Abstract

In this article, we outline the importance of peers in adolescent delinquency. We review ways in which peers influence different deviant behaviors, as well as the ways in which deviant adolescents tend to select like-minded friends (homophily). The coexistence of both the peer influences → deviance and deviance → peer selection direction of effects is also explored, where the same adolescents and behaviors co-occur in both directional pathways. We also discuss ecological (especially family) influences on peer selection and effects, as well as the ways in which peer network effects may differ between “life course persistent” and “adolescence limited” adolescent deviance. Finally, we briefly review biological and early-experiential vulnerabilities that predispose adolescents toward selecting antisocial peers.
It is well known that peer affiliations are one of the strongest predictors of adolescent problem behavior. Association with risk-taking friends is strongly related to alcohol use (Barnow et al., 2004), illicit drug use (Nation & Heflinger, 2006), and aggression and delinquency (Barnow, Lucht, & Freyberger, 2005). These effects have been found to be remarkably consistent across various countries (e.g., Beyers, Toumbourou, Catalano, Arthur, & Hawkins, 2004). Indeed, there is evidence that peer affiliations may be the mechanism through which social disadvantage and family conflict affect a number of undesirable life outcomes in later adolescence and early adulthood, such as criminal behavior, sexual promiscuity, and early childbearing (Dishion, Ha, & Vérroneau, in press).

Although few would argue that affiliation with risk-taking friends increases risk for delinquent, substance abusing, and unsafe sexual behavior, there are a number of ways in which this relationship can be conceptualized and explained. Each of these explanations carries different implications for how negative peer affiliations develop and how they in turn impact deviance. For example, do antisocial peers “cause” adolescents to begin (and continue) engaging in deviant behavior? Or do “birds of a feather flock together,” where antisocial adolescents simply seek one another out as a way of creating a risk-taking support network? Further, do adolescents choose to affiliate with negative peers, or are there individual predispositions and genetic influences that guide peer selection? Are there evolutionary processes that somehow increase the “adaptiveness” of a deviant peer network? We explore each of these issues in this article.

Peer Selection as Cause versus Effect

Classic criminological theories, particularly control theories, such as Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) self-control theory, posit deviant peers simply as correlates of individual deviance or propensity for norm violations – for example, affiliation with antisocial peers is seen as related to low levels of self-control, among other characteristics. Thus, adolescents may simply select peers who are similar to themselves. For example, analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health
(Hoffman, Monge, Chou, & Valente, 2007) indicate that adolescents who smoke cigarettes are more likely to select other smokers as peers, rather than affiliation with smoking peers leading adolescents to smoke. In a sample of Swedish adolescents, Kiesner, Kerr, and Stattin (2004) found that the most antisocial adolescents tended to choose multiple “best friends” who also exhibited delinquent behavior. This type of peer selection effect is known as peer homophily (e.g., Kiesner, Poulin, & Nicotra, 2003). Put differently, peer homophily suggests that “birds of a feather flock together.”

On the other hand, social learning theories, such as differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947), posit deviant peers as causal agents in the development of adolescent delinquency. Adolescents who “get caught up in the wrong crowd” may begin to display antisocial behaviors that were not previously apparent. For example, Regnerus (2002) found that, especially in older adolescents (ages 17-19), the amount of time spent with friends – in addition to friends’ own delinquency – predicted engagement in theft and minor delinquency (e.g., graffiti, damaging property). For another example, Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, and Cauffman (2006) report that adolescents raised by more involved parents are more resistant to such peer influences. Vitaro, Pedersen, and Brendgen (2007) found that association with disruptive friends in middle school predicted delinquent behavior in high school. A recent experiment by Paternoster and colleagues (2012) provided evidence in support of this social learning perspective, where 38% of college students exposed to a deviant experimental confederate (compared to none of the students in the control condition) later reported intending to cheat on a word recall task. This evidence suggests that both peer exposure and vulnerability to deviant peer influences predict delinquent behavior in young people.

The peer-homophily and peer-influence explanations are not mutually exclusive, however. A number of studies have attempted to empirically compare the two using growth curve or cross-lagged panel modeling (e.g., Simons-Morton, 2007; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2006; Urberg, Luo, Pilgrim, & Degirmencioglu, 2003). Many studies have found reciprocal effects, where risk behavior engagement
leads to peer influence, and vice versa (Simons-Morton, 2007). Other studies have found stronger effects of peer influence than of peer homophily (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2006) or vice versa (Hoffman et al., 2007). Still other studies have found evidence of homophily (Urberg et al., 2003) or of selection (Vitaro et al., 2007) only for specific behaviors. It is important to note that, despite the longitudinal designs used, all this work is correlational in nature and does not allow for causal conclusions.

Research has also suggested that some types of deviant behaviors are predicted by peer influence, whereas other types are involved in homophily effects. For example, Fite and Colder (2007) found that proactive aggression – antisocial behavior that is purposefully initiated to achieve a specific goal – leads to peer homophily, but reactive aggression – responding to an actual or perceived threat – occurs in response to peers’ behavior. Further, certain groups of adolescents may be most likely to gravitate toward antisocial peers, whereas others may be more likely to be influenced by antisocial peers on a more situational basis (Piquero & Brezina, 2001). Aggressive adolescents who have been rejected by their peers may turn to antisocial networks as a way of “fitting in” with like-minded friends – and these antisocial networks serve to reinforce the adolescent’s negative behavior (Light & Dishion, 2007). These adolescents often form friendships that are centered around deviant activities (Dishion, Nelson, Winter, & Bullock, 2004). Other adolescents may temporarily join these antisocial networks as a way of experimenting with deviant behavior, but will likely desist from this behavior toward the end of adolescence (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). However, adolescents who have been rejected by their peers and who follow a “life course persistent” delinquency trajectory are likely to continue exhibiting antisocial behavior into adulthood (Moffitt, 2006).

So the role of peers in adolescent delinquency is quite complex. Some adolescents are more likely than others to self-select into deviant peer groups; and some antisocial behaviors are more likely than others to lead to deviant peer selection, whereas other behaviors may be more likely to emerge as a result of peer influences. Selection and influence processes occur simultaneously and may affect one
another through a feedback loop. The peer context of delinquency is therefore dynamic and multifaceted.

**Environmental and Genetic Antecedents of Deviant Peer Affiliations**

However, what predisposes adolescents toward involvement with antisocial peers – whether through self-selection or through social influence? Research suggests that family processes, particularly parent-adolescent closeness and parental monitoring, are critical for protecting adolescents against the effects of deviant peer networks (Dishion, Nelson, & Bullock, 2004; Kiesner, Poulin, & Dishion, 2010). When parents maintain warm and involved relationships with their adolescents, they are more likely to supervise them – and the adolescents are more likely to disclose information to their parents (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Parents are then in a better position to intervene when their adolescents are associating with deviant friends. On the other hand, when the parent-adolescent relationship is conflictual or otherwise strained, parents may not know with whom their adolescents are spending their time – and adolescents may be more susceptible to the influences of antisocial friends.

Adolescents who actively select antisocial friends may be characterized by especially persistent and severe family problems. Ingoldsby et al. (2006) found that individuals from disadvantaged neighborhoods, and who experienced high levels of family conflict as young children, tended to seek out deviant friends in adolescence. Other environmental stressors, such as racial/ethnic discrimination, may also predispose ethnic minority adolescents toward affiliation with deviant peers (Gibbons et al., 2007). Young men who have undergone traumatic experiences, such as physical or sexual abuse or witnessing violence on a repeated basis, may be at increased risk for committing violent crimes in the company of deviant friends (Maschi, 2006). Having a substance abusing parent may also predispose adolescents to select antisocial peers (Kirillova, Vanyukov, Kirisci, & Reynolds, 2008).

Biological variables may also predict affiliation with antisocial peers and subsequent delinquency. There is evidence that children and adolescents with certain genetic predispositions are more likely to
select antisocial peers, and more likely to be influenced by them (Beaver, Wright, & DeLisi, 2008). Specifically, adolescents with specific genetic profiles are more apt to use substances if they affiliate with substance using friends (Harden, Hill, Turkheimer, & Emery, 2008). Boys with elevated levels of testosterone, and who lack the neurocognitive abilities to regulate their behavior, may also be likely to engage in deviant activities with peers (Tarter et al., 2007). So antisocial peer selection may, to some extent, have a biological basis.

Conclusion

In this article, we have outlined the role of peer affiliations in delinquent and substance-using behavior during adolescence. We outlined two primary perspectives – peer homophily/selection and peer influences and – and outlined ways in which these explanations coexist and intersect with one another. We outlined ways in which genetic and neurobiological vulnerabilities, traumatic or severely negative environments in childhood, and rejection by peers can predispose adolescents to select deviant friends. Among adolescents for whom deviant behavior is more transient, family conflict and poor parental monitoring can permit youngsters to be influenced by antisocial peers. In any case, although friends are the strongest correlate of deviant behavior, processes in other domains – especially the family – can be mobilized to reduce the likelihood that adolescents will affiliate with antisocial friends. We hope that this review can inspire further work in the effects of peers on deviant behavior in adolescence, as well as the development and refinement of interventions to influence peer selection and affiliation in adolescence.

SEE ALSO: Families and crime, drugs and crime, juvenile delinquency
References


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KEY TERMS: Adolescence, peers, delinquent behavior, family, substance use.