

Peer pressure and adolescents problem behavior

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Abstract

Aim: This research mainly aims to determine if and how much adolescent's problem behaviors are influenced by their social circles. Researchers hypothesized that adolescent's moral disengagement, or tolerance of deviant behavior, mediated the effect of their peers on their problem behavior.

Method: The methodology used here is a correlational one. The information was gathered through the use of self-reported questionnaires. Around 150 young people (aged 14-18) participated in the study. Sixty youths with legal issues comprise the first group, while ninety youths without such problems comprise the second.

Findings: According to the research results, adolescent's problem behavior is best predicted by the problem behavior models they see in their peer groups. According to both correlational and regression analyses, adolescent problem behavior is negatively correlated with peer regulation of that behavior. A statistically significant mediator variable between peer control and delinquent behavior was moral disengagement. Increasing adolescent's tolerance for deviant behavior weakens the correlation between peer pressure and negative behavior. Conclusions from this study support the use of a multi-system approach to preventing problem behavior in adolescents. When it comes to preventing deviant behavior in adolescents, the multi-system approach takes into account the adolescent's traits and the impact of social factors like their peers and family.

Implications/Novel Contribution: The proposed multi-factor theoretical model, which integrates the relevant individual and environmental characteristics linked to adolescent problem behavior, fully justifies the research's theoretical value and novelty.

Keywords: Peer pressure, Adolescents problem behavior, Prevention of deviant behavior, Moral disengagement.

Received: 11 September 2019 / **Accepted:** 18 November 2019 / **Published:** 10 February 2020

INTRODUCTION

The following research aims to examine the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between adolescents' problem behavior and their peer group. Adolescents' interactions with their peers play a crucial role in developing their sense of self (Almulla, 2018; Erikson, 1969; Ragelienė, 2016). Adolescents' pursuit of feelings of uniqueness, emotional autonomy from parents, and satisfaction of the need for feeling safe are intertwined with the importance of relationships with peer groups and conformity to peer pressure (Galliher & Kerpelman, 2012). Adolescents try to separate themselves from their parents and become independent, but they are not yet mature enough. Conformity to one's peers may help offset a child's reliance on their parents (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Luczak & Kalbag, 2018). According to (Erikson, 1969), adolescents conform to peer pressure for reasons including, but not limited to, the fact that they have learned that they are less likely to be an easy target if they are related to the peer group.

The proposed multi-factor theoretical model, which integrates the pertinent individual and environmental characteristics linked to adolescent problem behavior, fully justifies the research's theoretical value and novelty. The study aims to do more than just catalog and rank potential causes of problematic behavior; it also hopes to determine how those causes are connected. The research has a direct application to reducing rates of juvenile delinquency. The findings can inform the creation of a policy framework for reducing juvenile delinquency that is factually sound and culturally sensitive.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

When adolescents associate with peers who engage in risky behavior, that friendship can quickly become a major issue. Even when other risk factors for problem behavior are mitigated, exposure to such groups can still increase the likelihood of problematic actions being taken by their members (Agnew, 2003). People who exhibit problematic behavior stray from accepted social norms, formally and informally (Jessor, 2016). Delinquency, defined as an illegal act committed by a person who is considered a juvenile according to the legal framework of the country (Bartol & Bartol, 2014), is one of the many forms of adolescent behavior it encompasses. Juvenile offenders are often teenagers. Adolescence is characterized by a greater prevalence of problem behavior than any other age group (Agnew, 2003). Not the underlying mechanism of peer influence (striving to reach the feelings of uniqueness, maintaining emotional autonomy, etc.) distinguishes between normative and deviant groups of adolescents, but the direction of this influence (pressure to involve in normative or deviant behavior). The tolerance of problem behavior held by most group members or a group leader shapes the trajectory of the group's influence (Brown & Larson, 2009). Adolescent's normative values weaken, and the severity of their deviant behavior increases after they become involved with their peer group. From the point of view of social learning theory, such findings could be explained (Elliott & Menard, 1996; Tomé, de Matos, Simões, Camacho, & AlvesDiniz, 2012). Bandura et al. (1991) argues that self-directed person uses their cognitive system to do more than react to the world around them; they actively work to shape their environment, establish goals, and control their behavior. If a person is truly self-directed, they will not engage in antisocial behavior unless they can provide compelling moral justification. Moral disengagement refers to the psychological and social strategies that enable individuals to circumvent the need to self-regulate their actions. Individuals who have disengaged from their moral compass may engage in antisocial behavior without incurring the guilt associated with doing so (Fontaine, Fida, Paciello, Tisak, & Caprara, 2014; Mazzone & Camodeca, 2019).

According to the research on peer pressure and conformity, adolescents' personal beliefs and values are a mediator between their exposure to a deviant peer group and their subsequent problem behavior. In this study, we use adolescents' moral disengagement as an example of a tolerant attitude toward problem behavior and as a mediator between the effects of peer pressure and those of the youth's problematic actions. The research hypothesis states that

- 1) Adolescents' problem behavior and moral disengagement positively correlate with peer problem behavior models,
- 2) Adolescents' problem behaviors and moral disengagement are inversely related to their perception of peer control, which is the expectation of negative sanctioning of problem behavior from peers.
- 3) Adolescents' moral disengagement mediates the connection between peer pressure and problematic behavior.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, participants filled out questionnaires to provide information for a correlational analysis. Pilot studies were conducted to adapt the research instruments into Georgian before the main fieldwork.

Sample of Research

One hundred fifty young people, ages 14 to 18, participated in the study. The first set consists of 60 juveniles who have violated the law. They receive help from the Georgia Probation Department and the Crime Prevention Resource Center. Ninety more Tbilisi city school students who are not part of the first group have never been through anything like it. In accordance with Georgia's Juvenile Justice Code, the age of criminal responsibility is 14. The research sample contains 63.3% of males and 36.7% of females. Sample groups are not homogeneous by sex because the majority (87.4%) of children who conflict with the law are males (Garabal-Barbeira, 2015).

Research Instrument and Procedure

Adolescents' problem behavior and the prevalence of positive peer models were measured using the "Adolescents Health and Development Questionnaire" from 2002. Richard Jessor and his fellow researchers at Colorado State University's Institute of Behavioral Sciences developed this questionnaire. The inventory evaluates the most important factors that contribute to antisocial behavior, and it was developed based on Problem Behavior Theory.

Adolescents’ perceptions of behavioral models and peer control are reflected in the data, as the questionnaire is self-reported. Subscales of the Adolescents’ Health and Development Questionnaire were selected, such as those assessing peers’ conventional and behavioral problem models and their level of influence over their peers, depending on the study’s aims (using a 4-point scale where 1 means absolutely agree and 4 means absolutely disagree). There are two main dimensions of problem behavior among adolescents, both of which are measured by the subscale. Juvenile delinquency, and 2. abuse of drugs and alcohol, especially those two. The frequency of each problematic behavior type is rated on a 5-point scale.

To quantify moral disengagement, questionnaires were developed, but they all cited the same study by (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). The eight mechanisms of moral disengagement assessed by the questionnaire are the cognitive reconstruction of behavior, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, responsibility displacement, diffusion of responsibility, distorted consequences, attribution of blame, dehumanization, and attribution of blame.

A pilot study was conducted to assess the psychometric properties of the adapted inventories in Georgia before collecting quantitative data. Forty-five teenagers from the public schools and probation agencies in Tbilisi make up the sample for this pilot study. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated to determine the instruments’ reliability (Table 1). Most instruments have Cronbach’s alpha values above 0.7, a good reliability indicator in self-report surveys. Although the reliability index for the moral disengagement subscales (e.g., diffusion of responsibility, attribution of blame) is below 0.5, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, which indicates internal agreement of the scale, is satisfactory given the number of items (4 items per subscale).

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and reliability coefficients (Cronbachs a) of the inventories (N = 45)

Scale	N	Item N	Cronbachs α	M	SD
Peer conventional behavior models	45	7	.69	16.85	3.48
Peer problem behavior models	45	7	.62	11.83	3.03
Peer control	45	7	.71	23.21	3.31
Moral disengagement	45	32	.91	77.25	18.07
Cognitive reconstruction of behavior	45	4	.72	12.57	3.64
Euphemistic language	45	4	.54	7.98	2.70
Advantageous comparison	45	4	.68	7.62	2.97
Responsibility displacement	45	4	.61	10.91	3.21
Diffusion of responsibility	45	4	.36	10.63	2.77
Distorting consequences	45	4	.58	8.45	2.64
Attribution of blame	45	4	.43	9.99	2.84
Dehumanization	45	4	.73	9.11	3.46
Problem Behavior	45	26	.89	43.7	14.1
Delinquency	45	10	.83	19.2	6.8
Substance abuse	45	16	.86	24.5	9.2

To collect quantitative data, we sought official consent from relevant parties at the probation agency, the center for crime prevention, and the public schools. Minors’ legal guardians and the adolescents themselves provided written and verbal consent to participate in the study. Teenagers worked in groups of 8-10 to fill out research questionnaires. The research administrator briefed them on their rights as research participants and provided guidelines for completing inventories.

Data Analysis

There are two stages to the analysis of data. Adolescents were initially stratified by age, gender, and legal run-in history to be compared using the research variables. The Chi-square test for independence, the *t*-test, and the analysis of variance were used to evaluate the differences between the groups. After the initial data analysis was completed, peer pressure, disengagement from moral values, and antisocial behavior were examined using a combination of correlation, regression, and mediation. SPSS 21, a statistical package, was used for the data analysis. We conducted our mediation analysis using Andrew F. Hayes’ process macro for SPSS.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Compare Groups

The results of the analysis showed a statistically significant difference between the children who conflict with the law and those who do not have the same experience according to the school problems ($X^2(4, n = 150) = 27.55, p < .001$ Cramers $V = .43$). Adolescents who conflict with the law have more frequent experience of school rules violation and expulsion (57%), than children who are not in conflict with the law (16%). Also, the two groups of adolescents are different from each other according to the mean score of academic achievement ($t(148) = -2.7, p < .01$ two-tailed). Academic achievement of adolescents who are not in conflict with the law is higher ($M = 8.08, SD = 1.63$) than those who are in conflict with the law ($M = 7.4, SD = 1.12$). It should be noted that groups are not statistically significantly different regarding moral disengagement and problem behavior.

Also, groups divided by sex were compared with each other. Groups of boys and girls are statistically significantly different from each other with the mean score of problem behavior ($t(148) = 4.365, p < .001$, two-tailed). Boys ($M = 47.32, SD = 15.39$) have a higher mean score of problem behavior than girls ($M = 37.05, SD = 8.39$). These two groups are also statistically significantly different by the mean score of moral disengagement ($t(148) = 2.91, p < .01$, two-tailed). As for problem behavior, the mean score of moral disengagement is higher in the male group ($M = 80.44, SD = 17.86$) than in the female group ($M = 71.75, SD = 17.23$).

Means scores of problem behavior according to age were also assessed. Two groups of adolescents (middle adolescents 14-15 years old and late adolescents 16-17 years) were compared by the mean score problem behavior. Data Analysis revealed that the mean score of problem behavior is higher in late adolescence ($M = 45.87, SD = 16.18$) than in middle adolescence ($M = 41.52, SD = 11.16$).

Relationship Among Variables

The second data analysis phase involved using correlation, regression, and mediation analysis to determine the nature of relationships between key factors. Research shows that teens with peers who model problematic behaviors are more likely to engage in those behaviors themselves. Further, peer control is inversely related to the outcome variable (Table 2), while moral disengaging is positively related to problematic adolescent behavior.

Table 2: Conrrelation among peer behavior models, peer control, moral disengagement and problem behavior

	Peer Conventional Behavior Models	Peer Problem Behavior Models	Peer Control	Moral Disengagement	Problem Behavior
Peer conventional behavior models		-.286**	.311**	-.010	-.086
Peer problem behavior models			-.417**	.194*	.601**
Peer control				-.198*	-.384**
Moral disengagement					.379**
Problem baehavior					

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Adolescent problem behavior was predicted using a statistical regression model that included a group of variables (problem behavior models, peer control, and moral disengagement). This group of variables is statistically significant and explains 43.4% of variation in the scores of adolescents problem behavior ($(R^2 = .434, F(3,146) = 39.05, p < .001$). Peers problem behavior models ($B = .499, p < .001$) and moral disengagement ($B = .257, p < .001$) are statistically significant predictors of adolescents' problem behavior. When the other variables in the model are controlled for peer problem behavior, the model explains 20.25% (part correlation coefficient = .450), and moral disengagement explains 6.25% (part correlation coefficient = .250) of variation in the scores of adolescents' problem behavior. Adolescents' problem behavior cannot be reliably predicted by their ability to exert influence over their peers.

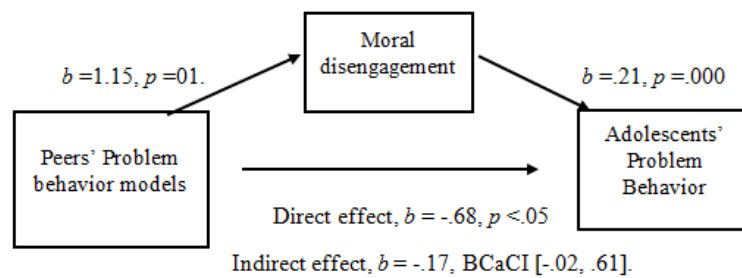


Figure 1. Moral disagreement model

The statistical method of mediation was used to examine the mediating effect of adolescents' moral disengagement in the link between their peers' problem behavior models and their problematic behavior. Effects values b and p are displayed in Figure 1. The results show that moral disengagement does not significantly mediate the link between adolescents' problem behavior and the problem behavior models they observe in their peers ($b = -.17$, BCaCI [-.02, .61]).

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research is to analyze the connections among peer pressure, moral disengagement, and problematic behavior in adolescents. As was stated in the study's methodology, the research sample consists of two sets of teenagers. The former are those who have run afoul of the law, while the latter has never been in such a situation. Limitations of self-report questionnaires used in studies of problem behavior in adolescents are directly related to the sample design. It has been found that adolescents who are officially registered as conflicting with the law tend to downplay the significance of their experience in self-report questionnaires.

In contrast, adolescents who are not officially registered as conflicting with the law tend to overemphasize the significance of their problem behavior despite the gravity of their experience (Siegel & Welsh, 2016). The study's findings confirmed what was hypothesized, showing no significant difference between the two groups of adolescents on the mean scores of variables (problem behavior, moral disengagement, and peer pressure) measured by the self-report questionnaires. However, there were statistically significant differences between the groups on school rule violation, academic achievement, and family structure.

The results of this study support the hypothesis that negative peer role models for problematic behavior and moral disengagement are significant predictors of problem behavior in adolescents. The data did not support the second hypothesis that adolescents' moral disengagement mediates the relationship between peer pressure and problem behavior. The developmental perspective may shed light on the mechanisms underlying this peer-to-peer influence on adolescent behavior. Adolescence is a time of rapid bio-psycho-social development, and as a result, adolescents' values and perspectives are constantly shifting. Adolescents fail to fully internalize normative values, which hinders their ability to deal with challenging situations (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Adolescents are especially susceptible to the influence of peers who engage in risky or destructive behaviors, as they are the primary social group with which they interact (Brown & Larson, 2009). Adolescents view their peers who engage in problem behavior as having access to the resources (autonomy, independence, attention of authorities) highly desirable to them (Moffitt, 2003).

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results correspond to previous research about the impact of peer pressure on adolescents. Also, they reveal that adolescents' lack of moral engagement is a significant predictor of delinquent behavior. These findings provide strong evidence for the efficacy of multi-system programs to prevent adolescent problem behavior. The multi-system strategy for preventing problematic behavior employs mechanisms that consider both the individual and the social context. Children need to learn assertiveness, self-regulation, and conflict management to stand up to their peers' pressures, and adolescents need a positive monitoring and supervision system from school and parents so that they can be shielded from negative influences (Bartol & Bartol, 2014).

Limitations

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of the research as new research is intended. The social desirability bias of self-report questionnaires affects results, even though the research sample includes children who conflict with the law, allowing us to compare groups of children with and without objectively measured experience of deviant behavior. For this reason, the researchers must employ a different strategy for gathering information for the study. The limitations of the methods used in the past should be considered when developing theoretical models to evaluate the complexity of problem behavior in the future.

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