The Extent and Effects of Peer Pressure Among High School Students: A Retrospective Analysis

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Although people assume that peer pressure is an influential component of adolescent development, few empirical studies have investigated the nature and extent of its influence. Using retrospective accounts from 297 college undergraduates, the present study assessed how much pressure peers exerted in numerous areas of high school life and how this pressure influenced teenagers' attitudes and behaviors. One-third of both genders identified peer pressure as one of the hardest things they had to face as a teenager. Generally, however, peer pressure appeared stronger for females than males, and the genders disagreed about the areas in which pressure was strongest. Perceptions of peer pressure were significantly associated with dating attitudes, sexual activity, and use of drugs and alcohol, but not with relationships with parents. The findings suggested that adolescents may be their own worst enemy in any attempt to break away from gender-stereotypic attitudes and behavior.

INTRODUCTION

"Peer pressure" seems to be widely acknowledged as a highly influential component of contemporary adolescence. The term is bandied about by textbook authors, journalists, parents, educators, and even teenagers...
themselves. Yet social scientific research into just how, and how much, peer pressure impinges upon teenagers is sparse. The present study attempted to appraise how peer pressure affects individuals' behavior during the high school years, based on retrospective accounts by recent high school graduates.

Few would argue with the assertion that peer relationships have a major impact on teenagers' behavior. Kandel et al. (1978), for example, found that adolescents were more likely to use marijuana if their friends used it or at least condoned its use. Similarly, Reister and Zucker (1968) reported that the extent to which teenagers drank alcohol depended heavily on the peer group to which they belonged. Peers also can influence prosocial behavior. Among both working- and middle-class adolescents, Simpson (1962) found that males were more likely to aspire to high-status occupations if peers encouraged, rather than discouraged, such aspirations.

Yet the influence peers apparently wield over teenagers may stem less from group pressure than from adolescents' willingness to conform to group norms and attitudes, particularly during the early teenage years. This was deftly demonstrated by Costanzo and Shaw (1966), who had teenagers report their judgments about the length of lines on a panel that first flashed what were ostensibly the responses of three peers. When the panel display was manipulated to indicate that all three peers had chosen the same incorrect response, half of the 12- and 13-year-olds made errors in the direction of the inaccurate peer judgments. Although the percentage selecting incorrect responses declined with age, peer-conforming errors were still made by one-third of the 10 to 21-year-olds. Similar results showing the same basic developmental trend have been reported in numerous other studies (Berndt, 1978; Collins and Thomas, 1972; Landsbaum and Willis, 1971).

Some regard teenagers' apparent willingness to conform to peers as particularly disturbing because of the claim by numerous authors that adolescent peer groups encourage undesirable behavior. In his classic study of 10 midwestern high schools, James Coleman (1961) concluded that adolescents face considerable pressure to strive to be popular and belong to the "leading crowd." This crowd, Coleman felt, represented a "sub-culture" with norms and values contrary to those endorsed and encouraged by adults. Braham (1965) echoed these sentiments by arguing that peer groups discourage adolescents from academic pursuits. And others have presented evidence that adolescents with a relatively high "peer orientation" are more likely to be involved in juvenile delinquency (Polk, 1971) or the use of illegal drugs (Stone et al., 1979). In Stone et al.'s (1979) study, 66% of parent-oriented teens had never tried marijuana and only 7% were regular users; but among those who were peer oriented, only 22% had never tried it and 33% were regular users.

Many investigators challenged the notion that teenagers tend to abandon adult values in favor of contrary peer group norms. Brittain (1963)