

Short Communication

Adolescent Peer Crowd Self-identification, Attributional Style and Perceptions of Parenting

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationships between self-identified crowd membership, attributional characteristics, and perceptions of parental style among students in their first year of high school ($N = 893$). The aim was to assess the extent to which group identity is reflected in self-reported characteristics. Most students self-identified either as studious, athletes, populars, rebels, or normals ($N = 669$) and also completed measures of perceptions of parental styles and attributional style. Consistent differences were observed between self-identified studious and rebel teenagers. One-way ANOVAS revealed significant group differences on mother's authoritativeness, father's authoritativeness, positive attributional style, and negative attributional style. These results are discussed with reference to the interplay between group influences and individual characteristics. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: group identity; parental styles; attributional style

INTRODUCTION

To what extent are our group or crowd identities an indication of distinctive individual characteristics? There is increasing empirical evidence that identification with particular crowds is central to providing us with a sense of who we are, and that self-identity and group belongingness are related (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Members of voluntary groups share similar attitudes and values and are more likely to have similar social representations of the world (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995).

One's immediate social context helps shape the behaviours, attitudes and motivational levels of young people (Emler & Reicher, 1995). Thus, behaviours and attitudes are seen

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as a function of crowd affiliation. For example, membership of the 'academic' or 'studious' crowd in one's year will dictate a set of behaviours and values that are different from those driving membership of other crowds (e.g. drug-taking youth). Quite conceivably, members of studious groups are more likely to achieve academically and are therefore also more likely to be high on traits such as conscientiousness and persistence. Engaging in group-appropriate behaviours, therefore, serves to enhance one's reputation as a worthwhile crowd member.

Sussman, Dent, and McCullar (2000) classified adolescents into one of a number of peer crowds and found that those classified as high risk (e.g. gang members and 'drug-gies') were significantly more likely 1 year later to engage in drug use and to use violence than those classified as regulars (e.g. socials, populars and athletes). Downs and Rose (1991) utilized content analysis to classify adolescents as belonging to one of four crowds, namely, involved with school and valuing good grades, involved with school and valuing athleticism and popularity, on the fringes of school activity and engaging in some alcohol use, and, finally, drug use and some destruction of school property.

The crowd labelled 'drug use and destruction of school property' was significantly higher on a self-reported delinquency index than other crowds and also significantly more likely to experience societal estrangement, depression, and low self-esteem. This crowd was also more likely not to perceive harm from marijuana or alcohol usage. Similarly, Mosbach and Leventhal (1988) found that smoking behaviour was more prevalent among so-called 'dirts' (kids described on the basis of their problem behaviours) than 'populars' (academic and extracurricular leaders). Thus, the labels used by adolescents to describe themselves have implications for their emotional well-being and provide a 'supportive and rewarding environment' that are likely to result in a positive or constructive social identity for the teenager (Downs & Rose, 1991, p. 487).

Linkages have also been uncovered between crowd identity and self-reported individual characteristics. Prinstein and La Greca (2002) found that self-perceived scholastic performance was highest among the so-called 'Brain' crowd, but lowest among the 'Burnouts' (those who tended to skip school). By contrast, athletic ability was highest among 'Populars/jocks', but lowest among 'Brains'. In addition, emotional well-being was found to alter over a time span of 6 years. Negative well-being (e.g. depression) increased over time among the 'Brain' group, while the opposite trend was observed for 'Populars/jocks'.

Aims and rationale of present study

The present study was designed to assess the extent to which crowd identification among young people is associated with their attributional style and perceptions of parental functioning. These two outcome measures were selected because evidence clearly demonstrates their implications for emotional well-being. Attributional style is known to predict emotional adjustment (e.g. Gladstone, Kaslow, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1997). A helpful or positive attributional style involves success being attributed to internal, stable causes, while failure is attributed to external causes (Simon & Feather, 1973). Negative or maladaptive attributions in children have been found to be associated with elevated levels of social anxiety and loneliness (Crick & Ladd, 1993). Therefore, it was hypothesized that the studious group, a group it was assumed would be successful academically, would score highest on the positive attributional style measures relative to the other groups, while deviant groups would have elevated scores on negative attributional style.

Previous studies have documented the links between adolescent perceptions of family functioning and their emotional well-being. Psychological distress among young people is elevated in conflictual families and it is generally acknowledged that family process factors help determine family climate (Barber & Eccles, 1992). Indeed, adolescents who rated their parents as authoritative (that is, as being democratic) were found to score higher on self-esteem and other mental health measures than teenagers who rated their parents as authoritarian. Children from authoritarian homes were more likely to be obedient, yet lacking in self-confidence (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). It was hypothesized that students regarded as 'popular' or 'normal' would most likely be self-confident and have high self-esteem and would score highest on perceptions of authoritative parenting (Lamborn et al., 1991). By contrast, it was expected 'rebels' would score lowest on perceptions of authoritative parenting.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were a population of students in their first year of high school ($N = 893$). They were drawn from all six Catholic high schools located in one of the Diocese of New South Wales, Australia. The sample consisted of 416 males and 404 females (73 did not indicate gender). The modal age of the respondents was 12 years. The schools in question were located in two cities with different socio-economic and cultural mixes.

Measures

Each student completed the following measures:

- (1) *Peer group identity*. Students were asked to indicate the 'kind of students you hang around with' by selecting one group from a list of group descriptions. The descriptions were based on our interpretation of previously described groups (e.g. Prinstein & La Greca, 2002; Sussman et al., 2000) and included the following: 'students who study seriously and have good relations with teachers', 'students who spend a lot of time playing sports', 'students who like to party, and sometimes use alcohol and/or drugs', 'students who are popular, liked by other students and enjoy participating in different school activities', 'students who rebel against teachers and do not always do homework'. It was possible that not all students would identify with the group descriptions listed above, preferring instead to self-identify with a 'general' crowd, to list another group, or to self-identify as an isolate.

Of the total number of respondents, 78 self-nominated as studious, 171 as athletes, 192 as populars, 33 as rebels, 195 as normals, 11 as drug/alcohol users, 69 as belonging to the 'other' category, and 19 as isolated. Thus, 768 students self-nominated. Of these, the following groups were selected for further analysis: studious, athletes, populars, rebels, and normals ($N = 669$).

- (2) *Parental authority questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991)*. This reliable and valid scale measures adolescents' perceptions of parental permissiveness, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness. Due to time constraints, a shortened version of the PAQ, containing 15 of the original 30 items, was used in this study. Each parenting style for mother and father was measured with the aid of five items for each of the three parenting styles

and scored on a five-point Likert scale with strongly disagree (scored one) and strongly agree (scored five) at the end points. Alpha coefficients for both parents were as follows: permissiveness = 0.71; authoritarianism = 0.80; authoritativeness = 0.76.

(3) *Children's attributional style questionnaire (CASQ; Thompson, Kaslow, Weiss, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998)*. The CASQ is designed to assess a child's tendencies to make depressive explanations for events. Tested on a sample of children in early adolescence, the CASQ was shown to possess good criterion-related validity, satisfactory internal consistency as well as test-retest reliability. On this occasion composite scores for negative as well as positive events were calculated such that a low score on the positive scale and a high score on the negative scale indicated a depressive attributional style.

Procedure

After obtaining consent from the school and parents, students were invited to participate in a study on 'Youth Issues'. Administration of the questionnaires took place during regular class times under the supervision of one of the authors or a teacher. Students completed the questionnaires anonymously and without any discussion. At the conclusion of the session students were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

RESULTS

In order to determine group differences on the various measures, a series of one-way ANOVAS was conducted on the outcome measures with group membership as the independent factor. Table 1 presents the mean scores of the various groups on the different measures. To minimize the problem of Type 1 error, alpha level was set at 0.01. Significant group differences were found on mother's authoritativeness, father's authoritativeness, positive attributional style, and negative attributional style.

As predicted, rebels were found to have the highest scores on the negative attributional scale, this score being significantly higher than that of any other group. There were no significant differences between the other groups on this measure. As expected, the studious group had the highest score on the positive attributional style measure with rebels obtaining the lowest score. There were no significant differences between studious, athletes, populars, and normals on this measure.

Table 1. Mean scores of various peer crowds on different measures

Variables	Studious (<i>N</i> = 76)	Athletes (<i>N</i> = 168)	Populars (<i>N</i> = 185)	Rebels (<i>N</i> = 32)	Normals (<i>N</i> = 193)	<i>F</i> value
Mother's permissiveness	12.81	12.83	13.36	13.81	13.22	1.22
Mother's authoritarianism	14.68	14.66	14.93	13.75	14.69	0.74
Mother's authoritativeness	19.13a	18.00	18.65b	16.15a,b	18.18	5.22**
Father's permissiveness	12.68	13.41	13.77	16.63	14.02	2.70
Father's authoritarianism	15.01	15.08	15.41	14.39	14.47	1.49
Father's authoritativeness	18.05a	17.47	17.91b	15.24a,b,c	17.68c	4.20**
Positive attributional style	19.88a	19.25	19.85b	18.41a,b	19.54	4.28**
Negative attributional style	14.79a	14.75b	14.55c	16.20a,b,c,d	14.54d	5.03**

Note: Means with similar letters differ significantly from each other.

***p* < 0.01.

There were no significant differences across the groups with respect to perceptions of parents' permissiveness and authoritarianism. However, rebels were least likely to experience authoritative parenting. On mother's authoritativeness, their mean score was significantly lower than the studious and popular groups ($F = 5.22$). Compared to the studious, popular, and normal groups, rebels were also significantly less likely to report authoritativeness among fathers ($F = 4.20$).

DISCUSSION

The results show that self-identified crowd membership among youth is significantly related to attributional characteristics and perceptions of parental styles. Young adolescents were able to identify with school crowds and these crowd labels were linked in logical ways to teenagers' reports of their attributional style and family life. The most consistent differences on all of the measures were between self-identified studious and rebel teenagers. Rebels were found to score lowest on positive attributional style and parental authoritativeness, and highest on negative attributional style. Teenagers who reported being members of so-called populars, athletes, or normals, were also found to be relatively well adjusted, as evidenced by their scores on the outcome measures. Thus, these data add to previous work in this area (e.g. Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001) by showing that there are theoretically consistent links between crowd identity and individual characteristics.

Previous writers (e.g. Emler & Reicher, 1995) have suggested that one's immediate social context helps shape one's motivational levels, attitudes and behaviour. These data extend this view by illustrating that crowd membership is not an isolated, random event, but is also a function of the personality, attributional style, and family experiences of the individual. It is not clear from these data whether the social context leads to particular individual characteristics, or vice versa, but the general thesis that they are closely linked is beyond dispute. We are currently conducting longitudinal research in which we will examine the extent to which self-reports of individual factors precede changes in crowd identity, and vice versa.

Why should young people with particular dispositions be attracted to the rebel crowd? It is likely that young people who find it difficult to form normal peer relationships or who have been rejected (see Parker & Asher, 1987), may gravitate to a crowd with similar individuals. It is also likely that this process of seeking out a particular crowd began before these students entered high school. It may be that children who have little hope (perhaps because of peer rejections or difficulties with school work) are more likely to have a negative attributional style. Thus, specific experiences reinforce negative cognitive biases that compound an already unsatisfactory situation. Such students will also be more inclined to seek solace in the company of other like-minded young people who have gravitated to the rebel crowd. Alternatively, as mentioned earlier, some crowds may serve to help avoid unpleasant stimuli. Further longitudinal research is required to test these competing hypotheses.

In conclusion, close connections exist between crowd membership and individual characteristics. The data demonstrate that societal and group perspectives on social behaviour converge with individual difference approaches to explaining social behaviour. Individual differences and the social context (crowd) do not operate in isolation. Rather than being in opposition to one another, together they provide a multidimensional perspective on the

emotional adjustment of young people. Future research needs to evaluate the causal direction of these links.

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