The Influence of Parents and Peers on Choices Made by Adolescents

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Received June 20, 1977

Hypothetical situations in which an adolescent was faced with a choice of two possible alternatives, one favored by parents and the other favored by peers, were read by ninth- and twelfth-graders. Subjects were asked to pick the alternative most likely to be chosen by the adolescent in each situation. Responses were analyzed for tendency to choose parent- or peer-approved alternatives. Boys in the ninth grade chose the parent-approved alternative more often than either ninth-grade girls or twelfth-grade boys. Girls' responses tended to remain stable over the same period.

INTRODUCTION

In a popular stereotype, the adolescent is portrayed as a member of a distinct and separate subculture within our American culture (Coleman, 1961). According to this stereotype, the adolescent tends to reject the values and beliefs of his parents, and thus their advice, in favor of those of his peer group. Indeed, Goodman (1969) reported that, overall, the adolescent conforms more to the norms of his friends than to those of his parents, or even his own. Smith and Kleine (1966) in their review of the relevant research concluded that both parents and peers exert influence upon adolescents, that when parents and peers are in agreement the behavior is most likely to occur, and that when parents and peers disagree the influence of both varies with the issue involved.

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Brittain (1963, 1966) sought to determine the relative influence of parents and peers on decisions made by adolescents in varying situations. He presented adolescent girls with hypothetical conflict situations in which one solution was favored by parents and another by peers; the girls were asked to indicate which alternative the person portrayed as being in conflict would be most likely to follow. The results indicated that conformity of the adolescent to parents and peers tended to vary with the situation. Thus, the subjects were more likely to select the alternative favored by peers when the decision concerned which of two dresses to buy, but they were more likely to select the alternative favored by parents when the situation involved whether or not to take a part-time job.

Brittain (1963, 1966) tends to refer to adolescents in general, but such generalization is unwarranted, since he obtained data only from girls. The present study extended the investigation of parent and peer influences to adolescent boys as well as girls. In addition, two different age levels were included in an effort to explore the possibility of a developmental trend in the tendency of adolescents to conform to parents and peers.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

The subjects were members of two ninth-grade and two twelfth-grade classes of a high school located in a small midwestern town. Forty-nine boys and 49 girls participated.

**Materials**

Ten paragraphs, describing an adolescent in 10 different conflict situations, were composed. In each paragraph, the adolescent was depicted as being undecided about which of two possible alternatives to follow, with one alternative being favored by the youth’s parents and the other by his or her peers. The 10 conflict situations involved decisions of whether to invite a person to a party, whom to take shopping (parent or peer), which course to take in school, which of two part-time jobs to take, whether to report a thief, which theme to use for a party, which of two activities to attend, which of two persons to date, which church to go to, and whether or not to tell who had broken a window. The subject was asked to indicate in each case which alternative the person was most likely to follow. The following paragraph is illustrative of the items used:

Judy was working at the school after hours when she heard a loud crash and went to investigate. A large glass in the front door of the school had been broken. Judy saw Jim walking away from the door. Bill had also been at the school that afternoon, and both he and Jim were suspected of breaking the glass. Bill and Jim, be-