of the 14 different categories, we used a multivariate analysis of variance framework. This analysis and a replication on a split half of the sample indicated that both significant gender effects ( $F = 15.25$ ,  $df = 1$ , 589,  $p = 0.00001$ ) and grade level effects ( $F = 2.76$ ,  $df = 3$ , 589,  $p = 0.00001$ ). There was no significant gender by grade interaction effect.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 contains the mean number of significant others listed by each of the 14 categories for both males and females in order to highlight significant gender differences. There were significant differences between males and females in 6 of the 14 categories (as indicated

<sup>4</sup>Although we report measures of central tendency, there are large standard deviations throughout Table 1, so that individuals varied enormously. Future analyses are planned to explore and explain these differences.

<sup>5</sup>Attempts to extract functions and examine the standardized discriminant function coefficients for each of the 14 categories proved unsuccessful. Both the number of functions extracted and the variable composition of the functions were unstable from primary to replication samples. Efforts to reduce the number of categories included in the analysis did not remedy this problem. For this reason a decision was made to continue the analysis using categories of persons organized according to familial relationship (nuclear, extended, and nonrelated).

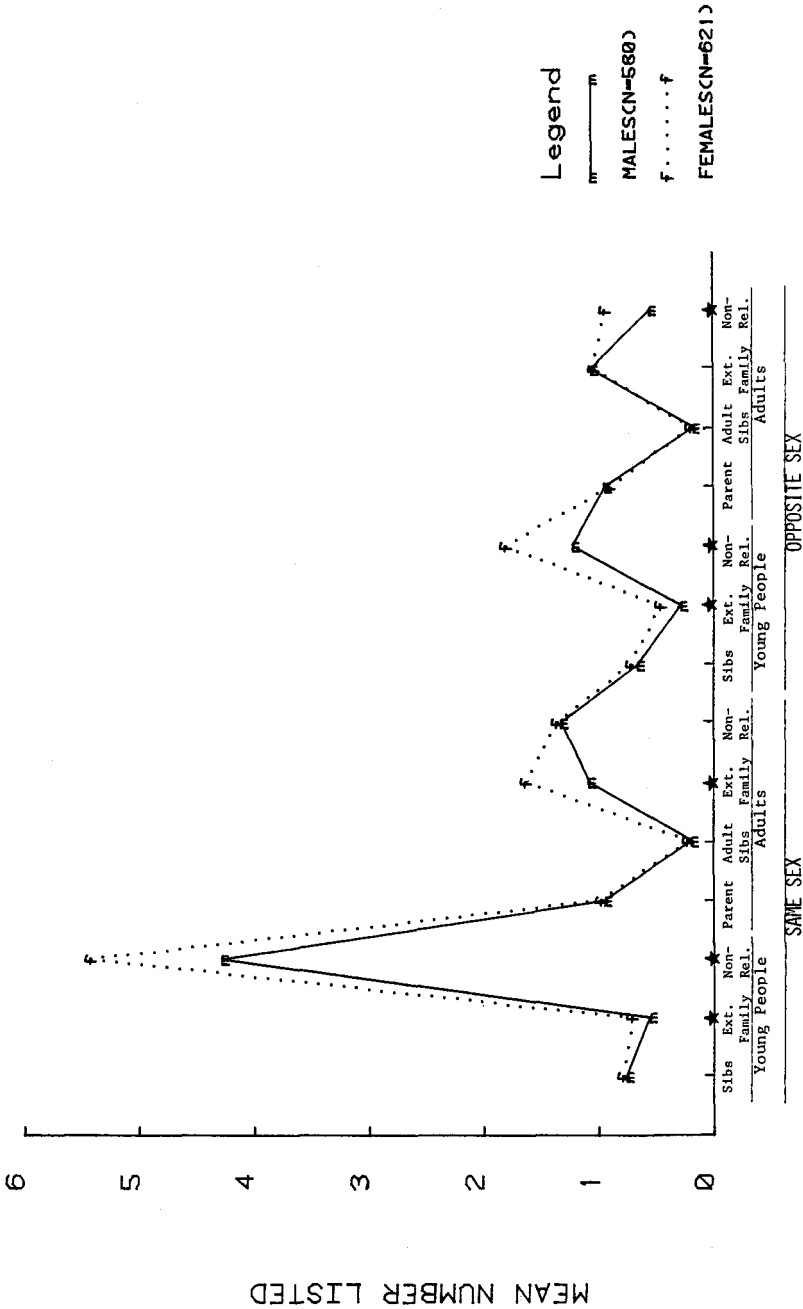


Fig. 1. Mean number of associates listed by type for males and females.

by the asterisks near the category on the horizontal axis). Females were significantly more likely to list nonrelated young people of the both the same and opposite sex. Females were also more likely to list extended family young persons either of the same or opposite sex. Finally, females listed more nonrelated opposite-sex adults than did males. That is, adolescent females listed significantly more nonrelated adult males than male adolescents listed nonrelated adult females.

While there were significant grade level effects which replicated on the multivariate level, few consistent grade-related trends exist in the mean number of persons listed in any of the 14 categories. This may in part be a function of students being in separate schools for seventh and eighth grade than they are in ninth and tenth grade. Furthermore, the factors which contribute to the significant multivariate grade effects tend to be different in the two halves of the sample. The only two grade effects found consistently in both halves of the sample were that respondents in the older grades listed a larger number of opposite-sex nonrelated young people (as hypothesized) and fewer extended family adults (particularly those of the opposite sex). The fact that the predicted age trend in opposite-sex friendships replicated lends validity to the instrument and the insights drawn from it.

### Parents

Of all respondents, 90% to 93% listed one or both of their parents as significant others in their lives. Regardless of the gender of the respondent, the average number of mothers listed is between 0.91 and 0.98, and the average number of fathers is between 0.91 and 0.94. These figures did not change significantly as a function of grade level.

### Siblings

The respondents in this study had an average of 2.4 siblings, with only 3% of the respondents not having any siblings. Given these somewhat larger than average families, to what extent were siblings listed as being important others in the respondents' lives? Only 8.1% of the females and 12.7% of the males who had a sibling failed to list at least one sibling as a significant other. Furthermore, over two-thirds of the respondents with siblings listed all their siblings as significant. On the average, 77% of a respondent's siblings were listed as being significant in his or her life. There were no significant gender or grade level differences in the mean percentage of siblings listed as "important others." Furthermore, respondents listed opposite-sex siblings as significant in their lives just as often as they listed same-sex siblings.

### **Extended Family Members**

Table I indicated that females listed significantly more extended family members than did males (3.84 for females and 2.98 for males) and that extended family members, who were for the most part extended family adults, made up approximately one-fifth of the adolescents' lists of significant others. Overall, 76% of the males and 85% of the females in our sample listed at least one extended family member whom they considered significant in their lives.

Table II contains a more elaborate description of the extended family members listed as significant others. When we examine the location of the extended family members' residence, we find that on the average over 60% of the extended family members (both adults and young people) live outside the metropolitan area in which the respondent lives. Another 23% to 28% live within the same metropolitan area as the respondent, but not in the respondent's own neighborhood or home. Similarly, we note in Table II that the frequency of contact with extended family members is generally "monthly or seldom" with respect to both telephone calls and visits. In fact, further analysis (not shown) revealed that approximately two-thirds of all the extended family members listed by both males and females were seen no more than monthly in any context. In summary, even though three-quarters of the respondents listed at least one extended family member as significant in their lives, levels of residential proximity and frequency of contact with these persons were low.

### **Nonrelated Adults**

A similar description of the nonrelated adults listed as significant others is presented in Table III. Males list an average of 1.89 nonrelated adults as significant in their lives; females list 2.31 nonrelated adults. The only significant gender difference is that females listed slightly more opposite-sex nonrelated adults than did males (0.94 for females and 0.56 for males). Roughly 10% of the significant others in these adolescents' lives were nonrelated adults, most of them of the same sex as the respondent. Sixty percent of the males in our sample listed at least one nonrelated adult, while 75% of the females listed at least one nonrelated adult.

The nonrelated adults listed by these adolescents reside primarily in the respondents' own neighborhoods (42% for males and 49% for females) or in the same metropolitan area (44% for males and 40% for females). With respect to how frequently and in what context the significant nonrelated adults are seen by these adolescents, a number of points need to be made. These nonrelated adults appear to be seen in several different

**Table II.** Description of Extended Family Members (Adults and Youth) Listed as Important Others

	Males (N = 580)			Females (N = 621)		
	Adults	Youth	Total	Adults	Youth	Total
	Mean number listed <sup>a</sup>	2.15	0.83	2.98	2.68	1.16
Mean % of total list	14	5	19	14	6	20
Subjects who listed at least one extended family member (%)	70	41	76	79	53	85
Location of other's residence (mean %)						
S's home	1	4	2	1	5	2
S's neighborhood	6	11	8	8	7	8
In metro area	26	23	25	28	25	28
Outside metro area	67	62	65	63	63	62
	Males' frequency of contact (mean %) via			Females' frequency of contact (mean %) via		
	Telephone		Visits <sup>b</sup>	Telephone		Visits <sup>b</sup>
	Adults	Youth	Adults	Youth	Adults	Youth
Daily	1	4	3	9	5	4
Weekly	17	12	22	14	20	13
Monthly or seldom	72	60	71	71	63	57
Never	9	25	4	7	12	25

<sup>a</sup>There are significant grade and sex main effects for the mean number of extended family members listed as important. In general, females listed more than males and there was a decline in the number listed as grade level increased from seventh to tenth.

<sup>b</sup>Visits to subject's home or other's home.

Table III. Description of Nonrelated Adults Listed as Important Others<sup>a</sup>

	Males (N = 580)			Females (N = 621)		
	Same sex	Opposite sex	Total	Same sex	Opposite sex	Total
Mean number listed	1.33	0.56	1.89	1.37	0.94	2.31
Mean % of total listed	8	3	11	8	5	13
Subjects (%) who listed at least one nonrelated adult	56	31	60	65	52	75
Location of other's residence (%)						
S's home	0	0	0	0	0	0
S's neighborhood	41	53	42	57	41	49
In metro area	46	36	44	34	47	40
Outside metro area	13	11	13	9	12	10
(mean %)	Males' frequency of contact (mean %) via			Females' frequency of contact (mean %) via		
	Phone	Visits <sup>b</sup>	Other	Phone	Visits <sup>b</sup>	Other
For same sex						
Daily	4	18	9	8	25	5
Weekly	13	21	18	22	24	12
Monthly or less	38	25	20	38	23	20
Never	45	36	53	32	27	63
For opposite sex						
Daily	6	25	6	6	16	7
Weekly	13	23	8	12	21	10
Monthly or less	42	21	20	34	24	19
Never	40	31	62	47	40	61

<sup>a</sup>In general there was no sex or grade main effects for the mean number of nonrelated adults listed. The exception is a sex effect for opposite-sex nonrelated adults, with females listing more than males.

<sup>b</sup>Visits to subject's or other's home.

contexts. Further analysis (not shown) revealed that the average nonrelated same-sex adult was seen in nearly three of the six different contexts studied. Roughly half of the nonrelated adults listed are seen in the school context; 60% to 70% of the nonrelated adults are seen fairly often in home settings (either theirs or the respondent's). A majority of nonrelated adults are also contacted by telephone, even if infrequently. Finally, almost half of all nonrelated adults listed are seen *daily* in at least one context (not shown in table).

### Nonrelated Young People

Nonrelated young people are the most frequently listed type of significant other, with an average of 5.52 listed for males and 7.24 listed for females (Table IV). This gender difference is significant both overall and for the number of same- and opposite-sex young persons separately. Approximately three-fourths of the nonrelated young people listed are of the same sex as the respondent. Virtually all of the respondents listed at least one same-sex nonrelated young person as being significant in their lives (93% for males and 99% for females). However, only half of the males listed at least one opposite-sex nonrelated young person as significant, compared to 76% of the females. There is also a grade level trend for the listing of opposite-sex nonrelated young people. As hypothesized, respondents in the older grades are more likely than younger respondents to list opposite-sex young people as significant in their lives.

Over two-thirds of the nonrelated young people listed reside in the respondents' own neighborhood. Most of the remaining young persons live in the same metropolitan area as the respondent. This is equally true for male and female respondents. With respect to where and how frequently nonrelated young people are seen by the respondents, several interesting results emerged. First, a majority of the nonrelated young people are seen daily in the school context. The only exception to this is for nonrelated opposite-sex young persons listed by females; here only 42% are seen daily at school. This may be due to the fact that females are more likely to go outside their own school for opposite-sex friends. Second, at least 19% (up to 37% in some cases) of the nonrelated young people listed are seen *daily* at the respondent's home or the young person's home, talked to on the telephone, or seen in some other location (e.g., stores, restaurants).

Finally, the frequency of contact between respondents and nonrelated young people is clearly much higher and occurs in a wider variety of contexts than that between the respondent and either extended family members or nonrelated adults. For example, three-fourths of all the

Table IV. Description of Nonrelated Young People Listed as Important Others

	Males (N = 580)			Females (N = 621)		
	Same sex	Opposite sex	Total	Same sex	Opposite sex	Total
Mean number listed <sup>a</sup>	4.29	1.23	5.52	5.43	1.82	7.24
Mean % of total listed	30	9	39	32	10	42
Subjects (%) who listed at least one nonrelated youth	93	54	95	99	76	99
Location of other's residence (mean %)						
S's home	0	0	0	0	0	0
S's neighborhood	71	62	69	69	64	67
In metro area	23	30	24	23	25	24
Outside metro area	6	8	6	8	11	9
	Males' frequency of contact (mean %) via			Females' frequency of contact (mean %) via		
	Phone	Visits <sup>b</sup>	School	Activities	Other	
For same sex						
Daily	19	37	59	13	25	34
Weekly	26	21	10	21	23	25
Monthly or less	35	26	12	31	30	29
Never	20	16	19	35	22	12
For opposite sex						
Daily	29	24	54	13	19	25
Weekly	20	21	11	16	26	16
Monthly or less	33	32	14	32	33	36
Never	18	23	21	39	22	23
						Phone
						Visits <sup>b</sup>
						School
						Activities
						Other

<sup>a</sup>There is a significant sex effect for both same and opposite nonrelated young people with females listing more. There is also a grade main effect for the mean number of opposite sex nonrelated adults listed. In general, more are listed at the higher grades.

<sup>b</sup>Visits to subject's home or other's home.



nonrelated young people of the same sex as the respondent are seen daily in at least one of the six settings asked about. Furthermore, 71% of the opposite-sex young people listed by males (and 63% of those listed by females) are seen daily in some setting (data not presented in tables). The average number of different settings a nonrelated young person is seen in has both significant gender and grade level effects. Nonrelated friends of the same sex as the respondent are seen on the average in 4.4 of the 6 contexts asked about. The significant others of the respondents in older grades (especially tenth) are seen in more contexts than those listed by the younger respondents (especially seventh graders), although this differs somewhat by gender. For opposite-sex young people listed, the average number of settings they are seen in is also greater if the respondent is older. Furthermore, males tend to see their opposite-sex friends in more contexts than do female respondents (4.23 versus 3.86).

The preceding results refer to nonrelated young people in general, rather than to "peers." In order to look at peers in more detail, Table V contains information about the grade level, neighborhood, and school location of the significant others listed. Since there are no grade level differences for same-sex others, these results are presented in the first block of Table V undifferentiated by grade. On the average, 70% of the same-sex significant others listed by males are from the same grade level as the respondent. (The corresponding figure for females is 79%.) Similarly, 72% of the same-sex significant others listed by males are from the same school as the respondent (77% for females). Furthermore, an average of 50% to 55% of the same-sex significant others listed are not only from the same grade level and the same school but also from the same neighborhood as the respondent.<sup>6</sup>

The lower portion of Table V contains information for opposite-sex nonrelated young people broken down by the grade level of the respondent. Here we find that the mean percentage of opposite-sex significant others who are *in the same grade level* as the respondent fluctuated by grade level (particularly for females). In seventh grade 63% to 64% of the opposite-sex young persons listed by either gender are from the same grade level as the respondent. In the later grades a majority of the people listed for males are still in the same grade level, but less than 50% of the opposite-sex significant others listed by females are of the same grade level. A similar effect can be noted with respect to whether the opposite-sex nonrelated young people listed are from the same school as the respondent. For males, a relatively constant two-thirds of the young persons listed by a respondent are from

<sup>6</sup>Although not defined for the respondents, it is believed from previous work with this sample that "neighborhood" is typically used to mean housing subdivision within the wider community.

Table V. Percent of Nonrelated Young People Listed by Grade Level, Gender, School, and Neighborhood for Males and Females<sup>a</sup>

SAME-SEX (all subjects)	Males				Females				Total
	Same school		Different school		Same school		Different school		
	Neighbor	Non-neighbor	Neighbor	Non-neighbor	Neighbor	Non-neighbor	Neighbor	Non-neighbor	
Lower grade(s)	2	0	9	3	2	0	5	2	9
Same grade	50	15	1	4	55	16	2	6	79
Higher grade(s)	4	1	8	3	3	1	5	3	12
Totals	72			28		77		23	100
			(519)					(602)	
<b>OPPOSITE-SEX</b>									
Grade 7 subjects									
Lower grade(s)	—	—	9	2%	—	—	12	3	15
Same grade	38	20	4	2%	43	10	5	63	
Higher grade(s)	5	3	11	6%	5	1	10	6	22
Totals	66			34		59		41	100
			(68)					(96)	

Grade 8 subjects										
Lower grade(s)	5	0	5	1	11	8	1	8	3	20
Same grade	45	19	2	4	70	34	6	1	3	44
Higher grade(s)	—	—	12	7	19	—	—	26	10	36
Totals	69	31	(71)	100	49	(105)	51	100		
Grade 9 subjects										
Lower grade(s)	—	—	13	5	18	—	—	11	5	16
Same grade	30	20	0	9	59	18	10	2	7	37
Higher grade(s)	10	6	6	1	23	13	4	11	19	47
Totals	66	34	(79)	100	45	(110)	55	100		
Grade 10 subjects										
Lower grade(s)	14	3	9	3	29	8	1	4	2	15
Same grade	34	17	2	5	58	27	11	3	6	47
Higher grade(s)	—	—	5	8	13	—	—	19	19	38
Totals	68	32	(73)	100	47	(103)	53	100		

"There are no major differences by grade level for either males or females in the distribution of same-sex young people over the dimensions examined here. Ns are given in parentheses.

the same school as the respondent. For females, however, this mean percent goes from 59% for seventh-grade females to 47% for tenth-grade females. Also apparent in Table V is the tendency for females to list members of the opposite sex who are in grades higher than their own. While this gender difference is not present in seventh grade, it is quite strong in eighth, ninth, and tenth grade, when more students are dating. This is particularly clear among those who are listed as being from a different school than the respondent. However, many of those listed as being from a different school than the respondent are still from the same school district and the same neighborhood.

In summary, nonrelated young people are clearly important others for the adolescents we studied. They represent a plurality of the people listed by our respondents; they live near the respondent; most are seen daily, and the majority are seen in several different contexts. Furthermore, while nonrelated young people could have been from any grade level or even below school age, the vast majority are from the same grade level as the respondent.

## DISCUSSION

We began our analysis with two hypotheses concerning the significant others in adolescents' lives. We hypothesized that more peers than adults would be listed as significant others with increasing age of respondent. We added that parents would not be replaced by peers, but would continue to be listed as significant others by respondents at all grade levels. When seventh- to tenth-grade male and female students were asked to list and provide information about the significant others in their lives, more same-sex nonrelated young persons were listed than any other category of significant other for both male and female respondents. Parents, however, continued to be listed as significant others by male and female respondents at all grade levels. Other nuclear family members also continued to be listed as significant others, with almost 77% of the respondents' siblings listed as significant others. Additional adult significant others were present in the form of extended family members and nonrelated adults. Over three-quarters of the respondents listed at least one extended family member; and 60% of the males and 75% of the females listed at least one nonrelated adult as significant in their lives.

These results argue against strong age-segregation positions. While same-sex nonrelated young persons are the most frequently listed category of persons, our adolescent respondents also continue to list parents, adult siblings, extended family adults, and nonrelated adults as significant in their

lives. With the exception of extended family adults, whose numbers decrease slightly with increasing grade level of respondent, there appears to be no trade-off of adults for peers as grade level increases. Rather, we found a relatively stable blend of adults and young people at all four grade levels.

Our second hypothesis focused on the increased significance of opposite-sex nonrelated young persons. We hypothesized that more opposite-sex peers would be listed with increasing grade level of respondent, and this relationship would be particularly evident for female respondents. The females in our study were more likely than male respondents to list opposite-sex peers as significant in their lives; and older females were more likely than younger females to list opposite-sex peers as significant others. These findings are viewed as supporting a general pattern of increased interaction with opposite-sex peers in adolescence as well as indicating that females take earlier opposite-sex interaction more seriously than males (perhaps because female pubertal development, and hence potential sexual involvement, is earlier than that of males).

Our analysis was directed toward providing a more complete descriptive picture of adolescents' social relationships than is now available. Our hypotheses addressed the adult-peer and familial-nonfamilial composition of adolescents' lists of significant others. However, we were also interested in examining the composition of significant others as a function of the gender and grade level of the adolescent respondents. Gender-role literature (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974) would lead us to expect gender differences in overall list size. Females are not only depicted as more interested in people than are males but are also considered to be more fluent and more likely than males to compose longer lists of significant others. Males are portrayed as having a greater interest in "things" than people and, therefore, may be less engaged in the task of composing lists of significant people in their lives. We found gender differences in both overall list size and list composition. Females listed more significant others than males overall. However, females consistently listed more significant others than males in only 5 of the 14 categories of significant others. Females listed significantly more same- and opposite-sex nonrelated young persons, same- and opposite-sex extended family young persons, and opposite-sex nonrelated adults than males. In no category did males list significantly more persons than females did. Females' greater fluency and males' potentially lower level of interest in completing the questionnaire seem unlikely to be the only factors operating, given only partial gender differences with regard to categories of significant others. A more appropriate explanation may be that different levels of intimacy may account for category-specific gender differences between males and females. Female

adolescents' greater capacity for intimate associations has been previously noted (Douvan and Adelson, 1966). Females may list more extended family and nonrelated young persons, since these are categories of people with whom females may choose (and males may choose not) to feel close and share confidences. Opposite-sex nonrelated adults, who may be male teachers, neighbors, or family friends, may be objects of adolescent girl crushes (Broderick, 1966).

Grade level differences were somewhat inconsistent between the two halves of the sample, except for the tendencies of respondents in higher grades to list more opposite-sex nonrelated young persons and fewer extended family adults than younger respondents. However, even the increase in opposite-sex nonrelated young persons with increasing grade level of respondent is not evidence of a massive orientation of adolescents to opposite-sex peers. The mean number of significant opposite-sex nonrelated young persons is less than 1; 46% of the males and 24% of the females listed no opposite-sex nonrelated young persons. The relative absence of opposite-sex nonrelated young persons as significant others for the adolescents is surprising, given stereotypes of the adolescent era.

Moreover, there are no significant grade level increases in the number of same-sex nonrelated young persons. Analyses of parent-peer influence processes indicate an increasing orientation to peers as adolescence progresses. These studies tend to focus on more specific social influence relationships, rather than on the more general notion of significant other that we employed, and may tend to inflate the role of same-sex nonrelated young persons with increasing grade level. Alternately, perhaps the greater influence of peers which others have found is more a function of the changing roles of peers than a quantitative change in the number of peers who play a role in the adolescent's life. In any event, our results indicated that the number of significant same-sex peers did not increase from seventh to tenth grade.

Our final question concerned the extent to which different types of significant others would vary in terms of frequency and type of interaction, proximity of residence, and (for peers) school and grade level. When extended family members, nonrelated adults, and nonrelated young persons were examined in relation to residential proximity and frequency of contact, extended family significant others were the most likely to reside outside the respondent's metropolitan area and to be seen infrequently. In contrast, the nonrelated adults listed as significant others tended to live in the respondents' own neighborhoods and to be seen more frequently and in a greater number of contexts. Nonrelated young persons were seen the most frequently, with over 60% of nonrelated young persons seen daily in some context. Moreover, nonrelated young persons tended to be of the same sex, attend the same school, be in the same grade level, and reside in the same

neighborhood as the respondent. These findings indicate that adolescents may define significant or important relationships according to a number of dimensions. The importance of nuclear family members appears to be given. Parents are listed by over 90% of all respondents, and 77% of all siblings are listed as significant. Extended family members continue to be listed despite residential distance and a relative lack of contact. The family tie may be the most salient aspect of these relationships. Frequency of contact, on the other hand, appears to be an important aspect of adolescents' relationships with nonrelated adults. Significant nonrelated adults are in more frequent contact with adolescents and also are more often seen in neighborhood and school settings. Finally, similarity (Kandel, 1978) may be the most important dimension of adolescents' relationships with nonrelated young persons. Significant nonrelated young persons appear to be the those who are similar to the respondents in terms of gender, grade level, school, and neighborhood residence. There is also a high degree of interaction with nonrelated young persons, who are not only seen more often but are also seen in a wider range of settings.

While the present study included a sufficient number of subjects to permit both initial analysis and replication, neither the context nor the magnitude of the study permitted sampling adolescents in more than one suburban middle class community. The patterns reported may vary as a function of community size, tradition, school structure (e.g., a kindergarten through eighth grade and four-year high school arrangement), and kind of transportation system (e.g., no busing to school or the availability of easy access via mass transit to the total metropolitan area—each absent in the present situation).

While the information presented describes one community at one time, the technique employed is designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of a more comprehensive approach to mapping adolescents' social worlds (Blyth, 1981) than has been employed before. Given the paucity of information about the issues involved and the promise of the two most relevant existing studies (Garbarino *et al.*, 1978; Montemayor and Van Komen, 1980), we believe our attempt at a more broad-based investigation gives a more adequate picture of the totality of significant others in adolescents' lives than has previously been presented. By not imposing restrictions on list size or on interaction setting, we allowed respondents to develop lists of significant others that more accurately reflect the composition of the respondents' individual social worlds. Our respondents not only listed more significant others than those initially elicited by Garbarino *et al.* (1978) (15.6 versus 11.1) but also were more inclined to list nonparent adults as significant others. Extended family and nonrelated adults comprised a total of 25.8% of males' and 27.2% of females' lists of significant others, as compared to 22.3% for the suburban adolescents in Garbarino *et al.*'s

study. Moreover, while Garbarino *et al.* found that 60% of their suburban adolescents named no adults in lists that were limited to respondents' top 10 most important people, we found that 60% of males and 75% of females in our suburban community listed at least one nonrelated adult as a significant other. The percentages of respondents listing extended family adults were similarly high. It appears that allowing list size to be determined by significant other status, rather than limited to a finite number of important others, allows for the inclusion of more adults who are significant in adolescents' lives. Part of the difference may also be a function of differences between the two communities.

The detailed information supplied by the respondents for each significant other enabled us not only to assess the contribution of characteristics of significant others to adolescents' implicit definitions of importance or significance but also to classify significant others into more distinct analytical categories. As did Montemayor and Van Komen (1980), we found that nonrelated young persons were the largest category of significant others for adolescents. However, by examining same-sex and opposite-sex associates separately, we were able to refine Montemayor and Van Komen's analysis of age segregation. Montemayor and Van Komen concluded that age segregation among adolescents and their friends was relatively stable throughout adolescence. In our analysis the percentage of same-sex nonrelated young persons who are in the same grade as the respondents remained constant across grade levels, but the percentage of opposite-sex nonrelated young persons did not. There was a decrease in the percentage of same-grade opposite-sex associates from seventh to tenth grade (and hence a decrease in age segregation). This was particularly striking for females, who demonstrate a shift toward relationships with older males. Using more detailed categories of persons, therefore, enabled us to refine notions of age segregation among adolescent friends.

In subsequent work we intend to explore other characteristics of these significant others. We recognize that frequency of contact (as used in this study) does not necessarily relate to the level of salience or the quality of the interaction. There are many dimensions to a relationship, and we are interested in the ways in which adolescents perceive their listed significant others in terms of advice, modeling, and intimacy. Much remains to be learned about the complex and changing social world of adolescents.

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