

Susceptibility to Peer Pressure Among Adolescents: Biological, Demographic, and Peer-Related Determinants

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ABSTRACT

Peer influence is widely held as a significant factor in adolescent development. Peer pressure is the influence that a peer group or individual exerts that encourages others to change their attitudes, values, or behaviors to conform to group norms (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Among adolescents, peer pressure can have a dramatic influence on various behaviors, including engagement in unsafe sex practices and substance use. The objective of this paper is to identify the variables associated with adolescents' susceptibility to peer pressure. Specifically, this paper will focus on race, age, and perceived gender roles as determinants of adolescent peer conformity.

Introduction

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Development of the Adolescent Brain in Relation to Peer Pressure Susceptibility

Previous literature has shown that susceptibility to social influence is highest among adolescents compared to both younger and older counterparts. Adolescence is the transition stage between childhood and adulthood where drastic changes occur in the social brain. Research suggests that adolescents have a greater susceptibility to peer pressure than children or adults because of the distinct timelines of two systems of the brain (Casey, 2008; Steinberg, 2008). The first system is an "incentive processing" system, which involves brain regions such as the ventral striatum and the orbitofrontal cortex. This system helps evaluate and determine decisions based on the possible risks and rewards of actions. The second system is a "cognitive control" system, which primarily involves the prefrontal cortex. This system encourages decision-making towards specific objectives by regulating impulses and aiding in the consideration of multiple choices (Steinberg, 2008; Casey, et. al, 2008). Whereas the incentive processing system is developed and highly active in adolescence, the cognitive control system continues developing into early adulthood. One potential consequence of this developmental mismatch is that adolescents rely more on their emotions when making decisions, since the incentive processing system is more developed. Furthermore, Gardner and Steinberg (2005) discovered that in an experimental driving task, adolescents who were surrounded by peers were more likely to take risks and make dangerous decisions than adolescents who played the task alone. In a similar study using fMRI, Chein and colleagues (2011) found that greater risk taking in the presence of peers on a similar experimental driving task was associated

with greater activation in reward-sensitive brain regions. Further, adolescents demonstrated much greater activation in reward-sensitive brain regions than adults, whereas adults demonstrated much greater activation in self-regulatory brain regions than adolescents. These findings support the theory that peer influence plays a role in adolescent risky behavior and impulsivity. Thus, the susceptibility to peer pressure may be heightened as a result of the maturity difference between the incentive processing system and cognitive control system during the period of adolescence.

The Extent of Peer Pressure Influence

Peers have an effect on practically every area of adolescents' lives, from the seemingly insignificant, such as music and dress preferences, to the more serious, such as the use of illicit substances or unprotected sex (Steinberg, 2008). For example, adolescents have admitted that they often participate in sexual activity as a result of peer pressure (Miller, 1995). Another study found that the chance of substance abuse throughout high school and transition to adulthood increased with the presence of peer pressure (Gallegos et al., 2021). Research ultimately demonstrates that peer pressure can have an influence in increasing adolescent misconduct, so much so that the behaviors can translate into adulthood. Hence, it is important to review variables that increase susceptibility to peer pressure to reduce such misbehavior.

Intersections of Race and Peer Pressure

One variable that has been reported to heighten susceptibility to peer pressure is race in relation to an individual and their community. A recent study reports that individuals with a higher number of friends who have a shared ethnicity often have a greater sense of belonging in regards to their identity. This, in turn, leads to reports of a stronger resistance to peer pressure (Derlan & Umaña-Taylor). A separate study examined susceptibility to peer pressure for multiracial groups compared to that of single-race groups. The study reported that multiracial groups were at an equal or greater vulnerability to peer pressure as their single-race minority counterparts. Compared to homogenous White or Asian American peer groups, multiracial groups had higher peer-related risks specifically in regards to misconduct, such as violence (Choi, 2012 et. al). These findings indicate that susceptibility to peer pressure is dampened within peer groups that are racially homogeneous. One reason for this could be that minorities feel pressure to conform to a dominant group. However, research in this area seems to be lacking. In order to acquire a more certain understanding of the relation between race and peer pressure, more studies must be conducted on the area.

Intersections of Age and Peer Pressure

An additional demographic characteristic related to peer influence susceptibility during adolescence is age. Several pieces of literature have identified age to have multifaceted effects on the resistance of an adolescent to peer pressure. Research from Steinberg and Monahan (2009) shows that peer conformity spikes in individuals ages 10 to 14, before declining between the ages of 14 and 18 years. Peer conformity is significantly lower between the ages of 18-30 years. In comparison to younger children and adults, it is speculated that during middle adolescence, individuals develop a resistance to peer pressure as a result of their development of identity. Such identity development can manifest itself into challenging the beliefs and behaviors of friends and parents, which is recorded to peak in adolescence. In a separate study, however, findings suggest that while pressure to conform to peer norms (e.g. fashion, taste in music, etc.) lessened in the adolescent period, peer pressure towards risky and illicit activities increased (Clasen & Brown, 1985). Rising peer pressure to misconduct may link back to the developmental mismatch of the incentive processing and cognitive control system. This development would incentivize adolescents to look for new and thrilling activities rather than to make rational decisions (Duell et. al, 2016). Findings from both studies suggest that early adolescence is a key period of vulnerability to peer conformity, but that the type of behavior to which individuals are susceptible to changes as they mature.

Intersections of Gender and Peer Pressure

Finally, peer pressure affects adolescent males and females differently. Peer pressure has been identified by around a third of both male and female adolescents as one of the hardest challenges they face as in their period of adolescence. Brown (1982) concluded that peer pressure is directed more strongly towards females than males, and the peer pressure the two genders face varies in areas of activities. For example, peer alcohol use has a considerable influence on adolescent boys, and an insignificant influence on girls (Lee & Tak, 2005). However, in regards to smoking, peer smoking has a considerable influence on both adolescent boys and girls. Interestingly, there is a growing amount of research that indicates girls who endorse masculine norms have an increased risk of engaging in alcohol use (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013). Thus, although gender itself seems to have an inconsistent influence on peer susceptibility, perceived gender roles may be a determinant.

Although there are mixed findings on the areas of adolescent misconduct in which either gender is more susceptible to peer pressure, research suggests that both genders conform to peer pressure to better their reputation among their peer community. Generally, female adolescents may be better able to resist peer influence because they consider the consequences of risky and illicit behavior with respect to relationships with their parents, teachers, and friends. Furthermore, whereas adolescent males may be more likely to prioritize their reputation and status (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), adolescent females tend to be more skillful at balancing both their affiliation and reputation (Sheldon, 1992). However, according to Rudolph and Conley (2004), there is evidence that male adolescents may be better able to resist peer influence. Adolescent females tend to have heightened sensitivity to social concerns compared to adolescent males (Rudolph & Conley, 2005), and can benefit from peer conformity to achieve popularity and acceptance. While the increased focus on social cues and the want for approval are generally thought of as beneficial to their interpersonal relationships (Rose & Rudolph, 2006), this focus could increase sensitivity to peer pressure. Therefore, while there are discrepancies in regards to which two genders are more resistant to peer pressure, it is evident that both the standards of the “masculine ideal” and “feminine ideal” increase an adolescent’s decision to conform to peer pressure.

Discussion

The purpose of this literature review was to identify the factors that contribute to an adolescent’s susceptibility to peer pressure and the possible misconduct that may arise out of succumbing to said pressure. Research reveals that racial homogeneity increases susceptibility to peer pressure, and racial homogeneity lessens the chance of peer pressure in single-race minorities. Mixed-race groups have a similar resistance to peer pressure as do the white majority. Research also reveals that conformity to peers is at its highest in early adolescence, and continues to decrease as an individual matures to adulthood, whereas conformity to misconduct increases. Although there are conflicting findings on whether adolescent males or females are less susceptible to peer pressure, research suggests that both genders may conform for the approval of their peers and social acceptability.

The extensive literature on the factors that contribute to adolescents’ decision to conform, while incomplete, provides a strong basis for the development of next generation intervention programs. Based on the literature, interventions could be directed at the peer group and designed to alter social norms. Such interventions may happen within the school environment, in which susceptibility to misconduct is abundant. Specifically, interventions should be targeted towards middle school, as research found that younger adolescents felt the highest susceptibility towards peer pressure. Future research on peer conformity and the variables that influence its increase and decrease would benefit from further examination of the relative influences on the adolescent peer group, such as family values, cultural backgrounds, and religious beliefs. In this way, we will gain a greater understanding of adolescent brain behavior and the consequences of peer pressure.

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