



The Friendship Experiences of Filipino Children with Autism Within Metro Manila During COVID-19

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Abstract: Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have a persistent impairment in their communication and restricted, repetitive patterns in their behavior. Because of this, they often struggled with befriending their peers. Nevertheless, the majority of studies found that when they were given the chance to befriend others, like their classmates or their family members, they felt satisfied with their friendships. However, due to the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), their normal structures were disrupted, and some studies reported that they felt lonely since they could not regularly contact their friends. This instrumental case study interviewed six (6) participants, three (3) of which were children with Level 1 in middle childhood, and three (3) of which were their typical friends, from Metro Manila to discover what children with Level 1 ASD experienced in their friendships from their perspectives, based on their level of pair relatedness with their friends, the rewards and costs they acquired from these interactions, and their stage of development. In this study, six themes emerged namely (1) costs versus rewards, (2) level of pair relatedness (mutuality), (3) proximity, (4) interactions, (5) relationships, and (6) forgiveness. Subthemes were also reported. The implications of this study and the recommendations that the researcher suggested for future use were discussed as well.

Key Words: friendship experiences; autism spectrum disorder; COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Ed. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) referred to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as having difficulty when it came to one's social-emotional abilities which could influence the way they interacted with others, as well as the way they created, maintained, and understood relationships, which could not only affect behaviors in simple, social situations but also in situations that required them to use their imaginations, to play, or to befriend other children, since sharing interests with others around them could help in establishing and building friendships. Typically, as children developed, it was found that their friendships also changed based on their age group, because their priorities and

qualities valued in a friend changed. However, this differed for children with disabilities, because, unlike their typical peers, they could have trouble socializing and creating friendships, causing them to have different priorities in this kind of relationship.

During middle childhood, children learned to have a deeper concern for others and focused more on their friendships, which was why it was important for them to be liked and accepted by their friends (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). This acceptance by their peers could influence and could be influenced by the social skills that children in middle childhood had (Greco & Morris, 2005), which could be a problem for children with ASD as they had difficulties in terms of socialization. Furthermore, it was found that children in middle childhood felt lonelier during the pandemic since they were no



longer in regular contact with their friends (Ghosh et al., 2020), and since using phones to communicate was not enough (Nearchou et al., 2020).

Since children with ASD struggled with connecting with others and struggled with building, preserving, and perceiving relationships, making friends or sharing interests with their peers could be difficult for them. Their friendships may also not always be reciprocated. Moreover, since the pandemic, an increase in the intensity and frequency of their behavior problems (Colizzi et al., 2020), and emotional symptoms (Waite et al., 2020) had been noted, since the closure of schools caused their usual structured environment to suddenly change (Neece et al., 2020).

This study aimed to discover what these children experienced in terms of their respective friendships from their perspectives. The researcher also chose to study this topic in order to discover what aspects changed within the friendships of these children, and how they changed, especially amid a pandemic, where their structured routines had been disrupted, and the exposures that they had with other children from school or their neighborhoods had been limited. The researcher chose to study children with ASD in middle childhood since limited studies had been done to better understand their perspectives and the emotions that they went through because of their experiences. Moreover, middle childhood was chosen as the age group since peer acceptance and peer approval were important during this stage of development.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilized Levinger and Snoek's developmental theory of Pair Relatedness, Homans' Social Exchange Theory, and Erikson's Psychosocial Theory since they were the most relevant to the aims of this study. This was because the researcher looked into the friendship experiences of children with ASD in middle childhood, as well as their friendship quality, which could then be influenced by the costs and the rewards they acquired from their friendships and by the level of pair relatedness they were in. Their level of pair relatedness was vital for this study, because as a pair progressed from one level to the next, they learned to acknowledge and interact with each other more, causing them to develop more interdependence toward each other (Perlman, & Fehr, 1986). Given that the kind of interactions that people

shared could influence the kind of relationship that they had, the costs and rewards that they received were also important since this determined whether they were more likely to pursue these relationships or not. Moreover, because the participants belonged to middle childhood, peers became a vital part of their self-confidence, and it was through gaining the approval of their peers that they developed a sense of pride in their accomplishments (McLeod, 2008). However, because children with ASD differed based on severity, socialization skills, and intentions for making and maintaining friendships, their friendship experiences might still be unique to every individual.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present research is a qualitative, instrumental case study, or a study of a case to gain more insight into a certain issue, or a certain phenomenon (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). For this study, the friendship experiences of Filipino children with Level 1 ASD served as the phenomenon. A snowball sampling technique, or a chain referral sampling, wherein the researcher collected further participants through the referrals of individuals, from the initial sample group, with similar characteristics (Frey, 2018), was also utilized. The data obtained from the interviews followed the steps of Colaizzi's method of data analysis as well.

3.2 Participants

This study had a total of six (6) participants, three (3) of which were children with Level 1 ASD in middle childhood, and three (3) of which were their typical friends, from Metro Manila. The participants with Level 1 ASD in this study were comprised of two (2) male children and one (1) female child, between the ages of eight to ten. They were also diagnosed by a psychologist/therapist based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5). Meanwhile, their typical friends were composed of two (2) male children and one (1) female adult, between the ages of five to thirty-three.

3.3 Setting

The interview proper for each participant was done through Zoom, which is an online platform in which online classes, video conferences, meetings, and



webinars can be done.

3.4 Instrument

An interview guide adapted from the questions from Moore-Dean, Renwick, & Schormans' (2016) interview questions about friendship experiences of children with intellectual/developmental disabilities in terms of developing and maintaining friends was used for this study. However, the interview guide for this study was altered since not all questions from the three measurements were applicable for this research. The questions that applied were also then divided into the respective research questions that they answered. Probe questions were asked to obtain more in-depth answers as well. Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the researcher wanted to examine the quality of friendships of children with Level 1 ASD within middle childhood, as well as their typical friends, given the pandemic, based on their experiences, and the factors, which contributed to or hindered the quality of friendships. There were six (6) recurring themes for this entire study that emerged across the three (3) cases: satisfaction, forgiveness, relationships, interactions, proximity, and mutuality. Across these cases, play-based interaction had the highest frequency, while forgiveness had the lowest number of recurrences.

Additional themes were also part of the data, such as outcomes, and cumulative rewards and costs for Case 1, cumulative rewards and costs for Case 2, and outcomes for TF3. However, because they did not appear consistently for all three (3) cases, the said themes were removed from the cross-case analysis.

Costs Versus Rewards of the Relationship.
Satisfaction. Despite having lesser friends, and having friendships that differed from their typical peers, the participants across all cases remained satisfied with their friendships, since they were still able to meet their social needs, (Petrina, Carter, & Stephenson, 2014), wants, and expectations. When one of the children with ASD was asked how he felt being friends with his typical friend, he answered, "He makes me feel happy, kasi siya kaibigan ko. Siya yung best friend ko."

Forgiveness. Across all cases, it was also reported that although forgiveness, or the act of apologizing when the participant and his/her friend fight, had the least number of recurrences among the themes, all the participants would still apologize in case they had misunderstandings or fights with their friends. This was depicted in one case, in which the participant explained, "Pag nag fight kami, he will be sad, and I will be sad. Kaya I will say sorry if we fight." Through this statement, forgiveness could be seen to have a positive effect on children, since forgiveness could allow them to give, and to gain peer acceptance through ending unpleasant conflict situations (Pickering, 2007). Furthermore, by asking for forgiveness when they were wrong, they were able to not only build friendships with people that they love, but were also able to learn how to promote reciprocal friendships (Pickering, 2007).

Relationships. Friendship with others.
Between both themes under relationships, friendship with others, or befriending and considering people outside of their families as their friends, recurred more often. Since all of the children with Level 1 ASD, who were interviewed for this study had a high motivation to socialize, they were more open to befriending their peers and other people around them, which was also found in a similar study by Calder, Hill, & Pellicano (2012). This was exhibited by one of the children with ASD when she mentioned, "But I also want to make friends with other kids. [...] We can dance together. I'll share my Barbies." Through sharing her toys with her classmates, she used similar interests with her peers as a way for her to befriend them, which, in turn, created more opportunities for her to have further interactions with them, regardless of whether the friends she was able to make were typical friends or other children with ASD. ***Family members as friends.*** The participants also considered family members as their friends. For instance, when another child with ASD was asked who he liked to spend time with, he responded, "Family, us. Mommy and daddy. Tita. I like my family." Similarly, according to Franco & Levitt (1998), when children in middle childhood felt supported and accepted through the intimate relationships that they had with their friends and their family, they felt a stronger sense of self-worth. Furthermore, it was through these relationships that they were able to learn more about their own identity and how they saw themselves as individuals (Franco & Levitt, 1998).

Interactions. Play-based interaction. Play-based interaction, or using play as a means of



interacting or bonding with one another, was found to be the theme that occurred the most in all the case studies and appeared in almost all of the interviews. One participant discussed, "Tomorrow, we can play Roblox [...] I still want us to play more games." However, since a large number of their interactions were play-based, it sometimes became the reason for conflict between friends. One participant stated, "I want Ate to share her toys with me. She never shares Marie, her stuffed toy. She never lets me share her favorite stuffed toy," and "Ate loves her stuffed toys so she's not my friend right now. Not friends yet." This suggested that although they did not always agree, as he believed that he should be allowed to play with his friend's stuffed toys, after his anger and after some time had passed, they would be friends, and play with each other again. Moreover, it was discovered that through play, children with ASD could be given the chance to develop their friendship, social skills, and sense of belonging (Barnett, 2018). *Other forms of bonding.* The participants also shared interests, and mutually enjoyable activities, other than play, to bond with their friends, such as singing, watching YouTube videos, horror movies, or cartoons, going out, and even talking about how they felt with their friends. When asked what activities she liked to do with her friend, a participant noted, "I like it when we sing Paw Patrol songs and do karaoke." Through this, it was found that sharing interests, and mutually enjoyable activities with friends helped in making and maintaining stable friendships (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010).

Proximity. The majority of the participants reported being physically close to their friends, which helped them maintain the friendships that they already had. One of the participants stated, "We spend time together because we're in one house. It's fun in the same house," when he was asked how being at home all the time, because of the pandemic, changed his friendship with his friend. This was supported by the study of Bauminger & Shulman (2003), who mentioned that children with ASD in mixed friendships, or friendships between a child with ASD and a typically developing child, befriended their friends at home, within their neighborhoods, or through their families, since they usually required more support from their social environment. *Transcendence of Context.* Despite the lack of physical proximity, transcendence of context, or continuing their friendship beyond the place where it was initially formed (Moore-Dean, Renwick, & Schormans, 2016), was still noted, and might be considered just as important. According to Moore-Dean, Renwick, and Schormans (2016), this showed that because

transcendence of context was still present, despite the lack of proximity, reciprocity and mutual liking between both friends were still enough to continue the friendship. This was exhibited by one of the participants when he stated, "Whenever we go to Bulacan, we play together. But we only see each other on holidays and during vacations," because it showed that even though a child with ASD and his typical friend did not see each other often, the friendship between the two was still possible since they both still considered each other as a best friend.

Level of Pair Relatedness. Mutuality. Based on the findings of this research, all six (6) participants knew a significant amount of information about one another and felt more responsible when it came to taking care of, maintaining, and improving their friendships. When the respondents were asked how different they were from their friends, one of the participants stated, "Different tummies. We have different tummies. I can eat all, but Ate cannot eat all food. She can only eat gluten-free food." Through this statement, he showed that by being aware of his friend's condition, he was more mindful when it came to taking care of her. Another child with ASD also stated that even if his typical friend left, he would also still be friends with him. He said, "I miss him. [...] Pero even if may new friends na ko, friend ko pa din siya, because he makes me happy." It was at this level of pair relatedness that two friends could discover that regardless of what society expected from them as friends, the interactions that they had will be for them to decide, since they already had an established dynamic, and their own patterns as friends (Perlman & Fehr, 1986). Furthermore, it was for this reason that what society expected from their friendship no longer fully dictated how they were going to interact with each other (Perlman & Fehr, 1986). Moreover, although they were aware of their friends' condition, the typical friends still treated and interacted with their friends with ASD the way they would normally do with other typical peers, showing that despite their differences, both parties were still capable of forming and maintaining reciprocal friendships.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Friendship was important in the life of a child in middle childhood, however, because of their deficits when it came to communication and restricted, repetitive behaviors, children with ASD often had difficulty when it came to creating and



maintaining friendships. For this study, six (6) themes emerged across the cases, which explained the overall friendship experiences of three (3) children with ASD and their typical friends. These themes were satisfaction, forgiveness, relationships, interactions, proximity, and mutuality.

Through discussing their experiences, they were able to report that despite having lesser friends, and despite having friendships that differed from their typically developing peers, they remained satisfied with their respective friendships, since they were still able to meet their social needs. They also discussed how because they cared about their friends, and because they knew that their friends would feel upset when they fought, they chose to ask for their friends' forgiveness. They were also capable of befriending their family members and other people; however, this was heavily influenced by their motivation to socialize. It was also through feeling supported and accepted by their friends and family members that they developed a stronger sense of self-worth, and learned more about themselves, and how they saw themselves as individuals. Their interactions, ranging from playing to sharing interests and mutually enjoyable activities, helped in developing their friendship and social skills, and their sense of belonging, as well as helped them create and maintain stable friendships. Moreover, although play sometimes became the reason for conflict between friends, the participants believed that losing their relationship over a fight, or over a toy, was not worth what they had already been through as friends, so they decided to continue engaging in them. Interactions were often done when two friends were physically close to one another as well, however, it was discovered that transcendence of context was just as important, since, through reciprocity and mutual liking, two friends could continue their friendship even beyond the context where the friendship was initially formed. Finally, based on the findings of this research, children with ASD were still able to form and maintain friendships with mutuality despite having friendships that were considered to be lower in quality. One of the main reasons for this could be because despite all the typical friends being aware of their friends' condition, they still treated and interacted with their friends with ASD the way they would normally do with other typical friends. Furthermore, since the typical friends were aware of what their friends with ASD needed in the friendship, they were found to become more mindful when it came to taking better care of their friends. Hence, through mutuality, or knowing a significant amount of information about

one another, the friends could start to feel more responsible when it came to taking care of, maintaining, and improving their relationships. Thus, learning about the friendship experiences of the children with Level 1 ASD from their perspectives, their experiences, and the emotions that they went through because of their experiences, especially in the middle of a global pandemic could be better understood. Through these findings, other factors, which influenced their experiences when it came to the quality of friendships they already had, came to light since limited studies had been done to better understand their viewpoints. Moreover, because COVID-19 altered their normal lives, and the routines of the children with ASD have been disrupted, the researcher wanted to determine how they would adjust to the new situation, especially concerning their friendships and socialization as they were no longer in regular contact with their friends in school, or in their communities.

Still, based on the cases above, because the typical people that they considered their friends were their family members, they were still able to develop their friendship and socialization skills. However, it is recommended that the children with ASD, especially if they have high motivation to socialize with other people, become exposed to other children regardless of whether they also have ASD or not, since this would help them develop and maintain friendships as well as acquire new skills in socialization. Their teachers and administrators could even expose their students with ASD to other students who share similar interests as well as integrate social stories in their lessons, whether in the classrooms or even online, so they could be given more opportunities to make new friends. Moreover, since only three cases were analyzed in this study, the researcher recommended for further researchers, who may wish to replicate this study, to gather more participants from different parts of the country to acquire a more generalized knowledge of what these children needed as well as what they were going through in their respective friendships.

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