



The Association Between Perceived Social Support in Adolescence and Prosocial Behavior in Adulthood



Kiran Eastman, Applied Data Analysis, Wesleyan University

Introduction

- Adolescents' social support systems influence well-being (Nestmann & Hurrelmann, 2012). Social exchange theory posits that individuals who perceive themselves as having more social support will provide more support to others (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005)
- Little is known about the possible long-term relationship between perceived social support (PSS) during adolescence and prosocial behavior (PSB) in middle adulthood (van Meegen et al., 2024). This project aims to fill that gap in understanding this relationship.

Research Questions

- Is an individual's perceived level of social support associated with the prevalence of prosocial behavior(s) in adulthood?
- How does this association differ based on sex assigned at birth?

Methods

Sample

- Respondents (Wave I n=6504 and Wave V n=4196) were drawn from the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (ADDHEALTH), a nationally representative sample of adolescents (grades 7-12) that follows them into adulthood.

Measures

- PSS was measured with 11 questions from the Wave I survey to determine to what degree each respondent perceived themselves as being supported by others on a scale from zero (not at all) to five (very much).
- 10 questions in Wave V were summed to create a PSB metric for individuals in adulthood. For every prosocial behavior exhibited, the individual's score increases by 1. Cohabitation, close friendships, and community service work are all examples of PSB.

Results

Bivariate

- Pearson correlation showed that PSB was **significantly** and **positively** associated with PSS (p-value < .0001).
- For every one point increase in PSS, the PSB metric increased by 0.323 points (p-value = 0.0126).

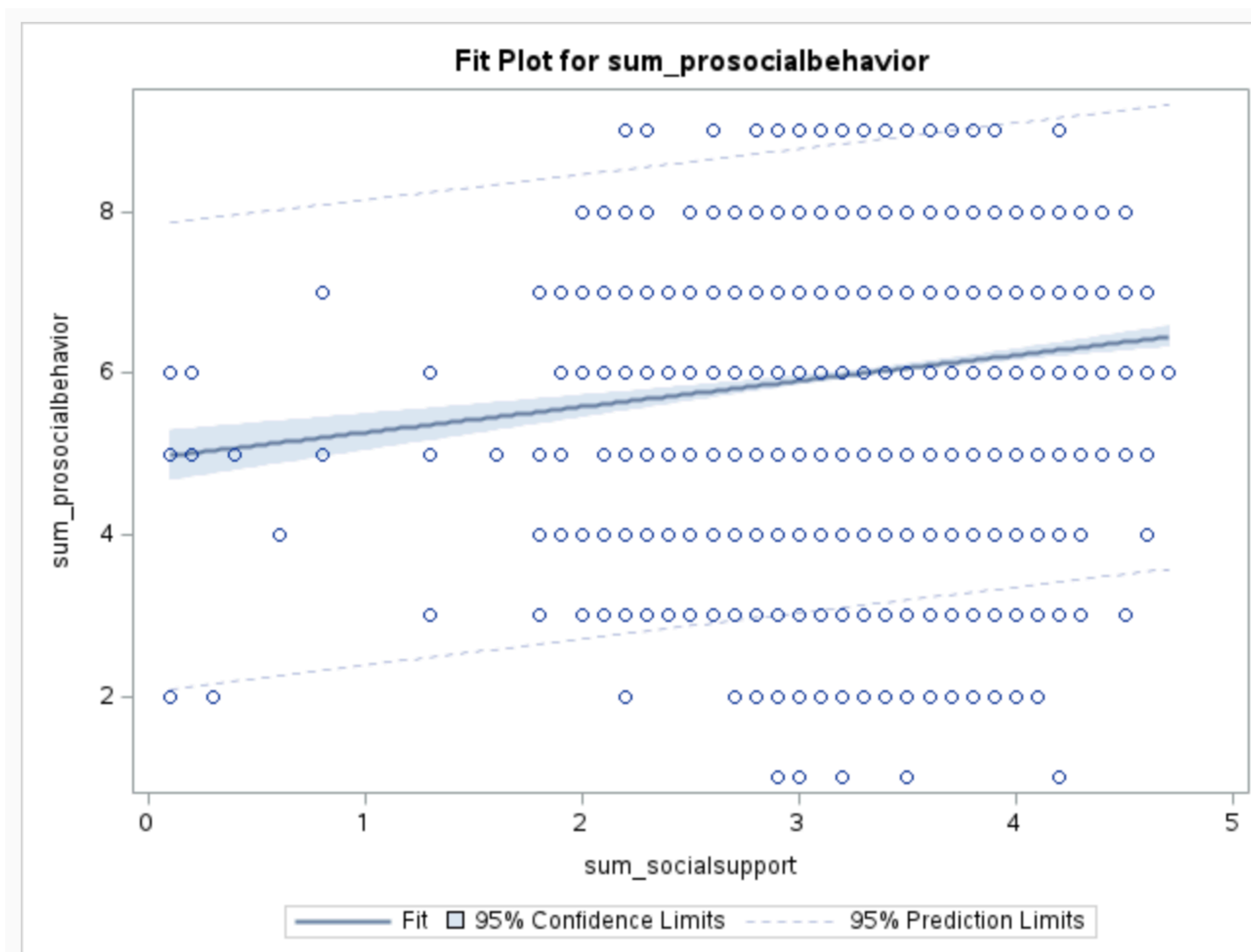


Figure 1: The association between perceived Social Support in Adolescence and Prosocial Behavior in Adulthood

Multivariate

- Multivariate analysis showed that the association between PSB and PSS was **stronger** among females (females $\rho = 0.11$ p-value = <.0001) than males ($\rho = 0.05$ p-value = 0.0206). A linear regression shows that sex **significantly moderates** the association between PSS and PSB (p = 0.0158) in fig 2. As PSS increases, PSB increases less for men than for women.
- While socioeconomic status is associated with PSB in adulthood, it **did not** confound the association between PSS and PSB (p-value = 0.0106)
- An individual's relationship with their biological father **did not** confound the relationship between PSS and PSB (p - value > 0.05).

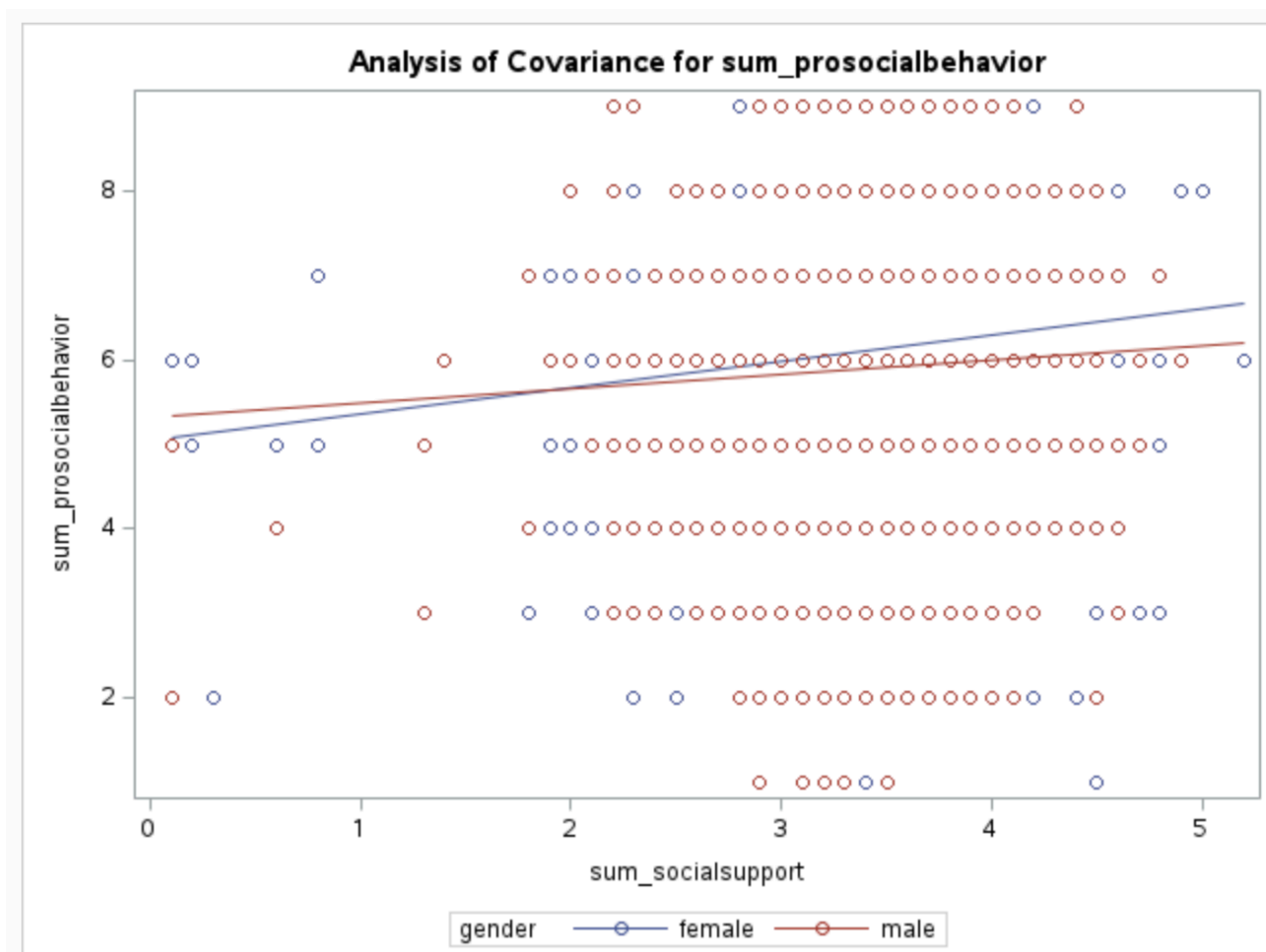


Figure 2: The association between perceived Social Support in Adolescence and Prosocial Behavior in Adulthood Based on Sex Assigned at Birth

Discussion

- The higher the PSS in adolescence, the higher the PSB in adulthood.
- These findings may contribute to psychological research regarding American access to mental health services and further demonstrating the need to provide support systems for young people.
- Future research is needed to determine how PSS effects other variations and combinations of PSB.

References

- Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social Exchange Theory: An Interdisciplinary Review. *Journal of Management*, 31(6), 874–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305279602>
- Nestmann, F., & Hurrelmann, K. (2012). *Social Networks and Social Support in Childhood and Adolescence*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Van Meegen, M., Van der Graaff, J., Carlo, G., Meeus, W., & Branje, S. (2024). Longitudinal Associations Between Support and Prosocial Behavior Across Adolescence: The Roles of Fathers, Mothers, Siblings, and Friends. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-023-01885-5>