

# Conflict With Friends, Relationship Blindness, and the Pathway to Adult Disagreeableness

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The ability to form and maintain relationships with friends and romantic partners is a major developmental task for adolescents. Disagreeable youth are likely to struggle with this task, yet little is known about how they maintain their oppositional style from adolescence to adulthood. This study examines the long-term implications of disagreeableness in a diverse sample of 164 adolescents assessed repeatedly across a 10-year period along with their friends and romantic partners. Results indicate that although disagreeable youth do not report any relationship struggles, both their friends and romantic partners see their relationships as being low in quality. Called relationship blindness, these youth simply do not see what their friends and romantic partners clearly do.

**H**ave you ever had that one friend? The one that was constantly creating conflict and would never admit fault? The one friend that made you work extra hard to keep the friendship going?

As it turns out, that friend's behavior, which can be rude, aggressive and argumentative, might not be that person's fault entirely. Called 'Relationship Blindness,' friends and romantic partners of so-called disagreeable youth, report their relationships as being low in quality, while the disagreeable youth themselves don't report any relationship struggles. The question is, why?

It's no secret that relationships for teenagers or young adults grow more important as they grow older. Forming relationships outside of the family is exciting and important for healthy development. These relationships, particularly friendships, differ from family relationships in many respects, but mainly because they involve choice. Being able to sustain healthy relationships at a young age should ultimately culminate in successful adult romantic relationships later in life. Some teenagers however, are not able to form and sustain these healthy relationships. One of those groups is teenagers who are disagreeable by nature; they are both consistently oppositional and offensive in their interactions with people that are close to them. In doing so, the research shows, they unwillingly sabotage their (romantic) relationships. There is ample evidence that shows that being disagreeable has many short-term negative consequences for teens, including a lack of peer acceptance, conduct problems, and even depression. There is, however, a lack of research investigating how this group moves through

adolescence and into adulthood. That is exactly what the researchers at the Curry School of Education's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) and the Department of Psychology tried to map. Does chronic disagreeableness disappear over time, or is it here to stay?

## The Study

The current study utilized observational, multi-reporter data collected over a 10-year span to identify and track the development and relationships of disagreeable youth.<sup>1</sup> Observations of target youth and their friends at age 14 and 15 were used to assess early adolescent disagreeableness in terms of rudeness, lack of cooperation, and forcefulness. In order to track the relationship blindness of these disagreeable youth, reports from friends in middle adolescence and from romantic partners in emerging adulthood were collected. It was hypothesized that disagreeable youth would have more conflictual and poorer quality future friendships in adolescence, and that this would be evidenced by an element of relationship blindness in that their friends would report a poorer quality relationship but they themselves would not (**Hypothesis 1**).

Second, it was hypothesized that this pattern would continue into target youth's romantic relationships in emerging adulthood, such that their romantic partner's would report a more negative relationship but the disagreeable youth would not (**Hypothesis 2**).

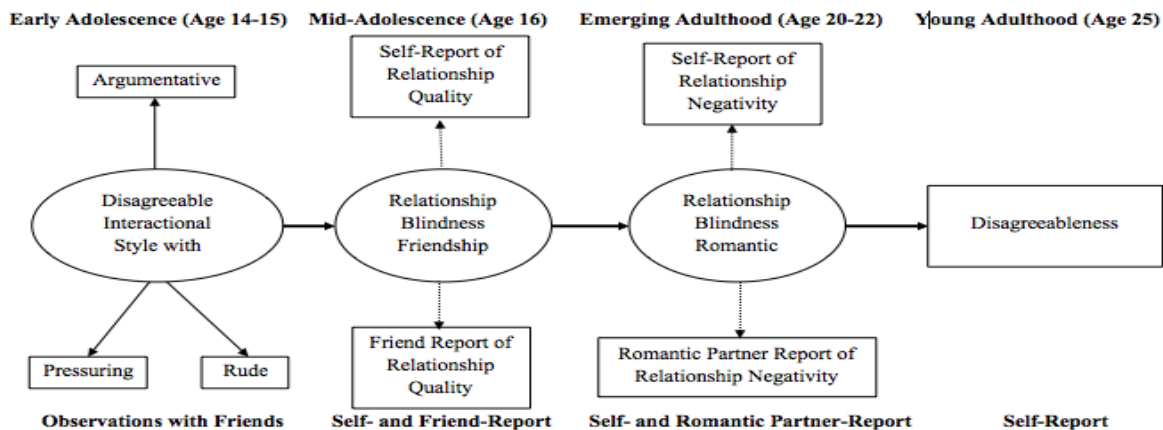
Finally, to confirm that the developmental process outlined above truly results in the formation of a

<sup>1</sup> See figure Conceptual Overview

disagreeable adult, it was predicted that the disagreeable construct created from observations of target youth at age 14 and 15 would predict target youth's self-report of disagreeableness at age 25 (**Hypothesis 3**).

self-report of negative relationship interaction. However, disagreeableness did predict romantic partner report of negative relationship interaction, such that romantic partners of disagreeable youth reported having more negative interactions with targets than did romantic partners of other youth.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Development of Disagreeableness from Early Adolescence to Adulthood



### The results

Disagreeableness was operationalized in early adolescence as a latent variable (see Figure 1), which included the observed collaboration, forcefulness, and rudeness of target individuals in a disagreement task with a friend at age 14 and age 15. As expected, the variables loaded together strongly, with collaboration loading negatively, and forcefulness and rudeness both loading positively. This latent variable was used in all subsequent analyses. Gender and income were included as covariates in all analyses and all interactions involving gender and income were tested though no interactions were significant.

**Age 16 Closeness.** As hypothesized, disagreeableness did not predict self-reports of friendship closeness at age 16. However, it did predict friend-reports of closeness at age 16, such that the friends of disagreeable youth reported having a less close friendship with those youth than did friends of others. These coefficients were significantly different, suggesting that disagreeableness predicted future friend-reports more strongly than future self-reports of closeness.

**Age 16 Conflict.** Disagreeableness predicted both self-report of friendship conflict and friend-reports of friendship conflict at age 16. Both disagreeable youth and their friends reported having more conflict within their friendship than did other youth. Further, the difference between these paths was not significantly different.

The research also shows that disagreeableness has a negative effect on the target youth's romantic endeavors. Again, disagreeableness did not predict

Finally, disagreeableness in early adolescence, as captured by observations of interactions with friends, significantly predicted self-report of disagreeableness in young adulthood. Those individuals who were disagreeable in their interactions with friends at age 14-15, reported being more disagreeable at age 25.

### Future research

If the findings in this study are confirmed in further research, targeted interventions might help turn the tide for disagreeable youth. These interventions should focus on the improvement of social interactions and social awareness. Training disagreeable individuals to be more aware of their friends and romantic partners' reactions to their behavior in the moment would not only improve those relationships, but would also likely translate to their behavior in other contexts. These mechanisms are already embedded in many bullying interventions, so targeting them for disagreeable youth would be fairly straightforward.

Without interventions, we predict that disagreeable youth are likely to keep experiencing relationally aggressive and unhealthy relationships, while ignoring and rationalizing their behavior at the same time. In that case, disagreeableness is not just a phase; it's here to stay.

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