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Negative and positive peer influence: Relations to positive and negative behaviors for African American, European American, and Hispanic adolescents

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to examine adolescents' perceptions of negative and positive peer influence (i.e., indirect peer association and direct peer pressure) as they related to adolescent behavior. Regression analyses were conducted using a sample of African American, European American, and Hispanic adolescents ($N = 1659$, M age = 16.06, $SD = 1.10$). The study found differences and similarities in relation to respondents' ethnicity vis-à-vis indirect peer association and adolescent behavior. Although few ethnic-based differences occurred as a function of indirect negative peer association, indirect positive peer association was not as consistently or as strongly related to behaviors for minority youth as it was for European American youth.

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During adolescence, less time is spent with parents and family and more time is spent with friends, who act as an important source of social support (Brown & Klute, 2006). In fact, the substantial body of research focusing on adolescent dyadic friendships, close-knit peer groups, and larger crowds of peers suggests that the structure of peer relationships is more elaborate during

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adolescence than at any earlier time (for a review, see [Brown, 2004](#)). Although it is generally understood that peers can have both positive and negative influences on adolescents, the vast majority of research focuses on negative peer influence and its relation to risk behaviors (e.g., [Jaccard, Blanton, & Dodge, 2005](#)). Although there are notable exceptions (e.g., [Barry & Wentzel, 2006](#); [Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004](#)), examinations of positive peer influence have focused primarily on the absence of problem behaviors (e.g., less sexual risk taking, lower drug use) rather than the presence of positive behaviors (e.g., social initiative, empathy; [Brown, Lohr, & McClenahan, 1986](#)). As an additional limitation, this body of research contains few studies of peer influences in diverse U.S. ethnic groups. Thus, the current study was designed to examine adolescents' perceptions of negative and positive peer influence, how these are related to adolescents' own positive and negative behaviors, and how these relations might differ as a function of ethnicity.

Peer influence

Research suggests that peer influence manifests itself in at least four ways: direct peer pressure, indirect peer modeling or association, normative regulation, and the structuring of opportunities ([Brown, 2004](#)). For purposes of the current study, we examine two of these modes of influence (i.e., direct peer pressure and indirect peer association). The first, peers' direct attempts to influence the attitudes or behaviors of others, is one of the most commonly discussed aspects of peer influence. Although research on direct peer pressure has inspired a variety of prevention programs, there is mixed evidence regarding whether or not it is common or effective in influencing youth behavior ([Velleman, Templeton, & Copello, 2005](#)). The second focus is the indirect and often unintentional modeling of behaviors, which can be measured by assessing adolescents' associations with peers who engage in certain behaviors. Research on indirect peer association has found that having friends who participate in deviant behaviors is consistently correlated with adolescents' own risky behaviors (e.g., [Hundleby & Mercier, 1987](#)).

A large body of research supports the influence (both direct and indirect) of antisocial peers on adolescents' negative behaviors, including externalizing problems ([Allen, Porter, & McFarland, 2006](#)), risky sexual behavior ([Crockett, Raffaelli, & Shen, 2006](#)), and delinquency ([Sullivan, 2006](#)). Association with deviant peers is often assumed to influence adolescents to engage in antisocial behavior (a socialization effect), whereas others have proposed that there is a selection effect in which antisocial youth with shared characteristics interact and form relationships ([Hirschi, 1969](#); [Kandel, 1978](#); [Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani, & Bukowski, 1997](#)). Early research on this topic supports both perspectives (e.g., [Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995](#); [Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994](#)), as do more recent studies that have found partial support for socialization and selection (e.g., [Vitaro et al., 1997](#)).

Putting aside the question of socialization and selection, the findings suggest that negative peer influence (direct or indirect) has a stronger impact on adolescent behaviors than does positive peer influence ([Haselager, Hartup, van Lieshout, & Riksen-Walraven, 1998](#); [Ma, Shek, Cheung, & Tam, 2002](#)). Although research has found that friends with positive behavior can serve a protective function over time ([Brown & Klute, 2006](#); [Haselager et al., 1998](#)), there are relatively few studies examining positive peer influence as both a deterrent to negative behavior and as a form of

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