



# Self-Disclosure is a Key Friendship Process Moderated by Neighborhood Context

Meghan A. Costello, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>, Jessica A. Stern, Ph.D.<sup>2</sup>, Ariana J. Rivens, Ph.D.<sup>3</sup>, Olivia A. Hazelwood, B.A.<sup>4</sup>, Shannon M. Savell, Ph.D.<sup>5</sup>, Joseph P. Allen, Ph.D.<sup>4</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>Massachusetts General Hospital, <sup>2</sup>Pomona College, <sup>3</sup>Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, <sup>4</sup>University of Virginia, <sup>5</sup>Children's Hospital Colorado



## BACKGROUND

- Learning the skills to give and get support is a fundamental social intimacy process (Cassidy, 2001) that is developed through repeated social interactions (Costello et al., 2023; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2020).
- Self-disclosure*, sharing personal thoughts and feelings to be known by another person, is a socially vulnerable behavior that adolescents use to ask for social support from their peers (Costello et al., 2025).
- Social vulnerability (required for self-disclosure) may have different implications for adolescents who face daily stressors regarding safety of their gender and racial identities and in their neighborhoods (Darling, 2007; Moran & Eckenrode, 1991).
- Social intimacy skills practiced in adolescent friendships set the foundation for similar behaviors in adult romantic relationships (Costello et al., 2024).

## AIMS

- Characterize differences in rates of self-disclosure by adolescents' gender and racial identities.
- Investigate how neighborhood context moderates associations from self-disclosure with adolescent best friends to adult romantic partners.

## METHODS

**Procedure:** Study visits with best friend every year age 13-18; with romantic partner every 3 years age 19-29.

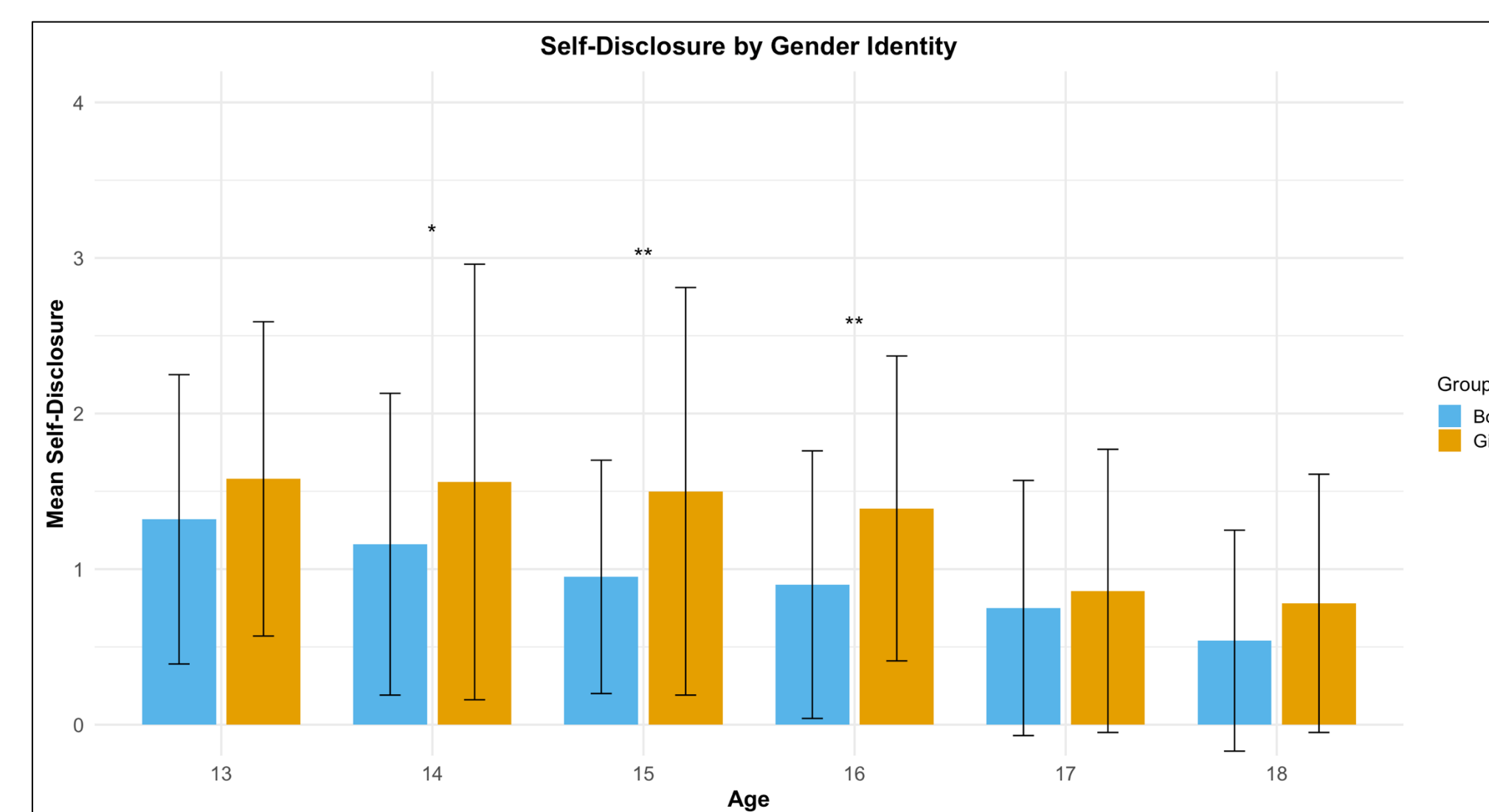
**Participants:** 184 adolescents and their best friends Charlottesville, VA. 58% White, 29% Black, and 13% Other identity groups. Median family income \$40,000.

**Self-disclosure (observed; age 13-29):** participants instructed to discuss any support/advice topic for 6 minutes with close other (friend or partner). Vulnerability double-coded by graduate students on a scale 0-4 (ICCs = .69-.75).

**Neighborhood quality (parent-report; age 13):** parents completed the Neighborhood Quality Questionnaire (NQQ; Buckner, 1988) at study start. Subscales: risk, connection, cohesion, and deterioration/crime.

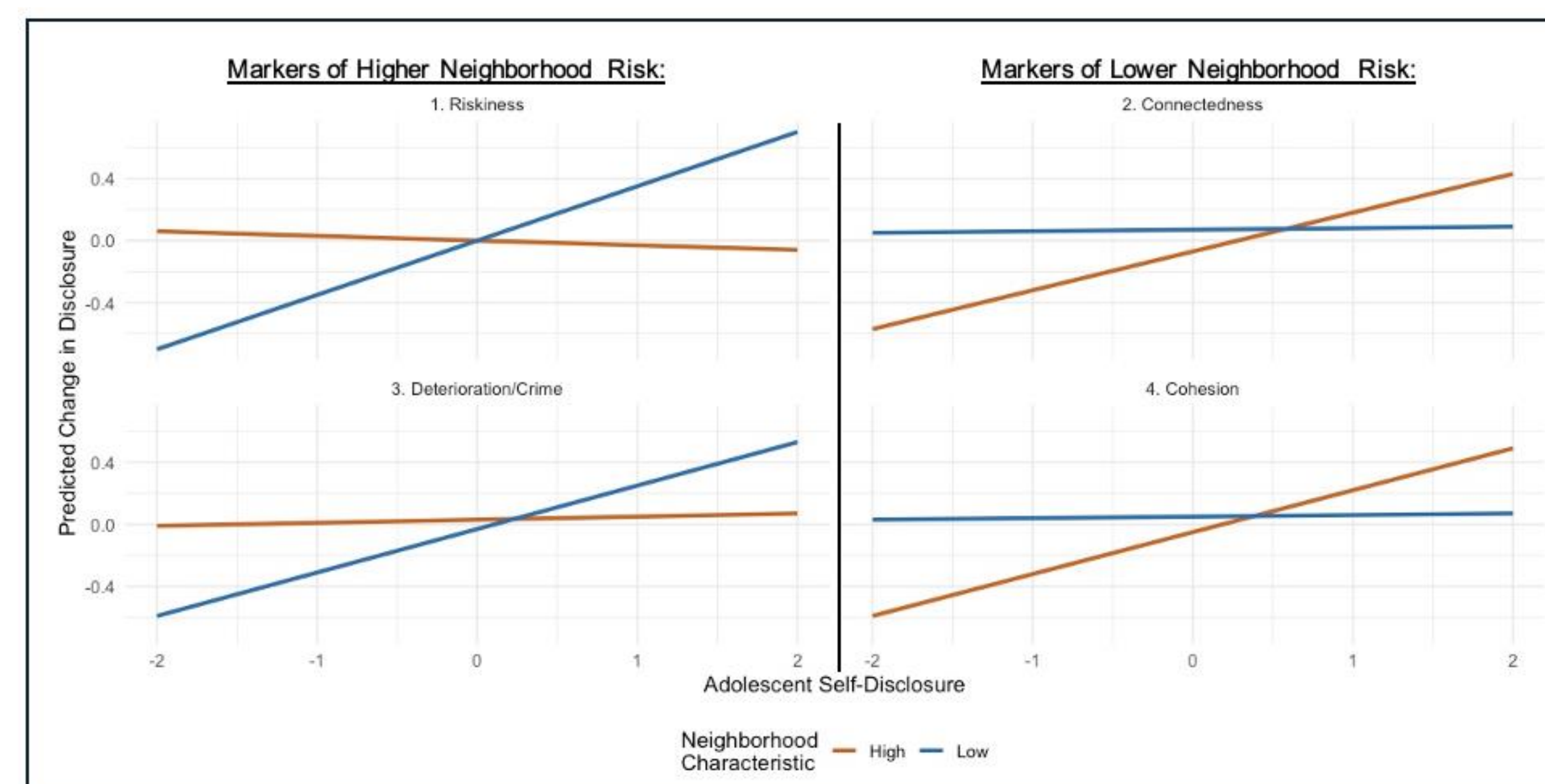
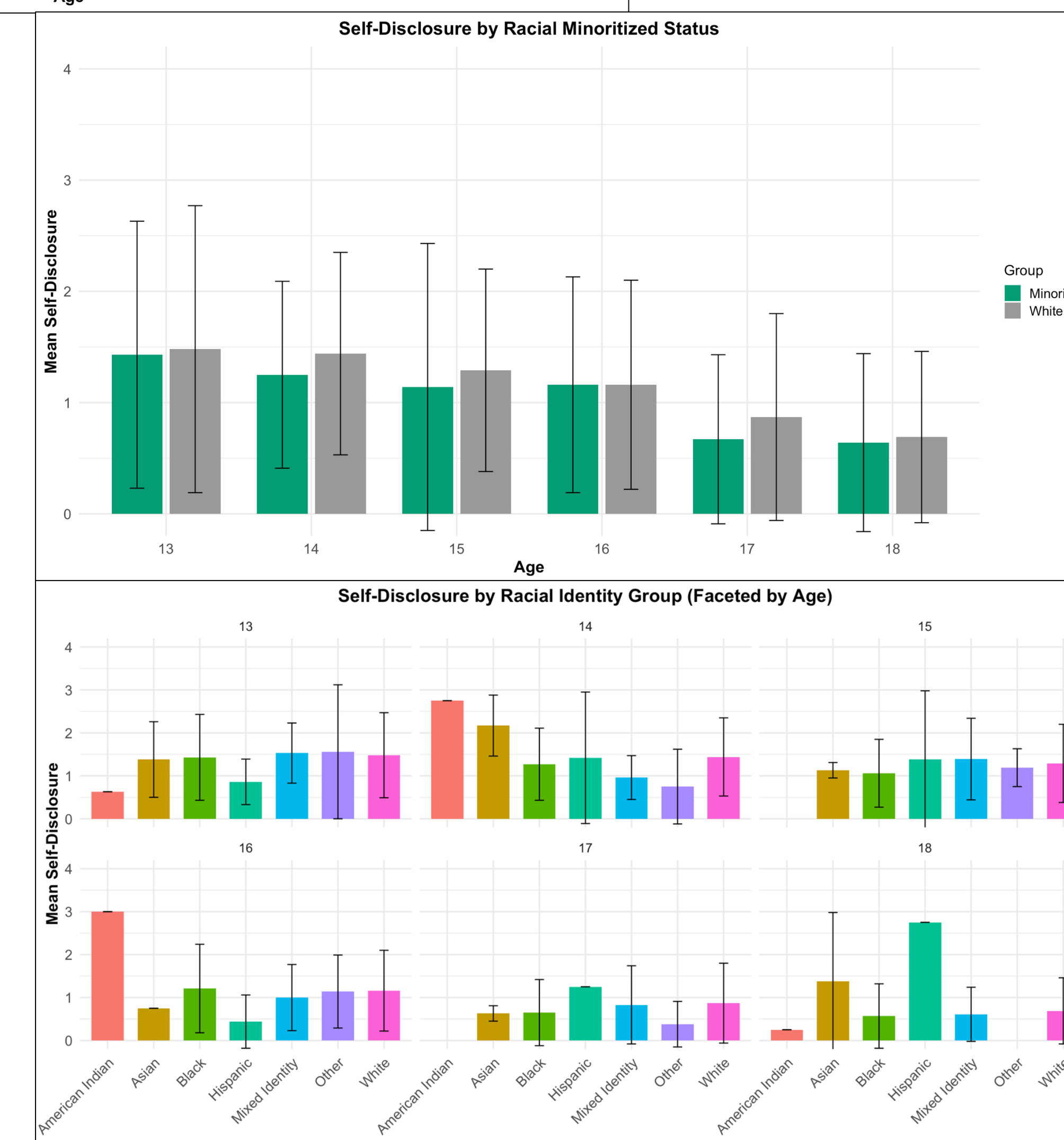
**Contact:** Meghan Costello, mcostello14@mgh.harvard.edu

## RESULTS



**Figure 1.** Girls in this sample self-disclosed more than boys at age 14, 15, and 16.

**Figure 2 and Figure 3.** There were no statistically significant differences in self-disclosure by racial minoritized status (Fig 2) or by specific racial identity (Fig 3).



**Figure 4.** Adolescents with higher self-disclosure and more positive neighborhood characteristics showed relative increases in self-disclosure into adulthood.

**Table 1. Simple Slope Analysis: Relative Change in Self-Disclosure from Adolescence to Adulthood at Different Levels of Parent-Reported Neighborhood Characteristics**

Value	Positive Neighborhood Characteristics		Negative Neighborhood Characteristics	
	$\beta$ Cohesion	$\beta$ Connectedness	$\beta$ Deterioration/Crime	$\beta$ Riskiness
+1SD	.26**	.25*	.01	-.06
Mean	.17*	.08 <sup>+</sup>	.19*	.25**
-1SD	-.00	.03	.29**	.32**

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , <sup>+</sup> $p < .07$

**Table 1.** Moderation was particularly driven by more positive parent description of neighborhood characteristics.

## DISCUSSION

**Social vulnerability with peers reflects a dynamic, adaptive response to nested environmental systems.**

- Adolescents in higher-risk, lower-connection neighborhoods may flexibly deploy self-disclosure, leading to less consistency in development.
- Deviations from the cultural norm should not be interpreted as maladjustment, but rather flexible adaptation to real social inequity.
- Adolescents' developing social intimacy is shaped by repeated social interactions that happen in context.

### Limitations and Future Directions:

- Explore friendships and romantic relationships comprised of ranging intersectional identities, outside of the gender binary.
- Small window into social processes that unfold over years and across relationships; investigate how various close relationships contribute to developing social intimacy.
- Neighborhood context is only assessed in Charlottesville, VA; research on the range of social contexts is needed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Buckner, J. C. (1988). The development of an instrument to measure neighborhood cohesion. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 16(6), 771-791.

Cassidy, J. (2001). Truth, lies, and intimacy: An attachment perspective. *Attachment & Human Development*, 3(2), 121-155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616730110058999>

Costello, M. A., Allen, J. P., Womack, S. R., Loeb, E. L., Stern, J. A., & Pettit, C. (2023). Characterizing emotional support development: From adolescent best friendships to young adult romantic relationships. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 33(2), 389-403.

Costello, M. A., Bailey, N. A., Stern, J. A., & Allen, J. P. (2024). Vulnerable self-disclosure co-develops in adolescent friendships: Developmental foundations of emotional intimacy. *Journal of social and personal relationships*, 41(9), 2432-2454.

Costello, M. A., Brehm, M. V., Rivens, A. J., Hunt, G. L., Nagel, A. G., & Allen, J. P. (2025). Support-seeking about social relationships with friends is associated with friendship quality, emotional support, and self-disclosure in adolescence. *Journal of social and personal relationships*, 42(12), 3388-3410.

Darling, N. (2007). Ecological systems theory: The person in the center of the circles. *Research in Human Development*, 4(3-4), 203-217.

Mikulincer, M. & Shaver, P.R. (2020). Enhancing the "broaden and build" cycle of attachment security in adulthood: From the laboratory to relational contexts and societal systems.

Moran, P. B., & Eckenrode, J. (1991). Gender differences in the costs and benefits of peer relationships during adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 6(4), 396-409.

This study was supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the National Institute of Mental Health (R37HD058305, R01-MH58066; PI Allen). Funding for MC was provided by 5K12DA043490-07.