The Relative Importance of Parents and Friends in Adolescent Decision Making

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In this study 175 older adolescents (83 males, 92 females) nominated their parents, particularly their mothers, then friends of the same sex, as people most important in their lives. While parents were rated as more important than friends overall, problems were more frequently discussed with close friends. Using a matched sampling design, the adolescents' own mothers, fathers, and a close friend of the same sex also responded to a scale where parents' or friends' opinions might be sought as part of adolescent decision making. As predicted, parents were perceived as most important in certain “future-oriented” areas, whereas for “current” decisions, friends' opinions were more valued. Several areas of possible parent–peer conflict were also identified.

INTRODUCTION

In their decision making, adolescents draw on the experience and advice of different reference groups and significant others. Of particular interest to researchers and educators has been the relative influence of parents and peers during adolescent development. While differences of opinion and disagreements about various issues are to be expected between adults and young people, the stereotype of fundamental conflict between these groups has not been supported by recent studies (Coleman, 1980). Instead, as Bid- dle and his colleagues suggest, parents and peers may influence adolescent

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behavior in different ways, depending on the relationships a young person has with each and the particular topic area investigated (Biddle et al., 1980).

One popular research methodology used to investigate the relative influence of these two reference groups has been to create hypothetical situations or dilemmas involving choices between conflicting parent-peer expectations (Brittain, 1963, 1967; Emmerich, 1978; Larson, 1972; Solomon, 1961). From these studies a number of important observations have been made. First, the type of situation or dilemma in which an adolescent is placed will be an important determinant of whether peers or parents are chosen as a frame of reference. Second, adolescents' perceptions of peers and parents as competent guides in different areas of judgment tend to influence their choices. For example, Brittain (1963) found that adolescent girls saw their peers as more competent guides in current situational dilemmas (e.g., which dress to buy), whereas for future-oriented situations (e.g., which part-time job to take) parents were seen as more competent. Third, the more difficult choices, and those perceived important in the eyes of both peers and parents, tend to elicit parent-conforming responses. Several studies have shown that in difficult and important areas such as those involving vocational and educational decisions (Eme et al., 1979) where parents may be perceived as having some "expert knowledge," high-school students have been found to choose their parents' advice and opinions rather than those of their friends (Sebald and White, 1980). On the other hand, in current situations where decisions about dating, dress, social events and hobbies were to be made, the opinions of friends were perceived as more important (Sebald and White, 1980). Age and sex (Emmerich, 1978; Floyd and South, 1972), and cultural background (Valiant, 1983) have also been shown to influence adolescent choices between parent and peer reference groups.

While studies employing hypothetical situations have generated a number of interesting findings, Larson (1972) has concluded that they "provide limited insight into the structure of parent and peer orientations during adolescence" (p. 73). In attempting to understand the complex set of social influences acting upon young people, researchers have more recently extended their investigations to focus on other reference groups such as siblings (Cicirelli, 1980), extended family members, and nonrelated adults (Blyth et al., 1982); as well as measuring the strength and quality of the relationships adolescents have with each and their willingness to approach referent others in particular situations (Valiant, 1983). In addition, since describing both parents together may mask the more important relationship one parent has with a son or daughter, many researchers are now asking questions about mothers and fathers separately. The same rationale applies for peers. Liccione (1980) argues that a distinction should be made between peers in general