

Friends, Lovers and Groups

Key Relationships in Adolescence

Edited by

Rutger C. M. E. Engels

Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University, The Netherlands

Margaret Kerr

Örebro University, Sweden

Håkan Stattin

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Introduction and Overview

Rutger C. M. E. Engels, Margaret Kerr, and Håkan Stattin

Few would disagree with the assertion that peers are important in adolescence. The literature on peer relationships is large, but for the most part, it is not extremely innovative. Recently, however, there have been some noteworthy advances in peer research, and in this volume we gather some of these innovative lines of research. This volume highlights four areas of peer research. One is the discovery of a 'deviancy training' mechanism of peer influence, in which antisocial pairs have been observed rewarding each other with approval for deviant or antisocial talk, and this has been linked to escalations in antisocial behavior. A second is the use of designs that capture both in-school and out-of-school peers in order to understand their relative influences on problem behavior. A third area of innovative research is the study of romantic partners as important peer relationships in adolescence. This is a newly emerging field of research with only a dozen or so studies published as of 2004, but many are now being presented at conferences and added to the literature in a seeming explosion of interest. A fourth area of innovative research is the application of behavioral genetic analytical techniques to understanding peer selection and peer and environmental influences on problem behavior. For each of these areas of innovative research, this volume contains contributions from the leading figures and comments and elaborations from other leading peer researchers.

DYNAMICS IN FRIENDSHIPS

Beginning with the study of the relative influence of peers on the development of problem behaviors: internalized problems such as depression and anxiety, and externalized problems such as delinquency and substance abuse, have dramatically changed from cross-sectional designs with adolescents themselves as single sources of information to sophisticated, prospective, multi-informant designs. These designs apparently permit us to draw conclusions from the complex reciprocal influence processes between friends. Most recent

prospective studies focus on the interplay between individual characteristics, such as initial behavioral states, the development of problem behaviors, or personality and relationship characteristics, such as time spent together or quality of relationships and how they impact on the development of friendships and individual adjustment. This is achieved by assessing these characteristics at multiple moments during adolescence. According to some scholars, observational designs are especially able to show how peers influence each other in real time. In other words, using longitudinal survey designs with substantial intervals between waves may not allow one to fully understand how young people affect one another. Observational designs in which dyads or groups are monitored in their real-time social interactions may help to show the processes through which peers influence each other's behavior and adjustment in the long term.

In their chapter, Dishion and Nelson address the issue of friendship dynamics by examining data from a longitudinal sample of boys. Their basic assumption is that deviancy training in friendship through talk about deviant activities, and lack of talk about normative behaviors, may result in patterns of deviant friendship processes, which will lead to engagement in deviant and delinquent behaviors over time, as well as affiliation with deviant peers. A sample of 206 boys was followed from age 9–10 to age 23–24. Besides interviews with the parents and children themselves, the authors invited these boys to come to the laboratory with the friend with whom they spent the most time, to engage in some tasks. These sessions, which mainly consisted of discussing free-time activities, were videotaped and coded. They used a method to code the topics of the conversations (e.g., drug talk, rule-breaking talk, prosocial talk), but more interestingly, also a coding system of the unfolding dynamics in interactions – both in terms of verbal and nonverbal positive and negative engagement – between the boys. In their analyses, they linked these adolescent social interaction processes to young adult positive and problematic development. Their main findings indicate that negative interactions – and getting involved in talk about deviant and rule-breaking behaviors are related to negative adjustment, such as engagement in deviant behavior later in life, whereas positive friendship dynamics are not at all linked with positive or negative adjustment outcomes many years later.

Influence between peers can be studied on the individual, dyadic, and group levels. After discussing some of the recent works on the significance of peer relations for positive and negative adjustment of adolescents, Mayeux and Cillessen elaborate on some unresolved issues. First, with respect to the assessment of peer influences, they distinguish the various ways peers can passively or deliberately coerce others into becoming engaged in deviant behaviors. The use of experimental designs, vignette studies, self-reports on peer influences, and comparisons of peer and self-reports will be discussed. Then, more insight has to be gained into the identities of the individuals most prone to be affected by peers and the identities of those who are most likely to affect others. As researchers, we sometimes overgeneralize the effects of peers and ignore individual differences in susceptibility to peer influences.

According to Mayeux and Cillessen, laboratory observational studies have the potential to uncover the more fundamental processes underlying peer influences, especially if combined with short and long-term behavioral and socio-cognitive outcomes. Experimental studies in which status and behavior of peers are manipulated may be helpful in more rigorously testing assumptions on directions and magnitudes of influences and the effects of moderating variables such as personality and sociometric status. In terms of a developmental perspective, the authors stress that processes occurring in the short-term, particularly when they are repeated and occur in different relationships, may not be so negative at first, but the effects might be delayed. As such, the effects on individual development could be prolonged. They argue that dynamic system approaches might help researchers understand how these friendship processes unfold over time.

Engels, Bot, Scholte, and Granic respond to the leading chapter by Dishion and Nelson by first elaborating on the problems associated with measuring peer influences using exclusively survey methods in longitudinal designs. In their contribution they focus on the specific issue of peer influences on adolescent substance use. They argue that examining the peer relationship dynamics concerning the use of substances such as cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs use should preferably be done in contexts in which substance use is actually taking place. So, when it comes to alcohol consumption, for example, a party, disco or pub should be the natural context of study. Observational studies on interactions between friends or within peer groups in naturalistic settings are fairly rare. Engels et al. report on the findings of research in their bar lab at the university campus in which they observed real-time social interactions in existing peer groups. They found robust evidence for the existence of direct and indirect peer influences. Furthermore, in response to the approach of Dishion and Nelson, who followed existing friendships, the issue of selective peer affiliation is discussed. This refers to the fact that similarities in behavioral patterns between friends, as well as reciprocal influence processes, may be the result of peers flocking together at first. In order to avoid this interpretational problem, Engels et al. suggest using experimental, observational designs with peers who are unacquainted when they meet in order to unravel the influence processes.

PEERS IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Research on how peers influence problematic adjustment in adolescence has been dominated by school-based surveys in which teenagers and their friends at school are included and followed over time. In most of these studies, the responses of young people are related to those of their classmates or other friends at school, assuming that by using this method, the vast majority of peer influences on adolescents are captured. This is quite a convenient way of assessing peer influences, and it might be accurate in childhood. However, in the teenage years this might not be the case. In most western societies, young

people spend time in various social environments besides school and home, such as clubs, sports, bars, discos, parties, friends' homes, and so on. This implies that asking adolescents solely about their friends at school might be too limited and might result in a distorted view of ongoing peer influences. This problem is underscored by research showing that: (a) out-of-school friends' behaviors over and above the behaviors of in-school friends explain a unique part of the variance in adolescent deviant behaviors, (b) many deviant behaviors predominantly occur in out-of-school contexts with a mix of peers, (c) not only close friends – who are mostly the focus of school-based surveys – but also other peers, such as siblings or romantic partners, may affect individual adolescents, and (d) when engaging in extracurricular activities such as unstructured neighborhood activities adolescents may come in contact with, and get affected by, older adolescents, who are normally not included in school-based research.

Kerr, Stattin and Kiesner employed a new approach to overcome some of the limitations of surveys conducted in school classrooms. They assessed all 10 to 18-year-old adolescents in a small, relatively closed community in central Sweden (population of approximately 36,000). In this whole-city design, adolescents were asked about their peers but were not restricted to only their classmates or even their friends at school, but were asked about peers in general, irrespective of whether they were siblings, close friends or romantic partners, or at the same school as the respondent. Further, the design created the opportunity to gather data from the peers themselves, so it was not necessary to rely on the perceptions of the respondents in terms of the behavior exhibited by the peers. Instead of asking friends to name their most important friends – which is the most common way of gathering data on peer relations – they asked adolescents to mention their Very Important Peers. Their findings showed for the first time that the people whom adolescents mention as their most important peers change substantially through the course of adolescence. In early adolescence, a classmate was most often mentioned as the most important peer, while late adolescents more often mentioned a romantic partner as their most important peer. Furthermore, they showed that the friendship groups in which adolescents engaged across contexts – school, home, clubs, sports, and so on – most strongly affected individual behavior, that is, more than friendships in school. In sum, Kerr, Stattin and Kiesner made a strong point that in order to study peer influences in adolescence, one should try to capture the complexity of relationships over social contexts.

To underscore the relevance of studying the links between peer relations and engagement in problem behaviors from a holistic approach, in which all kinds of peer relationships are acknowledged and included, Silbereisen and Titzmann stress that the most important finding of Kerr, Stattin and Kiesner's work is that depending on the phase in adolescence, different types of peers affect juvenile delinquency. Silbereisen and Titzmann, however, suggest that young people are constrained in their selection of peers with whom to affiliate. In a way, in a small city in central Sweden the possibilities for young people to

become engaged in a large variety of relationships are restricted, in contrast with adolescents growing up in metropolitan areas. Silbereisen and Tizmann raise the issues of assimilation and separation, especially relevant for immigrants. When young people reach the age and therefore the opportunity to enter new social contexts, do they want to maintain their own social roots – and therefore restrict the possibilities for all kinds of peer relationships – or do they look for new social contexts? The authors had analyzed data from a German study of immigrant youths, mainly from Russia and Kazakhstan, and reported that the number of intra-ethnic friends was positively related with delinquency. They also showed that if immigrants had relatively more friends from the local German population they were less likely to suffer from depression. As a result, the composition and size of the peer network were associated with adjustment, although in a more complex manner than expected. The concentration of intra-ethnic peers in the school and, to a lesser degree, in the neighborhood, played a moderating role. Concerning the research of Kerr et al., the authors stress that when immigrants are able to find friends in the local community, in school and out-of-school contexts they are more likely to integrate successfully and protect themselves against maladjustment. On the other hand, the authors also argue that there might be substantial constraints on the type of peer relationships individual youngsters can establish.

‘Understanding the Place of Place’ is the intriguing title of the chapter by Bukowski and Lisboa. They argue that, sometimes implicitly and at other times explicitly, place has its role in theories of development. Although theories have always acknowledged the environment in which individuals function, in empirical testing researchers often disregard the complexity of the various contexts in which young people function. Observing individuals in multiple social contexts should receive much attention from our methods and statistics analytic approaches. Moreover, the authors distinguish levels of analyses of the environment, focusing on very proximal ones, from the specific context in which a child is playing (e.g., school, home, kindergarten, friend’s home) to the more abstract one, such as the organization of environment (e.g., ecological system theory, Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bukowski and Lisboa, the work of Kerr et al. builds a bridge between the proximal multiple contexts adolescents operate in and the broader social systems Bronfenbrenner distinguishes, by aiming to include everyone of every context in their study. They emphasize the opportunities this kind of design provides to understand the changes and stability in influences of specific peers in the course of adolescence.

LOVERS IN ADOLESCENCE

The teenage years are characterized by considerable shifts in orientation from family to peers. Contrary to the childhood period, during teenage years adolescents spend much more time with their peers, and build longer-lasting,

stronger relationships with them. Further, characteristics of peer relationships, such as getting social support, sharing big and small life events, and establishing intimate bonds more strongly affect young people's adjustment in this period of life than in perhaps any other phase in life. Adolescence is also the period of life in which persons get experienced with new kinds of relationships such as romantic and sexual relationships. Young people can have hedonistic or social goals when they engage in romantic relationships – hedonistic, in the sense that the relationship provides them with sexual experiences, offers higher status in the peer group, and fulfils basic personal needs, or social in the sense that the relationship provides them with a safe haven in which they can give and receive warmth and support.

There is substantial evidence that romantic relationships become increasingly important for young people's functioning over time. When adolescents are asked who the most important person for them is, most late adolescents will mention their romantic partner. The support provided by romantic partners outweighs that of other peers and family members, especially in late adolescence. In a longitudinal study, Overbeek et al. (2005) showed that the quality of romantic relationships in adolescence affect adjustment in young adulthood, even more strongly than support provided by parents. All in all, this would recommend a strong line of international research on the development of intimate relationships in adolescence, and on the negative and positive effects of these relationships on adjustment of young people in the short and long term. Oddly enough, however, there has traditionally been rather limited attention paid to romantic peer relationships. Furthermore, despite all the positive features of romantic relationships, the vast majority of studies in this area have focused on the downsides of romantic and sexual relationships, such as teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, rape and violence in date contexts, and emotional problems following relationship break-ups.

Furman, Ho and Low took a different approach in their studies. They focused in their longitudinal research projects on the advantages as well as the disadvantages of romantic relationships. Furthermore, in doing so, they took a developmental perspective and tested whether the pros and cons of relationships depended on the timing and nature of dating. In their chapter they describe the findings of studies in which they followed 14 to 16-year-olds in their dating and sexual experiences over time. They were one of the first, who not only gathered data through questionnaires about relationship experiences and personal development, but also conducted observations of a series of interactions of these adolescents with close friends, mothers, and romantic partners (if they had one at the moment of administration). This of course offered not only multi-informant data on adolescents functioning in romantic relationships, but also provided the opportunity to look at the cross-relational continuity of behaviors. Concerning the quality of romantic relationships, Furman et al. distinguished support and negative interactions as key elements. They found that the impact of these elements on individual competence and engagement in risk behaviors became stronger with age. Moreover, the authors focused on the cognitive representations of the romantic relationship

(views), and found that primarily for late adolescents (compared with early and middle adolescents) and for girls, these representations were linked to individual adjustment. The authors further express the need to focus on sexual and romantic relationships starting from the assumption that they might not be two sides of the same coin. For instance, many youngsters have light sexual experiences with close friends. Finally, they stress that the timing of dating and sexual experiences strongly determine whether these experiences have positive or negative consequences, and ingenious designs are required in future studies to fully capture the micro-development of romantic relationships in adolescence.

In their contribution, Laursen and Mooney build upon the work of Furman and colleagues on the advantages and disadvantages of romantic relationships in terms of individual adjustment. They start from the assumption that whether romantic relationships are beneficial depends on the experiences of young people in previous kinds of social relationships, like those with parents and friends. They tested three theoretical perspectives. The first postulates that involvement in romantic relationships as such will affect the adolescent's development in a positive manner as it provides a context to learn new forms of socially desirable behaviors; the second postulates that adolescent outcomes are not affected by engagement in romantic relationships per se, but that this depends on the quality of this relationship; and the third assumes that whether romantic relationships function beneficially depends on how individuals operate in other social relationships. Their findings strongly support the last perspective in a way that, according to Laursen and Mooney, the effects of participation in and the quality of romantic relationships should be considered in the broader context of relationships which adolescents have. They finish by stressing that the impact of experiences in romantic relationships on mental well-being can be easily misinterpreted if romantic relationships are solely examined without paying attention to the network of social relationships in which romantic relationships are a part.

Baumeister and Blackhart offer three perspectives on sexual transitions and experiences in adolescence from a gender perspective. They start by addressing the topic of erotic plasticity, or the degree to which the sex drive is shaped by social, cultural and biological factors (Baumeister, 2000). Women experience stronger plasticity in sex drive than men. This suggests that when females enter the period of adolescence (and in the phases after) they experience greater changes and subsequently flexibility in their sexuality. Furthermore, the authors discuss evidence for the assumption that environmental influences, ranging from cultural norms in a broad sense to peer group norms in a narrow sense, affect female sexuality stronger than that of males. Moreover, the immediate context women are in more strongly influences their sexual responses (Baumeister, 2000). A second perspective Baumeister and Blackhart discuss is that men and women differ in their sex drives, and that this difference is already visible early in adolescence. These gender differences in sex drive may affect the attitudes of young people when they first enter romantic relationships. The third perspective deals with the theory of sexual

economics (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). This theory starts from the assumption that in most societies female sexuality is a valued resource and forms the basis for social exchange. The authors address empirical evidence for the existence and operating mechanisms beyond the sexual marketplace. Implications for understanding the development of the adolescent's sexual and romantic relationships are discussed.

GENES AND PEERS

In recent decades, substantial attention has been given to the relative effects of genes versus shared and unique environmental influences on children's and adolescents' development. Behavioral genetic research, in particular twin designs, has provided fascinating food for thought in terms of understanding the changes and stability in social and problematic development. Years ago, some scholars suggested that shared environmental influences, such as parental upbringing and sibling behaviors have little effect on a variety of outcomes in young people, such as personality, school performance, psychopathology, and social development. In addition, if parents do little to shape their offspring's behaviors, it is often assumed that peers will be the primary influences. This is underscored with evidence of studies showing that peer influences are strongly related to adolescent development (Petraitis et al., 1995). In the past decade, however, this opinion has substantially changed, as many finely grained longitudinal analyses showed that substantial variance in behavioral outcomes can be explained by environmental influences (Rutter, 2002). To give a simple example, there is now compelling evidence that the initiation of smoking and alcohol consumption cannot be explained very well by genetic factors, but substantially by shared environmental factors (e.g., Koopmans & Boomsma, 1996). Moreover, the most widely held assumption now is that, when it comes to behavioral outcomes in adolescence such as socio-emotional development and problem behaviors, theoretical models that include gene-environmental interactions are most helpful.

In the final chapter of this book, Rose reviews the influence of peers and parents on adolescent problem behavior and decides to focus on alcohol use as the primary behavioral outcome. He uses data from a Finnish longitudinal twin study to test his assumptions. Rose starts by clearly arguing that the onset age of drinking is primarily affected by environmental (familial) factors shared by twins and not by heritability. Concerning peer relationships, part of the environment siblings share is related to the peer relationships they have. Shared genes cannot explain resemblances in the behaviors of friends, as they grew up in different families; however, processes of selective affiliation and mutual influence may affect this resemblance. Indeed, there is evidence for the operation of both selection and influence processes. Rose, however, takes this type of research one step further by examining whether adolescents' genetic dispositions affect selective peer affiliation. In prospective research on Finnish 11 to 12-year-old twins and their classmate friends, there is apparent evidence