Resisting or Acquiescing to Peer Pressure to Engage in Misconduct: Adolescents' Expectations of Probable Consequences

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Received April 25, 1989; accepted February 7, 1990

Adolescents' implicit scripts for situations in which peer pressure to engage in misconduct is experienced were examined to determine whether expectations varied as a function of sex, community (urban, primarily black; urban, primarily Hispanic; suburban, primarily white), and learning status (learning disabled; nondisabled). One hundred ninety-eight high school students were interviewed about six situations in which one teen-ager asks another to participate in misconduct. The students were questioned about how the requests would be stated, what would ensue if the requests were accepted or refused, and what would be likely to motivate the decisions to accept or refuse. Sex, community, and learning status differences were found, particularly in anticipated consequences of refusing the request. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Preparation of this manuscript was supported in part by a research grant from the United States Department of Education to Ruth Pearl and Tanis Bryan.

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INTRODUCTION

Peer influence reaches its peak during the adolescent years (Newman and Newman, 1976). It is not surprising, then, that there has been considerable interest in the phenomenon of peer pressure, and particularly in adolescents' susceptibility to pressure from peers to engage in misconduct. Peer pressure to engage in misconduct is reported to occur less frequently than other forms of peer pressure (Brown et al., 1986; Clasen and Brown, 1985), appears to be less frequently successful than peer pressure on other domains of behavior (Berndt, 1979), and is certainly only one of many causes of misconduct (Gold and Petronio, 1980). Nevertheless, it is likely that most teenagers will at some point be requested by a liked classmate to engage in some undesirable activity. Why do some students acquiesce to such pressure and others refuse?

Social information-processing skills and biases have been implicated as factors contributing to behaviors ranging from aggression (e.g., Dodge, 1980; Dodge and Frame, 1982; Slaby and Guerra, 1988) to dealing effectively with challenging social situations (Ford, 1982). Yet despite the increasingly apparent role of social cognitive factors in interpersonal behavior, no research has examined adolescents' understanding of situations in which peer pressure to engage in misconduct is experienced. This study begins the investigation of this issue by examining adolescents' implicit scripts for situations in which one adolescent requests another to participate in an undesirable activity. In this study, we examined whether expectations for such situations varied as a function of sex, social environment, and learning status.

Receiving peer pressure to engage in misconduct was hypothesized to be a particularly difficult situation for girls. On the one hand, adolescent girls in general appear to be more concerned about the maintenance of friendships (Douvan and Adelson, 1966) and, in some situations, more receptive to interpersonal influences (Coleman, 1980; Kandel, 1986) than are adolescent boys. At the same time, both girls and boys disapprove more of girls' delinquent behavior than they do of boys' (Morris, 1965). It was hypothesized, therefore, that girls would view the consequences of both agreeing to the request and refusing to go along with the request to be more negative than would boys. Girls were also expected to focus on friendship as a rationale for agreeing with the request more than would boys, and to view friendship to be at greater risk if the request were refused. Boys, with social disapproval a less salient concern, were expected to focus more on pragmatic reasons for agreeing to or refusing the request than would girls.

A second hypothesis was that adolescents living in different social environments would be likely to view peer pressure to engage in misconduct