



Similarities and differences between perceptions of peer delinquency, peer self-reported delinquency, and respondent delinquency: An analysis of friendship dyads



Ryan C. Meldrum ^{a,*}, John H. Boman IV ^b

^a Florida International University, Department of Criminal Justice, Florida International University, 11200 SW 8th Street, PCA-364B, Miami, FL 33199, United States

^b University of Wyoming, Department of Criminal Justice, A&S Building, Laramie, WY 82071, United States

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Despite the peer delinquency measurement debate having profound implications for research, looming questions remain about the validity of various forms of peer delinquency operationalizations. This study examines whether perceptions of peer delinquency form identical latent constructs to both respondent and peer self-reported delinquency.

Methods: Using a dyadic dataset of friendship pairs, confirmatory factor analysis and model comparison tests are used to determine the degree of similarity between perceptions of peer delinquency, respondent self-reported delinquency, and peer self-reported delinquency.

Results: Peer self-reports and respondent perceptions of peer delinquency load on unique constructs across a number of different behaviors. For most behaviors, respondent perceptions of peer delinquency and respondent self-reports load on separate constructs. Results further indicate that respondent and peer self-reported delinquency are separate latent constructs. Finally, the strength of the association between respondent and peer delinquency is substantively smaller in magnitude, by as much as a factor of three in some instances, when peer delinquency is measured via peer self-reports in place of respondent perceptions.

Conclusions: Reports of peer delinquency provided directly from peers demonstrate strong discriminant validity in relation to self-reported delinquency, while perceptions of peer delinquency demonstrate poorer discriminant validity, particularly for theft and violence constructs.

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Introduction

The correlation between peer delinquency and respondent delinquency is one of the most replicated findings within criminology (Akers, 2009; Pratt et al., 2010). Research consistently demonstrates that the strength of this relationship meets or exceeds the influence of other theoretical variables, including self-control and variables from the rational choice/deterrence traditions (Pratt et al., 2010). In fact, researchers have noted that “Next to prior delinquency, association with delinquent peers is the best predictor of delinquency” (Agnew, 1991a, p. 148). Despite this, a critical debate centers on the measurement of the peer delinquency construct (e.g., Rebellon & Modecki, in press; Young, Barnes, Meldrum, & Weerman, 2011). Although Akers (2009) has argued that the most appropriate form of peer delinquency measurement should be perceptually-based, many have argued against the use of such measures (e.g., Haynie & Osgood, 2005) and instead have favored the use of direct reports of peer delinquency to avoid

issues such as projection, which is the situation when a respondent reports his/her own delinquency when perceiving how delinquent his/her peers have behaved (see Boman et al., 2012; Young et al., 2011). Drawing on the projection concept, some have argued that there are minimal differences between the constructs of perceptual peer delinquency and self-reported delinquency (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). If such a claim is true, then “virtually the entire body of research assessing the relationship between association with deviant peers and self-reported deviance would be useless because the measures are not independent” (Thornberry & Krohn, 1997, p. 222).

A small body of research has examined the degree of similarity between perceptions of peer delinquency and self-reported delinquency using latent variable approaches. For example, using data from multiple waves of the National Youth Survey (NYS), Rebellon (2012) found that there were statistical (though not substantive) differences between self-reported substance use indicators and perceptions of peers' substance use. Similar conclusions have been reached when considering property offenses (Zhang & Messner, 2000). In short, there appears to be evidence that partially supports the critique that perceptions of peer delinquency lack strong discriminant validity when examined in relation to self-reports of delinquency.

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 305 348 5848.

E-mail address: rmeldrum@fiu.edu (R.C. Meldrum).

More recently, researchers have started to consider the discriminant validity between perceptual measures of peer delinquency and reports of peer delinquency gathered directly from the peer him/herself, which are becoming a frequently used alternative to the traditional “perceptual” measurement strategy (these are often called “direct” reports of peer delinquency; *Rebellion & Modecki, in press; Young, Rebellion, Barnes, & Weerman, in press*). This is an important methodological consideration, as the first logical step when developing any particular scale is to evaluate if the scale is measuring what it claims to be measuring. Applying this intuition to the peer delinquency construct, the most important step is to evaluate if perceptions are measuring actual peer delinquency. The fact that researchers have only recently started to direct attention to this issue in part reflects the difficulty of obtaining measures of peer self-reported delinquency – they require the use of dyadic or social-networking methodologies (*Boman, Stogner, Miller, Griffin, & Krohn, 2012; Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2009; Rebellion & Modecki, in press*). However, with the increasing availability of such data, determining whether perceptions of peer delinquency are reflective of actual peer behavior is rapidly becoming realized as a critical area of research.

Despite the importance of recent work in these areas of research, latent variable investigations into discriminant validity between self-reported delinquency and each of the two measures of peer delinquency (perceptions and direct reports) have been limited to only a handful of empirical studies (*Rebellion, 2012; Rebellion & Modecki, in press; Young et al., in press; Zhang & Messner, 2000*), each with shortcomings that warrant additional research. For example, some studies have been limited to a focus on perceptual measures of peer delinquency in relation to self-reported delinquency without consideration given to direct reports (*Rebellion, 2012; Zhang & Messner, 2000*). In addition, of the studies which have included both direct and perceptual measures of peer delinquency in the same analyses, they have been limited with regard to the scope of the behaviors considered (*Rebellion & Modecki, in press; Young et al., in press*). Discriminant validity may vary according to the type of behavior investigated, and there are a number of additional constructs that should be considered in order to assess the generality of findings stemming from previous research. As *Warr (2002)* points out, certain types of delinquency – namely substance use behaviors – are more likely to be shared in common between friends. On the other hand, acts of theft and violence are often committed without friends. It is possible, then, that the discriminant validity between perceptions of peer delinquency, direct reports of peer delinquency, and self-reported delinquency could depend upon the specific behavior under consideration.

In an effort to advance this area of research, build upon recent work, and address the aforementioned considerations, the current study makes use of dyadic data collected from a large sample of young adults in friendship pairs at a university located in the southeastern United States. The data contain information on perceptual peer delinquency, self-reported respondent delinquency, and direct reports of peer delinquency for nearly two dozen behaviors. Thus, the data are well-suited for contributing to the existing literature and advancing our understanding of similarities and differences between these three measures of delinquency.

Prior research on peer delinquency measurement

The construct of peer delinquency occupies a central position in the field of criminology, particularly within the social learning tradition. *Sutherland's (1947)* differential association theory and *Akers's social learning theory (2009)* each attribute a significant causal role to peer delinquency within their respective theoretical frameworks. According to such theorists, associating with delinquent peers encourages deviant behavior because such peers promote attitudes favorable to engaging in law violating behavior, provide reinforcements for engaging in such behavior, and act as models for such behavior. Consistent with these arguments, a large body of research finds that peer delinquency is strongly and positively related to self-reported delinquency. Most recently, a

meta-analysis by *Pratt and colleagues (2010)* found that the peer delinquency construct is one of the strongest individual-level correlates of crime and delinquency.

Despite the evidence lending support to peer delinquency being a variable of considerable substantive importance, a point of contention concerns the measurement of peer delinquency. The typical way in which peer delinquency has been measured relies upon respondent perceptions of peer delinquency (see *Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985*). This usually involves a respondent being asked about the number or proportion of his or her friends who have engaged in various delinquent behaviors. One concern with this measurement strategy as a means to assess the strength of the relationship between peer delinquency and respondent delinquency has been levied by *Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, pp. 156–157)*. They argue that “one interpretation for these results is simply that delinquency is correlated with delinquency; that is, the variable – [perceptual] peer delinquency – may merely be another measure of self-reported delinquency.”

The theoretical implications of this methodological argument are clear and far reaching; if the two constructs are one in the same, then the vast majority of research citing the importance of peer delinquency is rendered suspect because researchers would be correlating the dependent variable – self-reported delinquency – with an identical predictor variable – perceptual peer delinquency. Of course, it is important to recognize that a very strong correlation between self-reported delinquency and perceptions of peer delinquency may not simply reflect respondents providing an alternative report of their own behavior. Rather, it could reflect, for example, frequent co-offending or information-sharing between respondents and their friends. However, as many recent studies have noted, a strong association between perceptions of peer delinquency and self-reported delinquency could also be the result of projection, where respondents overestimate the similarity of their friends' behaviors with their own (*Boman et al., 2012; Rebellion & Modecki, in press; Young et al., in press; Young et al., 2011*). In any event, the methodological and statistical complications that result from having an independent variable that is indistinguishable from a dependent variable warrant investigation into the discriminant validity between self-reported delinquency and perceptions of peer delinquency.

Factor analytic approaches are particularly well suited to address this issue. The general goal of this type of approach, as *Agnew (1991b, p. 56)* recognizes, is to “determine whether the measures of peer delinquency are empirically distinct from the measures of the respondent's own delinquency.” Drawing on *Agnew's* recommendation, a handful of studies have used factor analysis to shed light on this issue. Using a two-step procedure with the NYS data, *Zhang and Messner (2000)* created a single latent construct where six items measuring the respondent's perceptions of peers' theft, violence, and property offending were loaded onto the same factor as a corresponding set of six indicators of the respondent's own delinquency. Next, a two-factor solution was created that loaded the perceptions and the respondent self-reports onto separate respective factors. *Zhang and Messner* found that the two-factor model did fit the data better than the one-factor model, even though the improvement in model fit was not substantively large.

Also using data from the NYS, a similar analysis was undertaken by *Rebellion (2012)* with items that were not considered by *Zhang and Messner (2000)*. *Rebellion* constructed one and two-factor measurement models to determine whether perceptual measures pertaining to drinking, marijuana use, and amphetamine use loaded onto a different factor than respondent self-reports of the same behaviors. Consistent with *Zhang and Messner's* results, *Rebellion (2012)* found that the two-factor measurement model fit the data better than the one-factor model. Still, the two-factor correlation met or exceeded 0.95 across multiple waves of data.

More recently, *Young and colleagues (in press)* and *Rebellion and Modecki (in press)* have reached similar conclusions. Using adolescent data from the Netherlands and factor analytic techniques, *Young and colleagues* found that perceptions of peer substance use and property

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