

## **Indicators of Relatedness in Adolescent Male Groups: Toward a Qualitative Description**

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*Self-determination theorists (SDT) argue that the satisfaction of the need for relatedness is essential for growth and well-being. However, the current research has yet to account for the unique ways in which adolescent males engage in behaviors to fulfill their need for relatedness within their peer groups. This qualitative study investigates relatedness in six 16- to 17-year-old adolescent males. Independent observations of videotape data and a collaborative analysis revealed 13 main indicators of moment-to-moment relatedness. These indicators include expressing belonging, referring to shared experiences, and helping others out. The indicators of relatedness are discussed in the context of SDT, and additional theoretical frameworks provide an integrative understanding of the construct. Implications for research on the need for relatedness across diverse settings and populations are discussed and the utility of the indicators for professionals who work with adolescent males is considered. Key Words: Adolescence, Males, Relatedness, Groups, Qualitative Description.*

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Adolescence is a period of growth and transition during which key developmental tasks are ideally achieved. In particular, adolescents are faced with the challenges of engaging in self-exploration and constructing a cohesive identity while maintaining their connections to significant others, sustaining their engagement and motivation for academic tasks, and engaging in vocational exploration (Field, Hoffman, & Posch, 1997). To successfully negotiate these developmental challenges, adolescents require the support of significant others as they get to know themselves and the world around them. While the significance of close relationships during adolescence is well documented (e.g., Barry & Wentzel, 2006), less is known about the unique ways in which adolescent males experience and demonstrate feelings of relatedness vis-à-vis their fellow peers.

### **Relatedness and Development**

#### **Relatedness and Self-Determination Theory**

Relatedness refers to feelings of connection to and from important others that are driven by the need to experience a sense of belonging within one's environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and to establish consistent, nurturing, and protective relationships (Shahar, Henrich, Blatt, Ryan, & Little, 2003). The construct of relatedness is conceptually rooted in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and object relations theory (Winnicott, 1960/1965). Thus, relatedness can be understood as the process of

internalizing representations of and establishing a secure base with significant others so that the fundamental developmental processes of self-exploration and identity development can naturally unfold (Shahar et al., 2003). In other words, when individuals experience key figures in their lives as understanding, supportive, genuine, and invested, they feel safe and secure, allowing them to freely explore themselves and their surroundings and to engage in activities that are congruent with their developing identities (Ryan, 1995).

The need for relatedness has its origins in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a theoretical framework that conceptualizes motivation and elucidates contextual factors that are integral to adaptive motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT scholars assert that all individuals possess the capacity to grow and develop. The degree to which people's innate propensities are actualized however, is contingent upon their social environment (Ryan, 1995). SDT pioneers put forth the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness which are collectively defined as essential components derived from the social context (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Each need plays an important role in psychological wellness and growth and all three must be satisfied for adaptive development (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci & Ryan 2002). Overall, research on SDT indicates that need-supportive contexts are associated with higher levels of well-being, positive affect (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000), interest, commitment, curiosity, confidence, and self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

### **Satisfying Needs in Adolescence**

Given the substantial amount of time that adolescents spend at school, it is important that teachers and peers promote the fulfillment of adolescent students' basic psychological needs so that they engage in academic activities for reasons that are congruent with their values and their developing sense of self. SDT research suggests that relatedness needs are fulfilled when students develop close relationships with important others and when they feel that these individuals are invested in and care about them (Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006). In the school context, teachers and friends can provide support as the student negotiates developmental and academic tasks. The satisfaction of these basic needs within the school environment is significantly associated with positive educational outcomes (Legault et al., 2006).

While all three needs have been shown to play an important role, relatedness has been relatively neglected in the literature (Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick, 2005). Those who have studied relatedness however, argue that relatedness is a catalyst for adaptive adolescent development (see Blustein, 1994; Guay, Marsh, Senecal, & Dowson, 2008; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). For example, Green-Demers and Pelletier (2003) found that when peers and teachers fostered relatedness through providing affiliation and interpersonal support, adolescents were more engaged in and committed to academic endeavors, which in turn enhanced their overall well-being. Conversely, Legault et al. (2006) demonstrated that a lack of interpersonal support within the adolescent student's world was significantly associated with motivational issues. In other words, students whose needs for relatedness are not being met have difficulty internalizing the importance of academic activities and struggle with developing and sustaining motivation at school.

## **Peer Relationships**

Supportive peer relationships are important sources of adolescent relatedness (Legault et al., 2006). Peers are powerful socialization agents and potential sources of interpersonal support, especially in the school environment. Adolescent friendships are more egalitarian than relationships with teachers or parents. As such, peer relationships offer a unique climate for interaction and collaboration in which adolescents can experience a sense of mutual caring and concern (Barry & Wentzel, 2006). When adolescents feel supported by their fellow peers, their school engagement, self-esteem, and the integration of academic values are facilitated (Wentzel, 2005). Furthermore, research suggests that adolescent peer groups predict school commitment and performance above and beyond that of teachers and parents (Kinderman, 2007). While the perils of adolescent peer pressure have been extensively discussed in the literature (Allen & Antonishak, 2008), friends can also serve as motivators of prosocial and moral behaviors, encouraging one another to share, cooperate, and sustain motivation for educational pursuits (Barry & Wentzel, 2006; Martin & Dowson, 2009).

## **Relatedness and Gender**

The SDT research to date has focused on the basic psychological needs as universal (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000), without examining differences in need satisfaction between males and females. Research on adolescent development has demonstrated that males establish fewer close relationships relative to their female counterparts (Belle, 1989). This has been attributed to North American societal norms, which dictate that dominance, assertion, and competition are appropriate social behaviors for males (Pollack, 1998). This is of concern given the research that links positive health outcomes with the presence of close and supportive relationships (Resnick et al., 1997). Perhaps because relational needs and values are commonly associated with femininity (Gilligan, 1982), little research has focused on how males fulfill their relational needs during adolescence. A recent study (Chu, 2005) demonstrated that adolescent males perceive close friendships as an important source of support but they experience social pressures to assert their masculinity through dominance and competition. Despite these gendered messages, the adolescent males in Chu's study (2005) reported desiring closer relationships with peers and when such relationships were established, they reported feelings of validation, acceptance, and authenticity within their relationships.

Given the benefits of relatedness and the societal norms with which adolescent males must contend in order to fulfill this need, it is crucial that those who work with this population provide contexts that support, rather than impede, relational needs. Developmental theorists (e.g., Maccoby, 1990) explain that males tend to relate around tasks and shared activities. According to Maccoby (1990), males are more likely to establish close relationships when they have well-defined roles, structured environments, and shared tasks that involve working toward a common goal. Group activities which satisfy these criteria are an ideal context for research on adolescent male relatedness. Studies confirm that group activities help foster relatedness, which in turn catalyzes feelings of autonomy and competence, positive affect, and intrinsic motivation by promoting cooperation over competition (e.g., Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). In light of

the positive outcomes associated with group contexts and the developmental literature suggesting that group tasks are conducive to male relatedness, the current study is situated within a group context with the goal of further describing adolescent male relatedness.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to develop a qualitative description of relatedness as it occurs in an adolescent male group context. To date, there are no guidelines for observing manifestations of relatedness. The current study aimed to develop a set of observable descriptors of incidents of relatedness in an adolescent male group. Because group activities encourage cooperation through the provision of structured tasks and common goals (Bossert, 1988-1989), tasks that have been suggested to be conducive to male bonding (Clark, Flower, Walton, & Oakley, 2008; Maccoby, 1990), this study used the group setting as a backdrop to describe adolescent male relatedness. The current study sought to answer the following research questions: (a) How can attempts at relatedness be described within adolescent male groups; and (b) How can relatedness be described as it occurs between adolescent male group members?

### **Researcher Assumptions**

Prior to beginning the study, each author wrote a short description of their beliefs relative to the construct of relatedness. The purpose of these descriptions (included below) was to reflect on and identify our initial beliefs and to make their influence on the analysis transparent.

#### **First Author**

I am a White, Jewish, female, who recently graduated from a master's program in Counselling Psychology. My graduate training experiences comprised of two years of practicum experience which included group work. Of those experiences, one year was spent working with adolescents. My interest in the topic of adolescent male relationships developed as a result of my practical and research experiences. As an intern working in a college counselling center, I encountered many adolescent males who struggled to adapt to college life and its accompanying academic demands because they were having difficulty establishing close relationships with peers. In working with these clients and in making observations for the third author's doctoral research, it became apparent to me that the school environment often places significant emphasis on academic performance while neglecting the potential for relationships to serve as a vehicle for fostering these positive academic outcomes. Moreover, the research experiences I had while working on the third author's research team led me to the realization that self-report measures, while helpful, can be limited in capturing "what's really going on."

As such, my intentions in conducting the current study were to illuminate the potential that relationships have in promoting academic motivation and performance and to move beyond self-report measures toward providing ways in which relatedness can be described and observed. In so doing, my hope was that professionals who work with this

population would become more aware of the link between relatedness and academic performance and potential ways in which adolescent male relatedness can be facilitated and observed. I believe that relatedness is an essential component of well-being and development. To me, relatedness refers to people seeking relationships in which they feel connected to and supported by significant others. In addition, I believe that relatedness occurs in environments in which there is a balance of support and challenge.

### **Second Author**

I am a White, Catholic, female immigrant from Central Europe and a Master's student in Counselling Psychology. I have approximately one year of counselling experience, which includes individual and group work. I had not had any experience working with teenagers prior to joining this research project. I became interested in relatedness in the context of its impact on the therapeutic process. My general research interests focus on the efficacy of psychotherapy and factors that contribute to it. I entered this project with a goal to create observable markers of relatedness that could be used by practicing clinicians, guidance counsellors, and teachers in their work with adolescent males. I understand relatedness as an interpersonal construct, which is observable through verbal, non-verbal, and spatial manifestations. In my experience, relatedness is not always verbally or directly communicated and it may be expressed indirectly by showing a certain level of comfort with and attention to another person.

### **Third Author**

I am a White, Jewish female completing a Ph.D. in Counselling Psychology. My interest in exploring group relatedness stems from my seven years of experience conducting individual and group counselling with youth and young adults. Through this work, I have learned that creating a trusting and safe environment through being genuine and open are key components of successful counselling with adolescents. Thus, attending to the relational dynamics of counselling has become a cornerstone of my clinical work. The present study is an off-shoot of my own research in the development and evaluation of a career exploration intervention for academically at-risk youth. My involvement in this study represents my interest in extending my research and exploring relational dynamics as they occurred in the group intervention. As a result of my clinical and research experiences in the area, I hold several assumptions about the construct of relatedness. I see relatedness as a process of connecting to and identifying with another person. It is a construct comprised of the emotional aspects of feeling connected to another person. I think that we actively engage in an internal process of evaluating the safety of a situation, and when we feel safe, we involve ourselves in activities in a genuine way. Thus, relatedness is a combination of feeling connected and acting genuine.

### **Fourth Author**

I am a White female and currently a Ph.D. candidate in Counselling Psychology. I have been working with clients from a variety of populations for the past six years. I have experience working with adolescents and groups in a therapeutic setting. Relative

to the construct of relatedness, I believe that relatedness is universally necessary for emotional and psychological well-being. I also assume that relatedness involves effort on the part of an individual to connect with another human being. Additionally, I believe that there are a variety of ways in which an individual may attempt to relate to another person. To me, striving to express oneself and feel understood by others is a central component of this construct. I also assume that attempts to understand another is a component of relatedness.

I was invited to serve as an independent auditor for the current investigation given my lack of prior knowledge of the larger study and SDT. As such, my role was to use my external perspective to ensure the credibility of the analytic process. This project was of interest to me as my own research focuses on interpersonal skills. In light of my clinical work with adolescents and my research interests in interpersonal processes as a researcher, my intention in joining the research team was to contribute to a research-based understanding of adolescent relationships which might inform the understanding of adolescent interpersonal processes in a clinical setting.

### **Fifth Author**

I am a White female associate professor and research supervisor to the second, third, and fourth co-authors. I do research on alliance development processes so the relationship between client and counselor is one of my central interests. I believe that for a treatment to be effective, participants need mutual respect and collaboration on how to work together to achieve their goals. Thus, I believe respect and collaboration are paramount in establishing relatedness and understanding how relatedness develops is an essential aspect of the therapeutic process. My interest in the current study reflects my commitment to further understanding how interpersonal support can be described within the therapeutic context and beyond.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants were six boys, ranging in age from 16 to 17 years, who volunteered to participate in a group intervention. All participants identified as Canadian and of European descent. Four of the six participants identified French as their native language. All participants attended the same English high school in a semi-rural and predominantly French area of Quebec.

The participants were originally selected for a larger study that constituted the third author's doctoral dissertation which was geared toward understanding adolescent motivation for career exploration. Upon securing third-party approval from the authors' University Research Ethics Board, as well as the school board and the school itself, the participants for both the larger and the current study were chosen. The students were selected because they were identified as amotivated for career exploration by the teachers of a mandatory career exploration course taken in the previous semester. The teachers reported that these students were frequently disruptive in class, had failed or were failing courses, and did not put in sufficient effort into their academic work. As part of this

study, these students completed an open-ended questionnaire exploring their level of motivation. Participants' responses were consistent with the teachers' reports, indicating that they were lacking academic motivation

## **Data Collection**

For the larger study, participants attended 10 weekly group sessions, for which they were exempt from a full class period (75 minutes). The 10 sessions were designed to facilitate the participants' motivation for career exploration (i.e., identifying career-related interests, values, beliefs). Given the established link between SDT need satisfaction and academic motivation (e.g., Legault et al., 2006) the activities that comprised the intervention were structured to satisfy participants' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. All group sessions were facilitated by the third author; the fifth author supervised the project.

The sessions were developed in accordance with design research procedures (Cobb, Confrey, DiSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). A preliminary set of session activities was developed using prior literature on SDT and career interventions. Each activity was selected with a particular objective in mind (i.e., identifying sources of intrinsic motivation). These activities were implemented and then reviewed by the research team (first, second, and third authors) following each session. All sessions were video-recorded, and all three researchers made independent observations, which served as the basis for weekly discussions. The team meetings were used to improve the ongoing design of the intervention. In the event that the session objectives had not been met, the team discussed potential reasons for why this had occurred and decided whether the following session objectives should be revised based on the team's developing understanding of the group.

From the ten sessions that comprised the larger research project, a subset of sessions were chosen for the current study because they involved an activity that specifically focused on the satisfaction of relatedness. Given the significant relationship between relatedness, supportive contexts, and increased academic motivation (e.g., Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2003), as well as the influence of peer relationships during adolescence (Barry & Wentzel, 2006), the present investigation targeted amotivated adolescent males with the goal of increasing their motivation through fostering the satisfaction of their needs for relatedness. To facilitate the adolescent male participants' relatedness, each session contained a group activity that provided structure as the participants worked together toward a common goal. Consistent with Field et al. (1997) strategies that promote self-determination, we developed a group task that would involve role-playing and simulated situations. We chose to simulate a committee whereby the members of the group were enlisted as experts on how to improve the career course they had taken. The group format (shared task and common goals), the presence of structure (clear instructions, time limits etc.), and the ways of engaging in the activity (role-playing and the simulation of a real life scenario) were intended to facilitate the fulfillment of the members' needs for relatedness. Video-recordings of the target group activity served as the primary source of data for the present study. The video-recordings of the three sessions over which the activity of interest unfolded were analyzed for incidents of relatedness demonstrated by the participants. Specifically, their interactions during the

“career course improvement committee” group activity were analyzed for manifestations of relatedness.

## Data Analysis

**Trustworthiness.** Three of us (first, second, and third authors) had been heavily immersed in the data due to our involvement in the larger study. We took several measures to ensure the trustworthiness of our research and to maintain sensitivity to the data. First, we enlisted the help of a fourth researcher (fourth author) who had no prior knowledge of the project and no familiarity with SDT. Thus, her impressions were not influenced by prior exposure to the project or to the theoretical framework and thus, she helped to ensure the integrity of the coding process. Second, due to the fact that the third author facilitated the group intervention, she was excluded from coding to eliminate biases from coding behaviors of participants stimulated by her interventions. She served as a consultant and helped critique the credibility of the emerging indicators and the extent to which each conceptual label captured the essence of the moment of relatedness that was being observed. The methodological choices described herein reflected an effort to be aware of our varying levels of involvement with the theoretical framework, the data, and the participants. In being sensitive to our differing relationships with the research, we hoped to position ourselves for the current study in a manner that would enhance the trustworthiness of our analysis (Morrow, 2005).

**Process.** Our first meeting was geared toward developing a working definition of relatedness to anchor the coding process. We decided to use the SDT definition of relatedness (i.e., feelings of connection to and from others; Ryan, 1995). In the following meetings, we focused on moving beyond this general definition toward a more nuanced description of the construct in a naturalistic setting. In order to accomplish this goal, we allowed other theoretical explanations to inform our understanding of the data insofar as they provided a richer description of relatedness.

We adopted a dialogic collaborative methodology, in other words, the use of conversations, (Paulus, Woodside, & Ziegler, 2008) to focus our analytic process. Our analysis focused on how our individual meaning-making shifted and expanded as a result of collaborative discussions. By using the dialogic collaborative process (Paulus et al, 2008), instead of relying on individual efforts to understand and ascribe meaning to the data, our objective was to increase the trustworthiness of our qualitative research efforts and to allow for the emergence of an in-depth understanding of the complexities that characterize manifestations of relatedness (Richardson, 1997). The collaborative process took place during weekly research team meetings. Prior to each meeting, the three of us who were involved in the coding process, the first author, second author, and fourth author independently watched the session to identify and label the segments of the data that were observed as moments of relatedness. Then, we came together to derive a shared understanding of the data through dialogue. During the meetings, each person presented what she had understood to be moments of relatedness and the conceptual labels that she had developed to describe these moments.

For example, after the first, second, and fourth authors had viewed the first session, the first author presented a segment of the data which consisted of one group

member repeating verbatim what the other had said. She labeled this segment as *adopting language* and explained that when people are connecting with one another, they adopt each other's use of language or ways of communicating. While the other authors had not observed this moment to be one of relatedness in their own viewing of the first session, it was noted as something to be further explored in subsequent team meetings after more of the data had been reviewed. After having viewed the following session, the other authors who participated in the coding process had observed other incidents of relatedness in which members "echoed" one another. We returned to the videotape data of the first and second sessions to anchor our discussion concerning the emerging indicator. When we viewed the segment together, we collectively understood it as describing relatedness between group members and moreover, we concluded that this indicator encompassed the repetition of both non-verbal gestures and verbal statements, and decided that the label *mirroring* more comprehensively captured what we were observing to be relatedness.

As such, we used our individualized perspectives to generate the collective meaning of the data. This was accomplished through lengthy team discussions regarding what had been observed and the meaning attributed to the observations. The team discussions led to an expansion and refinement of our understanding of relatedness in general as well as our conceptualization of the specific indicators of relatedness. As the above example demonstrates, when we diverged in our understanding of the data, these differences were explored until we arrived at a collective understanding of the data. This process was iterative in that our shared understandings were expanded and refined each week based on new evidence.

After extensive collaborative discussions, a rich description of the moment-to-moment processes of relatedness (i.e., participants' process of initiating attempts to establish, increase, or maintain relatedness) and the responses to such processes emerged. The group context comprising of six participants played an instrumental role in the analysis. In particular, it allowed for an in-depth examination of manifestations of relatedness that reflected attempts at relatedness (and responses to these attempts) between individual members as well as attempts at establishing relatedness within the group as a whole. We focused on spontaneous processes that were not the result of task-related requirements. For example, if one group member moved closer to another because the task required them to be sitting next to each other, we agreed that this was not relatedness. However, if a member moved closer to another member and his behavior was not prompted by the task, this was considered to be relatedness. Our decision to focus on self-initiated behaviors is consistent with SDT theorists' assertions that when people are in contexts that promote need satisfaction, their active propensities are realized and they engage in self-initiated or intrinsically motivated behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 1995).

As researchers working from a constructivist paradigm, our research process reflected the belief that knowledge emerges as a result of collective and interactive meaning-making rather than as a product of individual interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The unique perspectives and realities of each researcher were embraced (Krauss, 2005) and informed the group discussions from which an understanding of relatedness was co-constructed (Cranton, 1996). The indicators of relatedness presented herein represent the collective voice of the research team.

## Findings

### Indicators of Relatedness

**Humor.** Humor is an indicator that is based on exchanges of jokes and laughter that group members used to relate to one another. For example, Nate made a joke comparing other participants to TV characters: “He’s like Mr. T and you are like Oscar the Grouch (laughter)”. Ian asked “What am I?” Hank responded: “You’re the cookie monster! (laughter)” Humor was an indicator of relatedness because it demonstrated the intention of the participant to have others respond by demonstrating their appreciation and/or approval of what the participant said through laughter. In addition, jokes and laughter also served to lighten the mood, or to relieve tension. In this way, humor functioned to engage others and/or to create an atmosphere of safety and comfort in the group.

**Inviting others to participate.** Inviting others to participate consists of instances when one or more group members invited another member or members to contribute or to share their ideas, opinions, and/or work. This included instances wherein a participant that was silent was invited to join the group. For example, Ian and Vinny discussed ideas for improving a career exploration class and then turned to Keith and Hank for their input by saying “How about you? And you? You know about this?” Another example occurred when Nate made an effort to include quieter Rob in the discussion about the need for new football equipment at school, by saying, “Rob here would like to play football, right Rob?” Inviting others to participate was an indicator of relatedness because it constituted an acknowledgement by a group member that someone else in the group was not participating, was quieter, or was not engaging in the task. By acknowledging and then inviting this person to participate, the group member was expressing a desire for another to become more involved in the group process or to share his ideas.

**Physical proximity.** This indicator is defined as a self-initiated shift in movement towards another person or people. For instance, after Vinny left a session early, Ian got up and changed his seat for one closer to other members. He pulled the seat toward Hank and then they both looked at each other and smiled. Another example of this indicator occurred when Hank pulled his chair closer to the rest of the group and turned to face the others even though this was not required for the task. This was an indicator of relatedness because it was a spontaneous shift in movement or posture (i.e., leaning toward) which communicated a desire to become closer or to reduce the physical distance between himself and other group members.

**Expressing belonging.** This indicator consists of instances wherein one or more members communicated feelings of inclusion with respect to being a part of the group. For example, when a teacher came into the classroom during the activity to ask Vinny if he could leave the session to attend the school science fair, Ian attempted to convince the teacher to allow Vinny to stay by emphasizing that “this is a team project.” Another instance of expressing belonging occurred when Nate and Rob had an argument and Rob left the room because he did not feel that his ideas were being included in the activity.

Nate expressed feeling badly that Rob did not feel included and explained that from his perspective, he believed that they were all a part of the group: “I am glad we’re doing this together. It’s actually fun.” These examples were indicators of relatedness because they communicated a sense of being part of something or demonstrated that group members identified themselves as part of the group. The examples indicate an acknowledgment that the group was established and that they feel included in that group.

**Defining boundaries.** This indicator is defined as instances when a member or members expressed who was a part of the group and who was not, or when one or more members distinguished the group or demarcated the limits of the group and thereby indicated that the group was a distinct entity. For example, at one point the participants spoke about another student who had been recruited for this project but had not come to any of the sessions. Hank concluded that this participant was, “dead to this team.” During another part of the task, participants spontaneously divided themselves into two groups. They emphasized the differences between the groups, for example, saying, “Let’s support this group, not that group.” Additionally, when one group member, Nate, was absent, Vinny acknowledged that the group was incomplete, saying, “We need Nate.” Defining boundaries was an indicator of relatedness because as the examples demonstrate, it indicated that there was a group that was distinct from others around them. This conveyed that the group members shared something in common by virtue of being part of the group and that they felt distinguished from others who were not in the group.

**Referring to shared experiences.** This indicator refers to instances when one or more members brought up or referred to a common or shared experience that occurred in the past. For example, Ian, Hank, and Vinny chatted about one of the classes that they had had together. They laughed during the chat and Ian said, “I remember that day like it was yesterday.” Additionally, in one instance when Ian and Vinny began to talk about the challenges of one of their previous jobs, Ian said “Remember this job?” and Vinny laughed and said “Yeah, never again!” Referring to shared experiences was an indicator of relatedness as it illustrated a desire to connect based on mutual experiences. The discussion of the experience was broached with the knowledge that others had had the same experience; with the goal being to connect around that mutual experience. In so doing, it placed the group members on common ground.

**Physical touch.** This indicator is defined as initiating physical contact through use of touch. For example, during a part of the group activity, participants were asked to take on new group roles. When the group decided that Rob and Jason would be group leaders, Rob went to stand next to Jason and he put his arm on Jason’s shoulder as he approached him. Another example of this indicator occurred when Hank used Vinny’s back as a surface on which to write (even though there were desks available). This was an indicator of relatedness because when one person touched someone else it conveyed a sense of presence, support, comfort, and safety.

**Commenting on the mood in the group.** This indicator refers to instances when one or more members reflected upon the atmosphere, “vibe,” or tone of the group. For

example, Hank noticed a change in the group mood and shared: “Is it just me or are we all like dead today? (...) Usually we’re like never boring and always laughing and now it’s like awkward silence.” Ian also commented on the mood in the group when he proposed a potential reason for the disagreement in the group: “It was just a long week for everyone and we’re all tired.” This was an indicator of relatedness because it communicated an attempt to capture how people are feeling in the group in a manner that illustrates a sense of intimacy and shared feelings. It was also understood as an indication that the group was experienced as an entity with its own mood.

**Mirroring.** This indicator consists of language, behaviors, or non-verbal behaviors (i.e. gestures or physical movements) that were expressed by one group member and then echoed or repeated by another group member. For instance, when participants were asked to generate ideas for how to plan a job fair; one of them suggested they needed to have a fundraiser. Nate gave several fundraising ideas and then said: “Spaghetti supper!” Rob responded by repeating “Spaghetti supper!” in a similar tone, and pointing a finger at Nate. Nate again repeated “Spaghetti supper!” in the same tone and pointed a finger back at Rob. In addition, Hank’s comment about the mood in the group (described in the previous indicator, “Is it just me or are we all like dead today?”) was closely mirrored by Vinny, who repeated in a similar tone, “We’re dead.” This was understood as an indication of relatedness because it involved connecting through adopting of one or more members’ frame of reference or verbal and/or nonverbal language.

**Sharing of personal information.** This indicator is defined as a sharing of personal information that goes above and beyond the requirements of the task. This included thoughts, feelings, and facts about personal information or experiences, and personal discoveries. For example, Ian shared his interest in becoming a restaurant server: “Actually, I am pretty interested in this [profession].” Nate asked, “You wanna be a waiter?” and Ian responded, “It’s actually more than that. You know I have manners, right? I say pardon and stuff like that.” At another point, when Nate and Rob got into an argument and Rob left the room (described above), Nate later shared his feelings about the incident with the rest of the group: “It actually made me feel bad having to argue. It’s always bad to argue but we have to have an argument sometimes. I just don’t like that Rob just had to leave like this. He’s like a friend of mine.” These examples represented indicators of relatedness because they involved members sharing or revealing a part of themselves without being prompted. They demonstrated feelings of comfort and safety within the group environment such that the group member or members felt free to disclose. The group members who shared could also have been attempting to encourage others to reciprocate and to self-disclose. In essence, the sharing communicated a desire to be known and to know others.

**Giving positive feedback.** This indicator consists of giving compliments, expressing praise or approval, or pointing out others’ strengths. We observed many instances where group members complimented each other on their work and/or pointed out strengths and positive qualities. The compliments were sometimes 1) expressed in a single word, such as “great” or “awesome” or 2) were more elaborate, like saying that

someone is good at talking to teachers. Several participants who were complimented expressed that positive feedback from the group members made them feel good about themselves. These were indicators of relatedness because it involved vocalizing a positive reaction to someone else's ideas, work, or opinions. It showed that another person and/or their contributions were valued. It also involved expressing an appreciation of someone's role in the group, or trying to connect to somebody by making them feel good and/or accepted.

**Helping others out.** This indicator is defined as providing materials or support through advocating, defending, or protecting other group members. For example, as part of the task, the group decided that they could have a job fair to get people more interested in career development. Ian volunteered to develop an advertisement for the job fair. Rob raised his voice and told Ian to make his advertisement funny. Vinny then responded, "hey, cool out" to support Ian. Another instance came about when Nate assisted Vinny. Nate offered him a larger sheet of paper after he expressed having difficulty with his drawing because he did not have enough space. These examples were indicators of relatedness because it was voluntarily responding to others needs by lending a hand. It involved going out of one's way when perceiving an unmet need for materials or support and making attempts to fulfill that need. It was also demonstrated by group members acting on behalf of others so that fellow members felt supported and had the resources they need.

**Displaying empathy.** This indicator refers to instances in which one or more members expressed an understanding of another's perspective and/or an understanding of how someone else might experience or feel in a given situation. For example, when Nate and Rob were arguing Nate tried to identify potential reasons for Rob being upset. Nate thought that Rob having been in trouble with a teacher earlier in the day may have contributed to him being in a bad mood: "I guess he's just pretty pissed off at what happened in Mr. Smith's office." Later on, empathy was also displayed when Vinny began to laugh over Rob's reaction to the argument with Nate. Nate then said, "He's finding it funny. If I were in his place, I'd be laughing too." This was an indicator of relatedness because it conveyed an attempt to understand someone else's perspective or context. It involved trying to understand and validate what other people may be feeling based on whom they are and the situation in which they find themselves.

### **Additional Indicators for Consideration**

Two less prominent indicators emerged as a result of our analytic process. These moments of relatedness were not classified as major categories because their occurrence within the data was infrequent relative to the 13 major indicators which were pervasive across sessions. As the current investigation focused on one activity, we concluded that in a different research context, these indicators may become more salient. Given their potential practical utility for those who work with adolescent males, these indicators are presented and described below.

**Taking an interest in others and/or their work.** Nonverbal behaviors were observed that were conceptualized as attempts to relate through taking an interest in another person and/or their work. For example, at one point, Rob leaned forward and looked over Ian's arm to see the text that Ian was presenting to the group. In a different session, Nate came in late while others were already working on their drawings. They did not interact with Nate at this time, but Nate kept looking at them and their drawings. It was concluded that these examples illustrated attempts at relatedness because by showing their interest, participants were trying to understand and connect with each other.

**Stating similarities.** In some of our coded examples the participants referred to perceived similarities between themselves and other group members. For example, Vinny and Nate discussed how they are a lot alike in their sense of humor and in their reactions to different situations. Stating similarities was understood as a manifestation of relatedness because it conveyed an effort to increase the level of comfort and closeness in the group by placing the group members on common ground with one another.

## **Discussion**

While SDT has received extensive empirical support, this study is distinct in several ways. Firstly, it specifically attends to relatedness, the need that has received less attention in the literature relative to the needs for competence and autonomy (Markland et al., 2005). In addition, this study is unique in providing a qualitative description of relatedness as it occurs in adolescent male groups. Finally, the current investigation uses the dialogical collaborative process (Paulus et al., 2008) as a way to increase the trustworthiness of the research and to develop a collective understanding of the phenomenon under study. The qualitative analysis yielded 13 indicators that describe active attempts to establish relatedness or incidents of relatedness already established. These indicators are in line with the authors' initial thinking that relatedness can be made manifest through verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Although an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that our inclusion of verbal and nonverbal behaviors within the indicators is in line with the extant literature on interpersonal communication (e.g., Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002).

These indicators build upon SDT by going beyond the theory which asserts the importance of the need for relatedness in growth and development, toward providing observable indicators of relatedness that can provide insight into how adolescent males demonstrate feelings of connection vis-à-vis their peers. Given the major role that peer support plays in fostering adolescent motivation and development, these indicators could offer a fruitful venue for professionals to observe whether adolescent males are satisfying their needs for relatedness. Moreover, in keeping with SDT, it could allow those who work with this population to make important links between students' relatedness satisfaction and their motivation for academic pursuits. In so doing, professionals may be able to enhance adolescent male students' academic motivation via the provision of relatedness supportive school contexts or activities. The 13 major indicators will be discussed in the context of existing theory and research.

## SDT-Consistent Indicators

In using the SDT definition of relatedness as a starting point and allowing other theoretical explanations to be introduced during the analytic process, several of the indicators were collectively understood as being most consistent with the SDT framework. For example, *inviting others to participate* can be understood as a desire to achieve closer connections with others in the group. Consistent with the research applying SDT to groups, by inviting a group member to participate, the participants were exhibiting attempts to connect with another group member by making him feel included in the group process and communicating to him their desire for him to get involved (Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). *Positive feedback*, which refers to expressing appreciation for another's work, efforts, or ideas, is also consistent with SDT. Specifically, it fits with the SDT research indicating that the need for relatedness is met when people feel valued and appreciated by key figures in their environments (Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2003). Another indicator that is congruent with the SDT framework is *sharing of personal information*. Sharing of personal information was understood as a way of letting others in the group know that it is safe to self-disclose and as a way of communicating a desire to be known and to know others. This is consistent with research supporting SDT scholars' understanding of relatedness as fostering feelings of safety and security in interpersonal relationships (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). Self-disclosing to know others and to be known is also aligned with SDT theorists' assertions that establishing relatedness involves engaging in behaviors that foster intimacy and authenticity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Finally, *displaying empathy* is consistent with the SDT literature that demonstrates that the need for relatedness is satisfied when people feel validated for their feelings and experience important others as making an effort toward understanding their perspectives (Markland et al., 2005). In experiencing empathy from others, people feel supported, rather than isolated, as they negotiate their life circumstances.

In contrast, several indicators were found to be indirectly related to SDT's construct of relatedness: *humor*, *physical touch*, and *physical proximity*. Humor has various interpersonal functions. Research indicates that it can be used to become closer to another person, to strengthen a group alliance, and to discuss difficult or embarrassing topics in a manner that feels comfortable and safe (Sanford & Eder, 1984). This is consistent with our observations and discussions surrounding incidents of humor in our data. Using humor in these ways communicates a desire to establish or maintain feelings of connectedness, comfort, and safety with fellow peers; interpersonal goals which are consistent with SDT's definition of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Unlike humor, physical touch and physical proximity are nonverbal behaviors. While the SDT literature does not make reference to nonverbal behaviors, these indicators were understood as attempts at, and responses to, relatedness. Research suggests that physical touch is used to communicate physical and emotional comfort, as well as support, caring, and presence (Chang, 2001). As such, physical touch is congruent with SDT's conceptualization of relatedness as both constitute an expression of support and comfort from significant others who are invested vis-à-vis the individual (Legault et al., 2006). Finally, an understanding of how physical proximity is an indicator of relatedness is derived from research examining friendship characteristics and

the factors that contribute to interpersonal attractiveness (Marmaros & Sacerdote, 2006). Marmaros and Sacerdote (2006) demonstrated that people are more likely to establish friendships with those who are physically closer to them and that peers exhibit a tendency to maintain physical proximity to one another. These assertions are compatible with our overarching SDT model because physical proximity communicates a desire to become closer to another person or to express feelings of connectedness to another person (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

### **Beyond the SDT Framework**

Our analytic process yielded several indicators that were better accounted for by theoretical frameworks other than SDT. Josselson's (1992) model of relational dimensions offers insight into four of our indicators. First, the indicator of *mirroring* can be understood in the context of Josselson's relational dimension of eye-to-eye validation. Eye-to-eye validation refers to a repeating or echoing of one's facial expressions, gestures, or verbal expressions. According to Josselson when people engage in eye-to-eye validation, they communicate affirmation, recognition, and understanding to significant others. Compatible with eye-to-eye validation, mirroring refers to an echoing of verbal and nonverbal gestures to demonstrate agreement and affirmation through adopting another's frame of reference. Second, our indicator of *expressing belonging* is highly congruent with the relational dimension of embeddedness. Embeddedness refers to a sense of belongingness that follows from creating shared meaning and forming a collective identity. Similarly, expressing belonging communicates a sense of being part of the group and conveys that a group identity has developed. Third, our indicator of *referring to shared experiences* parallels Josselson's dimension of mutuality. Mutuality refers to a sense of connectedness that people experience as a result of engaging in collective activities. Like mutuality, referring to shared experiences connotes an effort to increase feelings of connection by referring to a mutual history, thereby placing people on common ground. Lastly, our understanding of the indicator of *helping others out* is highly congruent with Josselson's description of the relational dimension of tending. Josselson describes tending as a "reaching out" (p. 12) and responding to others' needs through providing help and support. Akin to tending, helping others out refers to responding to the perceived needs of others by lending a hand or offering resources and support. Josselson's relational dimensions have received empirical support for their utility in understanding adolescent relationships and associated developmental processes. In line with our findings, Flum and Lavi-Yudelevitch (2002) found that these relational dimensions were salient in adolescent participants' narratives of their peer relationships.

Our indicators of *defining boundaries* and *commenting on the mood of the group* extended further, beyond SDT's and Josselson's (1992) models. Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT; Brewer, 1991) provides a framework that expands upon defining boundaries in a group context. ODT explains that people in groups have simultaneous needs for assimilation and differentiation. Assimilation is similar to what we call *expressing belonging* and differentiation is about the need to distinguish oneself from one's social environment. Research shows that in a group setting, people can satisfy both of these needs by forming a group identity and differentiating their group from outsiders (Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). The need to know who is in and who is out is consistent

with our indicator of defining boundaries as both refer to demarcating the limits of the group and experiencing the group as distinct. Finally, commenting on the mood of the group can be understood in the context of Yalom's (2005) theory of group therapy. Yalom explains that when group members are sharing how they feel in the group and how they experience the group as a whole, it signifies that the members have a sense of awareness and of belonging within the group, and that the group has been established as a collective entity. Phan, Rivera, Volker, and Garrett (2004) have provided support for the importance of cohesion and engagement in group dynamics and outcomes. In line with our findings, when group members express how they are experiencing the group, this signifies that group members are engaged in the group process and a sense of interpersonal awareness has been established.

In moving beyond the SDT framework toward the provision of an integrative understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the current study contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the multifaceted nature of adolescent male relatedness. Moreover, the present investigation builds upon previous research suggesting that adolescent males desire intimacy with their peers (e.g., Chu, 2005). Specifically, it reveals the active process through which adolescent males go about establishing feelings of connection with one another and offers observable indicators which describe what it looks like when they do so.

### **Limitations**

While the research team took several measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the analytic process and in turn, the credibility of the emerging indicators, the current study has several limitations. As noted, the authors have in common their training as counsellors and their ensuing understanding of supportive relationships as critical components of change and well-being. As such, our training backgrounds likely influenced our shared interest in studying relatedness and the lenses through which we came to collectively understand the data. Similarly, the fact that we are all females is worth noting as our gender may have informed what we observed to be moments of adolescent male relatedness. Enlisting the help of researchers with differing training backgrounds and gender identities would have enhanced the diversity of the perspectives that comprised the research team.

The current study was also constrained by its access to video recordings as the sole source of data. As such, the present investigation could have been strengthened by drawing upon multiple sources of data (e.g., participant interviews) beyond the videotape recordings to inform the analysis. While additional sources of data were not available at the time of the current study, follow-up interviews for the larger project indicated that participants experienced their relationships with fellow group members as significant sources of support and they perceived these relationships as playing a central role in fostering their motivation for career exploration.

### **Future Directions**

The literature on relatedness in general and adolescent male relatedness in particular, is in its infancy. This study can serve as an important stepping stone for future

research that might explore whether the same indicators of relatedness can be observed in other adolescent male populations in different environments. For example, future research could investigate whether these indicators bear relevance for adolescent males without motivational issues or adolescent males who are not in a formal group context, as was the case for the current study. In addition, it would be interesting to conduct future investigations on how adolescent females display relatedness behaviors relative to their adolescent male counterparts. In a similar vein, future research could also explore how relatedness can be described in mixed-gender groups.

While such a consideration was beyond the scope of the present study, the literature does suggest that adolescent males and adolescent females differ in their interactional styles (e.g., Maccoby, 1990). In considering the ways in which adolescent males and females relate, diverse manifestations of relatedness could be affirmed. While our study focused on adolescent male relatedness, we would like to caution readers against dichotomizing relatedness along gender lines. We believe that our findings illuminate the fluidity of adolescent male relatedness, yet we also recognize the gendered contexts in which individuals develop and the accompanying barriers therein. Extensive research in the areas of gender studies (e.g., Wood, 2011) and homophobic bullying (e.g., Pascoe, 2005) has provided insight into gender socialization processes and the costs of violating gender norms and expectations during adolescence. We hope that future research will facilitate a contextualized understanding and consider the different ways in which individuals internalize and express their gender identities when exploring adolescent relatedness.

Beyond gender, future research might investigate relatedness across the lifespan and across cultural backgrounds. SDT scholars suggest that although the psychological needs are universal, they are likely to be made manifest in different ways depending on the person, their developmental stage, and their environment (Sheldon et al., 2004). Research of this nature could assist in conceptualizing how people's stages of development and their cultural identities impact the manner in which they engage in relatedness behaviors.

Additionally, future research efforts could incorporate the needs for autonomy and competence, thereby allowing for an understanding of how attempts to fulfill the three psychological needs interact. While self-report measures of need satisfaction have been developed and employed by researchers (e.g., La Guardia et al., 2000), to date, there are no observer-rating methods for relatedness. The data from this study might be used to develop an observational tool could be useful for researching need satisfaction in a wide-range of practical settings (e.g., school, work, therapy). Finally, our study focused on relatedness between adolescent male peers and therefore we did not include the group facilitator in our analysis. However, we believe that this is an important area for future research as it could shed light on how group facilitator variables influence relatedness between student group members.

### **Conclusion**

This study built upon SDT's construct of relatedness to further understand how adolescent male relatedness can be described when observed in a group context. The 13 indicators of relatedness that emerged from our data analysis resonate with several

theoretical frameworks, thus fueling an integrative understanding of the construct of relatedness. Our analysis suggests that adolescent males who are in group contexts make active attempts to connect with one another and to establish closer relationships. Our data indicates that they do so through co-constructing a light atmosphere in which members feel validated, appreciated, safe, accepted, and part of something that goes beyond themselves. It is our hope that our investigation is of practical utility to those who work with adolescent boys. In having access to these observable indicators, professionals can have insight into how to structure their groups to promote adolescent males' needs for relatedness. In so doing, adolescent males' relational needs can be affirmed and their overall well-being and development can be facilitated.

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#### Article Citation

Hutman, H., Konieczna, K. A., Kerner, E., Armstrong, C. R., & Fitzpatrick, M. (2012). Indicators of relatedness in adolescent male groups: Toward a qualitative description. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Art. 30), 1-23. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/hutman.pdf>

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