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## The Impact of Geographic Mobility Upon Early Adolescents' Perceived Level of Peer Acceptance

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THE IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY UPON  
EARLY ADOLESCENTS' PERCEIVED  
LEVEL OF PEER ACCEPTANCE

Alicia Diaz Sachan, B.S.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Lindenwood University in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Art  
August 1999

## Abstract

Despite the prevalence of geographic mobility among American families today, little research has focused on the possible consequences of such moves upon children. The possible impact of geographic mobility upon children's social, emotional, and academic development has been investigated although not currently. Previous studies have also neglected to focus on a common concern among mobile adolescents in particular; peer acceptance. To address this need for further research, this study examines the effects of geographic mobility upon early adolescents' perceived level of peer acceptance following a move as compared to a group of nonmobile students. Peer Acceptance was determined by using the Index of Peer Relations (IPR). Subjects for this study were chosen from a list of newly enrolled students to a middle school in the 98-99 school year while the control group was selected from a list of 954 students from the entire middle school during the same school year. No significant differences were found between these two groups in terms of their perceived level of peer acceptance suggesting that feelings of acceptance by peers during the early adolescent period may not be affected by mobility. Other possible factors were investigated that may have contributed to the lack of significance between mobile versus nonmobile adolescents.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Extensive research has been conducted on the variables that may influence the social adjustment of early adolescents. One variable which has received little attention, however, is the effect of family relocation on the social adjustment and development of early adolescents. Since geographic mobility is one of the major defining qualities of contemporary life, approximately 16% of American families change residence each year, (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1996-1997) it is important to examine the stresses and challenges that these relocations may have on early adolescence.

Changing residences and schools can carry with it a number of unique stressors. Friendships and extra-curricular activities are disrupted. Early adolescents who move often typically must live without any regular contact with grandparents and other relatives. Parental relationships may suffer as a result of the move as well. In some cases, fathers may be away from home, leaving mothers with the sole responsibility of raising the children in spite of their own feelings of isolation (Kantor, 1965). Particularly when a move is the result of a change in family status (i.e. divorce), early adolescents face an even greater disruption to their lives.

Mobile adolescents are often faced with novel customs and school requirements. To be successful, children must develop flexibility and employ new strategies acceptable in a wide variety of situations (Kroger, 1980). Of particular relevance here are the theories developed by Goffman and Richardson in understanding the process a newcomer undergoes in an attempt to adjust to his/her new surroundings (Goffman, 1959; Richardson as cited in Elliott & Punch, 1991). These adolescents are repeatedly torn from friendships yet must have the energy to invest in new ones. Consequently, it may become difficult to develop and maintain nurturant interpersonal relationships.

Adolescence is a time of rapid change. Erikson's psychosocial theory (as cited in Newman & Newman, 1995) describes this stage of development as characteristic of rapid physical changes, significant cognitive as well as emotional maturation, sexual awakening, and a heightened sensitivity to peer relations. Young adolescents begin to value friendship as a source of support and turn to their peers rather than family to satisfy these intimacy needs. Therefore, if peer social interactions are particularly important in this stage of development, it would seem then that environmental continuity for the development of these friendships is crucial.

Not only are forming interpersonal relationships critical in adolescence, but these ties are also a vital part of our existence as human beings as we grow older. Research has found that mobility makes it difficult to maintain emotional bonds with family and friends not only during the time of transition, but may also translate into difficulty in forming intimate, long-term friendships in adult years (Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983; Jalongo, 1983). Furthermore, the effects of frequent mobility may deprive early adolescents of the dependability and security of long-standing bonds which will act as the foundation on which to build the rest of their lives (Elkind, 1979; Wadsworth, 1984).

Therefore, there is a real need to study the effects of geographic mobility on early adolescents' perceived level of peer acceptance. The need for this study grew out of the researcher's experiences with mobile students as a counselor. It has become evident that as this population increases and possible consequences of mobility become graver, it is necessary to gain insight into what a newcomer experiences to better provide appropriate interventions to these students. The proposed study examined the possible effects of geographic mobility on early adolescents' perceived feelings of peer acceptance. Because early adolescence is viewed as a time when peers are considered a main source of their identity, only early adolescents will be studied. Although the literature on this topic is sparse and outdated, the evidence that does exist seems to point to the notion that adolescents struggle with transitions such as moving and changing schools more often

than do younger children (Barrett & Noble, 1973; Smardo, 1981; Bloomfield & Holzman, 1988; Berg-Cross & Flanagan, 1988).

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

#### Early Adolescence

Adolescence has typically been referred to as a period of transition between the developmental stages of childhood and adulthood. Although it is considered to be a critical phase in human development, it has received little attention from psychologists or other social scientists and is considered to be the least understood. In addition, the age span which this stage of development encompasses has also been a controversial issue. That is, some classify adolescence as beginning with the onset of puberty (11 or 12 years of age) and lasting until one is considered a legal adult or graduates from high school (18 years of age). Therefore, adolescence has become synonymous with the teenage years (Atwater, 1992). However, due in part to the structure of the educational system, adolescence has also been divided into early and late adolescence by some in the field of psychosocial human development (Atwater, 1992). Although the boundaries of division are somewhat blurred, early adolescence, for the purposes of this paper, will be defined as ranging from 11-14 years of age.

Erikson (as cited in Newman & Newman, 1995) characterized early adolescence by rapid physical changes, significant cognitive and emotional maturation, sexual awakening, and a heightened sensitivity to peer relations. During this stage of development, young adolescents must resolve questions about their connections, especially their relationships with their peer groups. In an effort to create their own individual identities, they must first develop a sense of group identity. Therefore, that is the main task of this age group. As Erikson states, "from 10-14, friends become an increasingly important source of support" (p.432)

Similarly, Sullivan's social-developmental theory, discusses the need for interpersonal intimacy that involves a member of the same sex during early adolescence (Mannarino, 1979; Maas, 1968; Furman & Bierman, 1984). No longer are parents able to

satisfy their interpersonal needs so they look to friends for that support. However, at this stage of development, the meaning of friendship undergoes changes as well. For example, the nature of friendship evolves from a concrete, behavioral, surface relationship of playing together to a more abstract, mutually-satisfying relationship of caring for one another, sharing each other's thoughts and feelings, comforting one another, and enduring over occasional conflicts (Berndt, 1981; Scarlett, Press, & Crockett, 1971; Furman & Bierman, 1984). In addition, when asked to describe friendships at this age, young adolescents emphasized the importance of acceptance, loyalty, companionship, and common interests (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Furman & Bierman, 1984).

#### Group Identity Among Early Adolescents

It seems that early adolescents choose friends based on similar interests and attitudes. For instance, peer group formation becomes more defined at this age. Social cliques begin to form and early adolescents begin to associate with those who share similar interests, beliefs, values, and attitudes. More specifically, peers share the same tastes in music, clothes, and attitudes towards school especially during this stage of development. There is also the element of peer group influence that exists as well. Conformity among early adolescents is at its peak and independence among this age group is consistently low (Berndt as cited in Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Petersen, 1996; Cobb, 1992).

Erikson (as cited in Newman & Newman, 1995), describes a major crisis that comes into play for early adolescents. The crisis is determining whether their beliefs and value systems complement or conflict with their peer group's norms. Therefore, early adolescents are confronted by the fit or lack of fit between their personal needs and values and the values held by the peer group. This struggle cannot be underestimated considering their strong desire to be connected to others and their need for approval.

This desire stems from a number of developmental changes the early adolescent is facing. First, he or she is beginning to disengage from parents and the family. This leaves an emotional gap in the lives of young people (Cobb, 1992). In an attempt to fill that gap, early adolescents look to the peer group for support during this transitional period. Secondly, because they are not children anymore yet not yet adults, they may experience some turmoil in trying to achieve the independence for which they search. Consequently, they rely on friends and peers to share the conflicts, anxieties, and differences they may be experiencing at home in an attempt to resolve them through mutual sympathy and understanding from peers. According to their own reports, adolescents spend more time talking to peers than any other single activity; they also describe themselves as most happy when talking to peers (Csikszentmihaly, Larson, & Prescott, 1977 as cited in Berndt, 1982).

On the other hand, as Cobb (1992) points out, it is erroneous to assume that these two reference groups (parents and peers) must contradict one another when, in many cases, they reinforce each other. That is, where choices have to be made, the majority of adolescents, contrary to expectations, select parents rather than peers to make their final decisions. Several studies (Wilks, 1986; Wintre, Hicks, McVey, & Fox, 1988 as cited in Cobb, 1992) have investigated the influence of peers in an effort to determine whether early adolescents would abandon parents' expectations for those of the peer group. Overwhelmingly, the adolescents' decision to conform to parents versus peers wishes depended primarily upon the nature of the dilemma. Although there are undoubtedly differences in taste between adults and young people, as well as disagreements over mundane domestic issues, such differences do not imply major discrepancies where fundamental values are concerned (Coleman, 1980). Moreover, affiliation with a peer group does not necessarily lead to a rejection of parental values and it is possible for the early adolescent to maintain respect for both parents and peers. In these cases in particular, young people seem to choose friends whose values are congruent with those of

their parents. However, one must always consider the impact of personality as well as family structure as significant factors in determining the early adolescent's relationship with both parents and peers.

A third reason believed to contribute to the close bonds which develop between early adolescents and other young people is the vulnerability that they are experiencing during this stage of their lives. For example, feelings of self-doubt and a lack of self-confidence often leads to a strong need for social support. Early adolescents begin to develop a new awareness of self and a more sophisticated understanding of other people and events which, in turn, affects the quality of their friendships. For instance, they are beginning to understand their friends' thoughts and feelings and are more able to realize the importance of mutuality or reciprocity in friendships (Berndt, 1982; Furman & Bierman, 1984; Mannarino, 1979).

#### Factors Impacting Peer Relations

Since the essence of friendships transforms into more meaningful relationships at this stage of development, researchers and theorists in the social-cognitive-developmental field have yielded a large amount of information about the features of adolescent friendships and how certain variables may influence peer acceptance. Several studies (Walsh & Kurdek, 1984; Kurdek & Krile, 1982; Ladd & Oden, 1979; Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975) have found a link between early adolescents' interpersonal competence and social cognitive skills and peer acceptance. For example, proficient social skills such as communicating effectively, integrating themselves into a group conversation, reciprocating humor, possessing knowledge of peer norms and values, and matching social skills to the demands of a particular situation seem to relate to positive peer relationships. Furthermore, these prosocial behaviors have been found to increase with age and are more pronounced in girls than boys (Walsh & Kurdek, 1984; Kurdek & Krile, 1982).

Although in Berndt's (1982) study, the nature of the relationships between boys and girls differ in the sense that girls may require intimacy in their friendships in a different fashion than boys. That is, boys may get to know their friends just by spending time with them while girls prefer to verbally connect by sharing their innermost thought and feelings with one another. In addition, boys' friendships are typically characterized by common pursuits with an emphasis on competition, skills, and achievement whereas girls value empathy and sensitivity in relationships (Cobb, 1992; Mannarino, 1979). Overall, while friendships between the sexes may differ in orientation, it does not imply that the importance of friendships is undermined for either sex.

It also seems that early adolescents' friendships consist of mainly same-sex relationships whereas opposite-sex relationships start to develop and are more accepted in later adolescence (Berndt, 1982; Kagan & Coles, 1972; Cobb, 1992; Maas, 1968). For instance, Sullivan (1953) depicts friendships at this stage as a "chum" relationship referring to a same-sex best friend.

Not only are interpersonal skills beneficial to the development of early adolescent friendships, several theorists have proposed the need for these skills as a prerequisite for later interpersonal adjustment (Piaget, 1965; Selman, 1980; Sullivan, 1953; Youniss, 1980 as cited in Kurdek & Krile, 1982). Peer relationships in early adolescence afford children the opportunity to become interpersonally sensitive, experience intimacy, and achieve mutual understanding that prepare individuals for future interpersonal satisfaction. Similarly, Maas (1968) performed a study in which he investigated the relationship of adults who appeared to be high or low in their intimacy with other people by examining their peer relationships during early adolescence. He found a positive correlation between those who were more socially isolated or rejected by their peers and the poor quality of their adult relationships.



### Transition in Early Adolescence

Considering the “turmoil” early adolescents may face at this point in their lives, it would seem that certain stressful events in their life would present an even greater challenge for these youth. The importance of a relatively stable environment as a prerequisite for developing a true sense of self has been stressed by several theorists and researchers (Erikson, 1968; Newcomb, Huba, & Bentler, 1981; Bloomfield & Holzman, 1988). As stated earlier, early adolescents are in the process of defining who they are through the affiliation with the peer group. Therefore, residential stability appears to be a necessary condition for the development of adolescent’s true identities. Yet, according to the United States Bureau of the Census (1990), moving has become a standard procedure of American life with approximately one out of five families moving each year affecting some 8 million school age children.

Despite these statistics, the effects of geographic mobility upon children, and particularly adolescents, remains largely unresearched and only partially understood (Tooley, 1970; Smardo, 1981; Marchant & Medway, 1987; Newcomb et al., 1981; Cornille, Bayer, & Smyth, 1983). Moreover, the research that does exist is often inconsistent. On the one hand, some of the evidence seems to suggest that the impact of relocating can be detrimental to the social, emotional, and academic development of youngsters (Fields, 1995; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989). For example, even after controlling for possible mediating influences such as family problems, Fields’ study found more mobile students scored lower on measures of peer acceptance, social competence, and overall school adjustment following a move. Another study also found that frequent family relocation was associated with an increased risk of children failing a grade in school and behavior problems (Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). Finally, Ingersoll et al. (1989) found that students in the more stable population scored consistently higher on measures of academic achievement than did those from the

mobile group of adolescents. These results also persisted under attempts to control for socio-economic status.

On the other hand, several studies have found that relocating was a positive experience for children (Tooley, 1970; Mann, 1972; Marchant & Medway, 1987). The latter study suggests that military children adjust quite well considering the frequency of relocation's in the population as well as the nature of military life. For instance, there appears to be more community involvement and support for these families in addition to similar curricula among schools.

Evidence suggests that several variables such as the socio-economic status of the family, reasons for moving, parental attitudes toward moving, mobility history, family status and structure, and social support seem to greatly impact the way in which an individual adjusts to their new environment (Barrett & Noble, 1973; Kroger, 1980; Hendershott, 1989; Humke & Schaefer, 1995). Therefore, the effects of moving are complex and depend largely upon a variety of factors.

Other than military personnel, today's families move for a variety of reasons. According to Bloomfield and Holzman (1988), many of these moves are employment-related where a parent is forced to or chooses to transfer to improve working conditions. On the other hand, more and more families are moving due to separation, divorce, remarriage, unemployment, or to escape debts. When accompanied by changes in family structure or unforeseen circumstances, moving may become even more stressful.

Although the research on relocation has been limited, there seems to be a consensus among researchers that residential mobility is perceived as a stressful life event which can impair a child's adjustment (Hendershott, 1989; Newcomb et al., 1981; Ingersoll et al., 1989; Humke & Schaefer, 1995; Barrett & Noble, 1973; Pedersen & Sullivan, 1963; Levine, 1966). More specifically, a life-event questionnaire administered to 1018 adolescents assessing dimensions of stress identified relocation among one of them. Similarly, on Elkind's Child's Stress scale, (Elkind as cited in Humke & Schaefer,

1995) school readjustment, moving to another place, changing schools, and changing friends have been described as major stressors. In yet another study of children's anxieties, geographic mobility was found to be a principle source of stress (Lewis, Siegel, & Lewis, 1984).

Relocation may be most stressful on early adolescents who are already facing a variety of stressors. Several researchers (Bloomfield & Holzman, 1988; Barrett & Noble, 1973) agree that mobility during the turbulent adolescent years when the important age-appropriate development task of establishing their independence becomes hindered due to the strain of a new environment. For example, since peer groups are beginning to become more cohesive at this age, early adolescents are more susceptible to rejection by peers. As a result, mobile early adolescents must depend upon their parents during this transition which is in direct conflict with the developmental tasks of this age group. This, in turn, places adolescents at risk for feeling dependent and alienated (Berg-Cross & Flanagan, 1988).

Early adolescents overwhelmingly report that leaving old friends and making new ones is the most difficult part of moving (Brett, 1982; Berg-Cross & Flanagan, 1988; Smardo, 1981; Humke & Schaefer, 1995). Vernberg (1990) further explained these findings by stating, "relocation is a transition in an adolescents life which may increase the likelihood of rejection by peers at a point in their life when the judgment of peers is thought to be particularly important" (p. 471). Unfortunately, studies have shown that new students trail behind in popularity and acceptance by classmates as compared to the more stable students (Fields, 1995; Kantor, 1965). Therefore, the most commonly reported need of residential newcomers is peer acceptance.

#### Factors Mediating the Impact of Transition

Despite the impending need to establish friendships following a move, early adolescents may not be well equipped to do so. For instance, depending upon the nature of the move and other confounding variables, newcomers may experience a form of social

anxiety that can negatively affect their ability to develop intimate friendships (Vernberg, Abwender, Ewell, & Beery, 1992). The latter researchers studied military and civilian teenagers and found that those that had difficulty leaving their friends exhibited a higher level of stress than those who reported little difficulty. Consequently, newcomers may lack the appropriate social skills necessary to develop and maintain peer relationships.

The gender of the adolescent also plays a significant role in determining the impact of mobility upon early adolescents. For example, Orthner et al. (1987) found that teenage girls had an especially hard time adjusting to a new group of peers as compared to the boys. This finding can be supported by Feshbach & Sones (1971) study in which they found that adolescent girls displayed more negative, rejecting attitudes toward a newcomer than did boys. Similarly, Mann's (1972) study also found males more able to cope with their new situation. In his study, he examined the adaptability of college undergraduates who had a history of mobility to determine if this factor would enhance their transition to college life. Consequently, males were found to be more adaptive than their mobile female counterparts. Although the age of the populations of these two studies differ somewhat, the general conclusions seem to be consistent.

On the other hand, Vernberg's (1990) study concluded that 'mobile' boys generally encounter more difficulty with peers following a move than do 'mobile' girls. Similarly, Wood et al. (1993) study also found males were more likely to report more occurrences of learning disorders, retention, and behavioral problems following a move as compared to mobile girls. Although these studies focused on different consequences of moving, the trend seems to be similar to other evidence suggesting that boys generally seem to struggle more with other stressful transitions as compared to girls. For instance, following a divorce, boys are thought to experience more stress, frustration, and aggression and are viewed more negatively by mothers, teachers, and peers than girls (Hetherington, 1981; Rutter, 1981; Zaslow, 1988; as cited in Vernberg, 1990).

Social class and educational level of parents also seem to influence the adjustment of mobile youth. This factor is best portrayed in Levine's (1966) study of residential change and its possible consequences. He described the segment of the population where a high proportion of social problems and educational difficulties were prevalent, as being highly mobile. Therefore, children from poor families are apparently exposed to moves at a much greater rate than children from wealthier families (Wood et al., 1993; Pedersen & Sullivan, 1963). Whereas upper class children may develop flexible thinking skills and approach problems from a broader perspective, children that come from economically deprived homes experience the tensions and sense of disequilibrium caused by moving coupled with the daily hardships associated with poverty. It becomes evident then that those adolescents faced with the stress effects of moving at a critical time in their lives in addition to other family demographic variables are more at risk of suffering as a result of the move. Moreover, transient children of professional parents may even benefit from relocating while moves among poor youth were correlated with lower academic achievement (Levine, 1966; Kantor, 1965; Barrett & Noble, 1973).

This particularly powerful variable, socioeconomic status (SES), appears in much of the literature related to geographic mobility. For instance, in a study of military children and their adjustment to relocations, the group of military families with officer status (representing a degree of professionalism) failed to possess any real adjustment problems associated with moving (Pedersen & Sullivan, 1963). Although this may be due to the essence of military life as discussed earlier, a similar finding exists in Wood et al. (1993) study. These researchers found that children in families with an increasing number of risk factors such as being poor and a less than high school education of parents, were more likely to repeat a grade in school or exhibit behavioral problems associated with moving than did those children in families with less risk factors.

In addition to the SES of the family contributing to the adjustment of newcomers, race also influences the impact of mobility. As mentioned previously, moves among

lower SES populations were more common as well as among nonwhite families (Wood et al., 1993; Pedersen & Sullivan, 1963). In addition, poor, nonwhite children seem to lag behind wealthier, white children in terms of academic achievement (Levine, 1966). However, race cannot be isolated as being the single variable that may impact upon the consequences of moving since it was coupled with SES. Although not addressed extensively in the literature, nonwhite children were found to be significantly more susceptible to having delays in growth or development than children of white families (Wood et al., 1993). However, this result should be interpreted with caution due to the confounding variable of race with SES.

A final factor that may be vital in determining the effect on children's adjustment in school following a move is the attitude of the parent toward the move. This variable surfaced quite often in the literature related to mobility. One study specifically focused on mother's anxieties and the outcome of moving on children (Barrett & Noble, 1973). The results of this study, however, failed to find a direct link between the anxiety about negative consequences of moving on the emotional development of children. But, these results must be interpreted with caution given that the population studied was well-educated and from the upper SES, and therefore, not necessarily generalizable.

On the other hand, in their study of military children, Pedersen and Sullivan (1963) found that one's attitude about moving was especially critical for mothers. It was believed that mothers who experience transition, may only be able to express their feelings at home rather than have jobs that may redirect their energies. Therefore, if they are experiencing some unpleasant emotions associated with the move, it may, in turn, negatively impact their child's adjustment as well. Again, this may reflect a population that is of higher SES and of an earlier era, where the mothers stay at home to care for the children and may not necessarily be representative of the larger population. Finally, Humke and Schaefer (1995) pointed out that children mirrored their parent's attitude and adjustment to a move. Therefore, while empirical results are not conclusive, there is

some indication that the attitude of the caretaker towards moving can be associated with a child's adjustment.

#### Process of Adjustment

Of real concern to transient students and an issue disputed in the field centers around the period of time necessary to make a smooth transition. The literature seems to be consistent in reporting that most young people undergo at least a relatively brief period (less than 3 months) of stress associated with being "new" (Cornille et al., 1983; Hendershott, 1989). However, Humke and Schaefer (1995) found some young adolescents took approximately 6 months to start feeling better, but still reported that they were thinking about the move. Furthermore, Vernberg's (1990) study revealed that some were still struggling with friendship formation and peer acceptance 9 months after a move. This finding supports the notion that early adolescents perceive peer acceptance as crucial to their adjustment and feel as though they have not completely adapted to their new environment until they have accomplished the age-appropriate task of establishing social networks. Similarly, the estimated adjustment period for the average newcomer with respect to peer relationships was found to be slightly longer than that of academic achievement according to Humke and Schaefer's study.

#### Sociological Theories Related to Mobility

The actual process that a newcomer ensues in adjusting to their new surroundings has been outlined by two relevant theorists, Goffman (1959) and Richardson (1974). The latter theorist's viewpoint stems from studies on migrants who make transitions quite frequently and how they cope with those changing conditions. Richardson (1974) believes transient students assimilate into their new environment in different ways that occur over a period of time. Goffman, on the other hand, is concerned with understanding the day-to-day interactions of the newcomer with others in the school. Furthermore, Goffman's dramaturgical approach views each interaction as a performance and believes newcomers control what others get to see of them. These theories have

particular relevance for mobile students in that despite the influence of certain variables, transient students will be received differently depending upon how they approach their new situation. Finally, Goffman's theory can also help in understanding the roles played by others in this process. As Goffman (1959) describes:

Each newcomer is aware that no person in the school has any real knowledge of him/her. He/she is entering a new environment knowing that from the first contact with others, judgments are being made. It is expected that, to varying degrees, newcomers will control the image they present to others in the school. The image may not be a consistent one for all others. It may be varied, depending upon who the other parties in the interaction may be. Various school staff members have different functions in dealing with the newcomer. All are concerned with maintaining the image of the school as a "good" school. Other students will take on differing roles. Some become self-appointed helpers while others are more reluctant guides for the newcomer. Some will have little to do with the newcomer until he/she has become "acceptable" by some means. (p. 36)

Richardson's theory (as cited in Elliott & Punch, 1991), on the other hand, provides a framework for understanding the different stages experienced by each newcomer over time.

Upon arrival, the newcomer's position is similar to that of a migrant. Initially, there is likely to be a mixture of anxiety and excitement. As a novice member of the school community, the newcomer will have some freedom to make mistakes, but this freedom does have limits. There are some restrictions on his/her behavior. (p. 164)

The newcomer will then proceed to a stage where they will adopt at least some of the norms and values of the school peer-group. Some may fail to completely become a member of the new group where they may still hold on to their previous ties in their



former community or school. Others will become indistinguishable from the host population.

#### Interventions to Ease the Transition Process

Although these theoretical frameworks provide an overall guide in understanding how a transient student interacts with others in their new conditions, it does not take into account the mediating variables that may exist that are capable of altering the outcome of potentially stressful events such as relocation. For example, one of those factors, alluded to briefly, is that of social support (Hendershott, 1989; Newcomb et al., 1981). Social support has been defined by Lin (1984) as "the perceived or actual instrumental and /or expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks and confiding partners" (p. 18). This single variable has the potential to lessen the negative effects of relocating. This social support can stem from a variety of sources. It seems reasonable to assume that it should come from those who interact with the newcomer on a daily basis (i.e. family, school personnel).

As stated earlier, an important variable in serving to ease the transition into the new environment is the parents' attitude toward moving, particularly the mother's. Therefore, they can prepare their children as well as themselves for the move. The literature contains an immense amount of interventions as well as resources available for parents who are relocating. Some of these interventions are structured programs while others are simply a list of suggestions.

One service for parents is a support group for relocated women (Bloomfield & Holzman, 1988). These groups provide an outlet for women where they can share their common thoughts, feelings, and anxieties related to moving. Furthermore, these type of groups educate mothers about the effects of moving on their children and what to expect following a move. Specific strategies are then discussed to help children deal with the range of feelings they may be experiencing. These groups focus on both the mother's own apprehensive feelings about moving as well as ways to help their children cope with

a move. Finally, mothers who participated in these kinds of groups reported that they felt better prepared to help their children once they were able to work through some of their own anxieties (Bloomfield & Holzman, 1988).

In addition to programs set up for parents dealing with transition, some schools have implemented plans to aid mobile students. As Cornille et al. (1983) describe, many schools employ standard procedures for enrollment of new students in an effort to gain valuable information about the newcomer's needs and abilities. Having pertinent background information on a new student prepares the new school for what to expect and how to plan accordingly. The way in which this information is gained can vary. For example, some schools' counselors or teachers conference with the sending school prior to the student's arrival. This personalizes the written information gathered from the sending school and provides a reference if further information should be needed.

Once the newcomer arrives, a plan to assist them in their new environment is crucial. Many services can be provided to mobile students from the simple to the more complex. For instance, orientation programs such as buddy systems offer a way for new students to become familiar with their new school while meeting friends at the same time (Cornille et al., 1983). These systems typically involve a same-sex peer escorting the new student around school for either the entire day, week, etc. The buddy is usually matched with the new student based on class assignment, bus route or personality. Some buddies are trained in advance while some are chosen spontaneously. Other schools have formed a "welcoming club" set up exclusively for that purpose (Cornille et al., 1983). The primary goal of this type of program is to make the newcomer feel welcome and lessen the stress associated with being "new".

In addition to the buddy program, schools also may provide other systems to accommodate the newcomer. For example, a packet of information pertaining to the new school may be given prior to or upon arrival. This packet may include names of school personnel, a school map, student handbook, and a list of extracurricular activities and

supplies needed (Cornille et al., 1983). Old yearbooks may be used as well as a way to familiarize newcomers with school personnel. Furthermore, a few schools offer a listing of community services and organizations that can provide additional information and services to newcomers. Moreover, school newsletters offer an opportunity to introduce newcomers in an informal way.

Similarly, a more structured program that targets prospective new students can also be used to aid in the transition process. One such program entitled A Summer Visitation Program (SVP) was developed by Keats, Crabbs, and Crabbs (1981) to meet the social and emotional needs of new students. The program had four phases (a) community services patterned after the Welcome Wagon made new families aware of the program, (b) the school counselor visited the home and gave parents and students information about the school, (c) there was an orientation session in the school, and (d) there was a community picnic for returning students, new students, parents, and the faculty. As a result of this program, newcomers reported feeling less reluctant to attend school the first day and felt more at ease than new students who did not participate in the program (Keats, Crabbs, & Crabbs, 1981).

While the previous program addressed the social and emotional needs of newcomers, another program, Operation SAIL, focuses on the academic needs of mobile students (Panagos et al., 1981). This program targeted youngsters who transferred from inner city schools with lower academic standards to high-achieving suburban schools. This plan was structured similar to the resource room concept for learning disabled students in that children spent one period per day at the SAIL learning center remediating academic deficits. At the end of 12 weeks, progress was evaluated to determine whether continued participation in the program was warranted. Using a standardized academic achievement test, significant gains were noted in basic skills, confirming the success of the program (Panagos et al., 1981). Parents and school staff, however, were an integral part of the success of this program.

In light of the effectiveness of these two programs and the wealth of information available on strategies designed to minimize the traumatic effects of moves on children, the reality is that many schools do not utilize any type of service for newcomers unless there is a substantial occurrence of mobility (Cornille et al., 1983). This notion is not surprising considering the vast amount of outdated literature related to residential mobility (Barrett & Noble, 1973; Long, 1972; Mann, 1972; Feshbach & Sones, 1971; Scarlett et al., 1971; Tooley, 1970; Levine, 1966; Pedersen & Sullivan, 1963). Consequently, there appears to be a real need to examine the possible consequences of geographic mobility as it exists currently.

In reviewing the literature and considering the tremendous impact transition has upon early adolescents, this study examines the effect of residential mobility upon peer acceptance. This decision also stemmed from the researcher's own experience with mobility during her childhood and her current work with this population of children. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to compare mobile versus nonmobile early adolescents on a measure of perceived peer acceptance in an effort to isolate mobility as a pertinent variable that may influence how newcomers feel they are received by their peers.

#### Research Question

What is the impact of geographic mobility on early adolescents' perceived level of peer acceptance?

#### Hypothesis

Middle school students who change schools more than once will score lower on measures of peer acceptance than students who have remained stable in their schooling.

### Operational Definitions

Middle school students are defined in this study as students ranging in ages from 11-14.

Peer acceptance will be defined by the Index of Peer Relations with a score of 30 and above indicating absence of a clinically significant problem in this area.

Students who are geographically mobile are defined as middle school students who have moved into a new school during the 98-99 school year after the fourth week of the start of the school year and have moved at least one other time during their school careers (excluding the transition from elementary to middle school).

Students who have remained stable in their schooling are defined as those who have not moved at least twice during their school careers.

## Chapter Three

### Method

#### Subjects

The school from which the sample was drawn for this study was chosen due to its accessibility to the researcher and is classified as a primarily white, middle-class suburban middle-school located in a large midwestern town. Subjects for this study were selected by using a convenience sampling method. A database generated by the central office of the school district was examined. From that list, middle-school students who are described as those students who have entered the chosen school after the 4th week of the start of the 98-99 school year and have moved at least one other time previous to the current move (excluding the transition from elementary to middle school), were chosen. Following this, the students were interviewed individually and their permanent records checked for accuracy in reporting their educational histories.

Those who met the above- stated criteria formed the first group which consisted of 30 volunteer subjects ranging in ages from 11-14. Of those 30 subjects, 20 responded (67%). The male to female ratio was 7:13 with the majority (85%) of the subjects being white. The socioeconomic status (SES) of this group was not necessarily equally distributed. For the purposes of this study, socioeconomic status was defined by participation (low SES) or nonparticipation (high SES) in the free and reduced lunch program employed in the district. Considering this, 3 of the 20 subjects (15%) qualified for this program and could; therefore, be considered to be from a low SES whereas the majority were classified as being from a higher SES. On the other hand, subjects in this group were evenly distributed in terms of grade/age levels (i.e. sixth, seventh, and eighth grade).

Since mobility is being examined as the independent variable in this study, information was gathered from the first group in relation to that factor. For instance, the number of moves made by these subjects ranged from 2-7 during the course of their school careers. In addition, the primary reason for moving to their present school was due to a change in family status (i.e. divorce, remarriage, separation). Finally, it seemed as though there was an even division among this group of those who had moved recently (in the past 4 months) as compared to those who had moved more than 5 months ago.

The second or the control group, was selected in a slightly different fashion. For these subjects, a list of all 954 students in the school of study was used to match for SES with the first group so that both groups will reflect similar distribution in terms of SES. Therefore, this group also included approximately 30 volunteer students. Of those selected for participation, 23 (77%) responded. Again, the majority of subjects in this group were white (91%), middle school students ranging in ages from 11-14.

Possible sources of sampling bias may be the limitation of the sample size as well as it being a volunteer sample, sampling only geographically mobile students from one type of school setting, and the homogenous racial/ethnic composition of the sample.

#### Instrument

Index of Peer Relations. The Index of Peer Relations (IPR) is a self-report, paper and pencil inventory that consists of 25 items. These items are designed to measure the extent, severity, or magnitude of a problem the respondent has with peers. The instrument uses a 7 point Likert scale with response choices ranging from 1= none of the time to 7= all of the time.

Although there is limited technical information available on this instrument, the author describes the norm sample as a group of 107 clients currently engaged in counseling, of which about half were evaluated by therapists as not having problems with peers. Furthermore, the sample is considered to be diverse in regard to gender, ethnicity,

and social class. The researcher chose this instrument based on the relevance of the instrument to the purpose of the study.

Training for the administration and scoring of the IPR is not required as scoring procedures are outlined along with the instrument. In addition, significant scores are highlighted for interpretation purposes. Overall, the IPR is user-friendly and relatively easy to administer.

The IPR has excellent internal consistency (.94) and a low standard error of measurement (4.44). Test-retest data, on the other hand, is not available. This instrument also has excellent known-groups validity that significantly distinguishes between clients judged by themselves and their therapists as either having or not having peer relationship problems.

The IPR appears to have numerous strengths and weaknesses. Strengths include the practical nature of this instrument such as the ease of use, administration, and scoring procedures. The Likert scale also allows for more variety of responses. In addition, the reliability information provides strong evidence for the consistency of the instrument.

Several weaknesses should also be noted with the IPR. The modest technical information justifies caution in interpreting results. First, the very small norming group is not clearly defined leaving uncertainty when eliciting a similar reference group. Second, the reliability, and particularly, validity information is not comprehensive in that there is no mention of the construct validity of this instrument which would seem appropriate.

#### Procedures

This research study is casual-comparative in nature as it purports to establish a cause and effect relationship between mobility of transitional students and their perceived level of peer acceptance. This type of design is appropriate due to the fact that the independent variable, mobility, cannot be manipulated and has already occurred.



Data collection procedures involved giving each participant a parental consent letter to be delivered home (a small incentive was offered upon return of those letters). Consequently, this was a volunteer sample.

Appointments were then set up to administer the demographic data sheet as well as the instrument, the Index of Peer Relations. Instruments were individually administered in the privacy of the school's guidance office after school hours. The experimenter read a set of standardized directions and allowed for any questions. Then, the experimenter remained apart from the examinee and was only be available if needed. When subjects were finished, they were instructed to place their materials in an envelope to ensure anonymity. They were not required to place their name on any piece of material.

#### Data Analysis

An Independent T-test was used in this study to analyze results. This was utilized to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups on a measure of perceived peer acceptance.

Some potential threats to validity include differential selection in that the mobile and nonmobile groups differ on some other characteristics. In order to partially control for this, the subjects in both groups were matched on SES. It is also possible that experimenter effects may impact the results; therefore, the data collection procedures were executed in a standardized fashion by administering both the demographic information sheet as well as the instrument to subjects with standardized directions. In addition, exact grade level, subject's ages nor gender were equally matched or evenly distributed. However, all students in both groups were either in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade, and hence will be considered to be within approximately the same age range and relatively equal gender distributions.

## Chapter Four

## Results

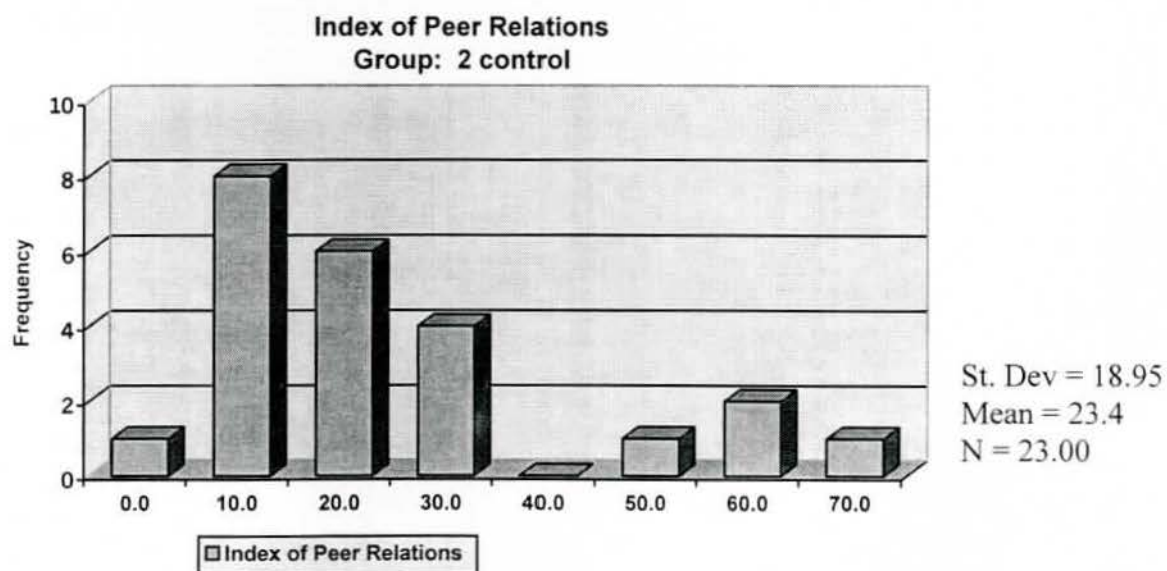
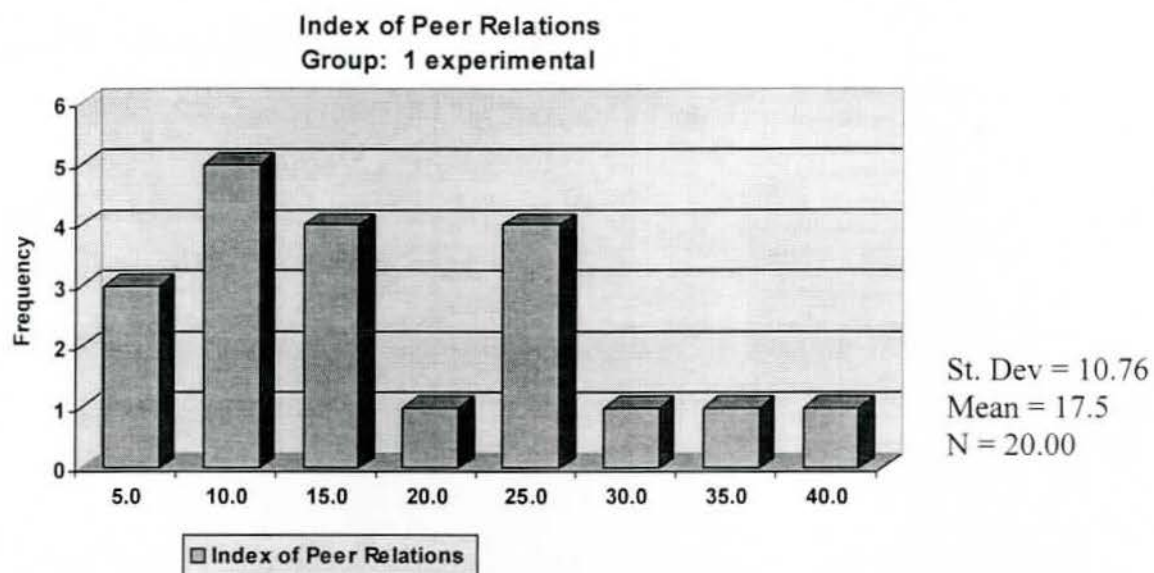
Peer acceptance scores were computed to test the hypothesis that middle school students who change schools more than once will score lower on measures of peer acceptance than students who have remained stable in their schooling. The descriptive statistics for both groups (experimental and control) are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1  
Index of Peer Relations

Group Assignment	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean
Experimental Group	20	17.50	10.76	2.41
Control Group	23	23.43	18.95	3.95

The mean for the experimental group who had a history of mobility was 17.50 with a standard deviation of 10.76. Despite the variability among scores in this group, only 15% of the subjects received a score that is considered to be significant according to this measure of perceived peer acceptance. On the other hand, the mean for the control group was 23.43 with a standard deviation of 18.95 indicating that there was more variance among scores in this group. Although the number of participants was slightly higher for this group, the greater variance could be attributed to the 4 outliers (e.g. 54, 61, 61, 67) causing the results to be skewed (See Figure 1).

Figure 1



An Independent Samples Test was used to determine the level of significance between these two groups. These results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Index of Peer Relations

	t-test for Equality of Means			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	-1.237	41	.223	-5.93
Equal variances not assumed	-1.283	35.670	.208	-5.93

\* $p < 0.05$ 

The difference between the mobile group (Group 1) and the nonmobile group (Group 2) was not significant ( $t = .223$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Therefore, the original hypothesis stating that this sample of middle school students who change schools more than once will score lower on measures of peer acceptance than students who have remained stable in their schooling was not supported in this study.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion

The hypothesis being tested stated that middle school students in this sample who change schools more than once will score lower on measures of peer acceptance than students who have remained stable in their schooling. The findings of this study suggested there was no significant difference between the mobile versus the nonmobile group of early adolescents. Consequently, the results of this investigation fail to support this hypothesis.

The findings suggest that, on the whole, mobile adolescents perceived their peers as accepting of them regardless of the fact that they were "new". This conclusion is in direct conflict with previous findings (Fields, 1995; Kantor, 1965) in which new students were not as accepted or considered as popular as the more stable students. Conversely, the control group, with no known history of mobility, possessed a great deal of variability in their scores on the Index of Peer Relations. That is, this group's scores ranged from 3 to 67, respectively, resulting, in part, to a higher mean score than the experimental group. This conclusion led the researcher to speculate on what may have contributed to this.

For example, it could be that peer acceptance among early adolescents may have more to do with their own feelings of self-worth rather than the mobility factor. It may also indicate that peer acceptance is more related to interpersonal competencies and social skills than any other variable. Similarly, in their studies, Walsh and Kurdek (1984) and Kurdek and Krile (1982) found a link between early adolescents' interpersonal competencies and peer acceptance. However, as Vernberg et al (1992) found in their study, newcomers may lack the appropriate interpersonal skills necessary to build friendships considering the social anxiety they may be experiencing following a move.

On the other hand, these findings could possibly suggest that mobility fosters resilience among early adolescents. For instance, studies such as Tooley (1970), Mann (1972), and Marchant and Medway (1987) found that relocating was a positive

experience for mobile youth (although the latter study focused on military children; and therefore, is not necessarily generalizable to this population). These newcomers may have developed the coping skills necessary to maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships. A final consideration in analyzing this data is that evidence (Hendershott, 1989; Newcomb et al., 1981; Lin, 1984) points to the notion of social support as a variable that mediates the stress effects of moving. Coincidentally, a program entitled the "Welcoming Committee" was implemented as a form of social support to newcomers at the school of study perhaps contributing to these findings.

#### Limitations

Barrett and Noble (1973), Kroger (1980), Hendershott (1989) and Humke and Schaefer (1995) depicted certain variables in their studies that may impact upon the effects of moving. These factors may have also impacted the results of this study and contributed to the lack of significance among the two groups. For example, socio-economic status (SES), reasons for moving, mobility history, and social support seem to affect the way in which an individual adjusts to their new surroundings. In hindsight, when gathering background data on the subjects, some of these factors surfaced that would have been noteworthy to include in this study. Although SES was attempted to be evenly matched among groups, the proportion of lower as compared to middle and higher SES among the participants was unevenly distributed.

In addition to the lack of control for the previous variables, this study was also limited by its small sample size. A larger sample size may have yielded different results. The homogeneous ethnic/racial composition of this sample may have also contributed to the findings. Moreover, an equal gender distribution between the two groups could have provided meaningful data and controlled for individual differences among the groups. A more random sampling which included subjects from a more diverse population could have also produced more generalizable results. Furthermore, it is also possible that experimenter effects may have impacted the results. Although the data was collected via

standardized administration procedures, the Hawthorne effect could have been a contributing factor. Finally, considering the limited technical data available on the choice instrument, the instrument itself could have led to the inconsistent results.

### Recommendations

This investigation provided the researcher the opportunity to explore a topic that has been currently lacking in the literature. It is also one that has been overlooked in spite of the growing trend toward residential mobility among Americans in today's society. Moreover, considering that adolescents' main objective is to form social ties with their peers, it would seem as though environmental stability would be crucial at this time of their lives. Although the hypothesis was not supported in this study, future programs can still be approached. These programs can range from more informal ones such as the one implemented at the school of study to more entailed, structured ones. A program should, however, consider the needs of the population and the resources available.

In light of the limitations of this study, it would seem beneficial to conduct a similar study with more control for the mediating variables alluded to earlier. Another recommendation would be to increase the sample size and include a more diverse population. Finally, administering another measure of peer acceptance may produce different results as well.

Appendix A  
Parent Consent Form

Dear Parents,

This spring a research study is going to be conducted at Barnwell Middle school involving students and their perceptions of their peer relationships. We are contacting you to receive permission for your child to participate in our study. This study has been reviewed and approved by Mr. Mosher, school principal.

We are interested in learning more about how students feel about how accepted they are by their peers and how this affects their overall success in school. We are not interested in how any individual adolescent views their peer relationships, but rather adolescents in general.


Your child's task will be to complete a background questionnaire that inquires about demographic information and then answer a series of questions concerning how they feel about their peer relationships. This process is expected to last approximately one-half hour. Participation in the study will generally be arranged by appointment immediately after school and students will be able to arrange their own transportation or ride the activities bus home. No unusual discomforts or inconveniences are expected. No risks are anticipated. We expect that the information obtained from this study will help us better understand how students feel about their relationships with peers at this age.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you or your child will remain completely confidential. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not prejudice your child's relations with his or her teachers or school district. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he or she is free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any further questions, please ask us. If you have any additional questions later, I will be happy to answer them. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep if desired. You will also be provided with the results of this study if you should so desire.

-----  
Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

  
Alicia D. Sachan -Research investigator

  
Scot Mosher-Principal



Appendix B  
Background Questionnaire

Code # \_\_\_\_\_

1. Sex: Male \_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_

2. Age \_\_\_\_\_

3. Grade \_\_\_\_\_

4. Ethnic background (check one):

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Black

\_\_\_\_\_ Mexican-American

\_\_\_\_\_ White

\_\_\_\_\_ Other

5. I live with:

\_\_\_\_\_ both mother and father

\_\_\_\_\_ father and step-mother

\_\_\_\_\_ mother and step-father

\_\_\_\_\_ father only

\_\_\_\_\_ mother only

\_\_\_\_\_ other relatives (please describe relationship)

\_\_\_\_\_ other people (please describe arrangement)

6. Father's Occupation \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Title or description of type of work)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Mother's Occupation \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Title or description of type of work)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Father is currently employed?      \_\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No

Mother is currently employed?      \_\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No

8. Mother's educational level  
 \_\_\_\_\_ less than high school  
 \_\_\_\_\_ high school  
 \_\_\_\_\_ technical training  
 \_\_\_\_\_ college  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 year college or more  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

Father's educational level  
 \_\_\_\_\_ less than high school  
 \_\_\_\_\_ high school  
 \_\_\_\_\_ technical training  
 \_\_\_\_\_ college  
 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 year college or more  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

9. Please list ALL the family moves during your lifetime (this includes any moves that required you to change schools except when you went from elementary to middle school).

Approximate dates and locations of moves:

	(Month/Year)	Grade	School moved to
1.	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____	_____
6.	_____	_____	_____

10. Please state the reason for your most recent move.

- parent's job  
 military family  
 change in family status (i.e. divorce, separation, remarriage)  
 unforeseen circumstances  
 other \_\_\_\_\_

11. When did you start school at Barnwell?

- September  
 October  
 November  
 December  
 January  
 February  
 March  
 April

## Index of Peer Relations (IPR)

Code #: \_\_\_\_\_

This questionnaire is designed to measure the way you feel about the people you hang out with most of the time; your peer group. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer each item as carefully and as accurately as you can by placing a number beside each one as follows:

- 1= None of the time
  - 2= Very rarely
  - 3= A little of the time
  - 4= Some of the time
  - 5= A good part of the time
  - 6= Most of the time
  - 7= All of the time
- 

1. \_\_\_\_ I get along very well with my peers.
2. \_\_\_\_ My peers act like they don't care about me.
3. \_\_\_\_ My peers treat me badly.
4. \_\_\_\_ My peers really seem to respect me.
5. \_\_\_\_ I don't feel like I am "part of the group".
6. \_\_\_\_ My peers are a bunch of snobs.
7. \_\_\_\_ My peers understand me.
8. \_\_\_\_ My peers seem to like me very much.
9. \_\_\_\_ I really feel "left out" of my peer group.
10. \_\_\_\_ I hate my present peer group.
11. \_\_\_\_ My peers seem to like having me around.
12. \_\_\_\_ I really like my present peer group.

- 1= None of the time  
2= Very rarely  
3= A little of the time  
4= Some of the time  
5= A good part of the time  
6= Most of the time  
7= All of the time

13. \_\_\_\_ I really feel like I am disliked by my peers.
14. \_\_\_\_ I wish I had a different peer group.
15. \_\_\_\_ My peers are very nice to me.
16. \_\_\_\_ My peers seem to look up to me.
17. \_\_\_\_ My peers think I am important to them.
18. \_\_\_\_ My peers are a real source of pleasure to me.
19. \_\_\_\_ My peers don't seem to even notice me.
20. \_\_\_\_ I wish I were not part of this peer group.
21. \_\_\_\_ My peers regard my ideas and opinions very highly.
22. \_\_\_\_ I feel like I am an important member of my peer group.
23. \_\_\_\_ I can't stand to be around my peer group.
24. \_\_\_\_ My peers seem to look down on me.
25. \_\_\_\_ My peers really do not interest me.

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