

The Effect of Age on Peer Influence in Late Adolescence

University ID

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The influence of peers on adolescents changes over time. In infancy and childhood, parents are commonly known to be major influences in almost every aspect of a child's development: physically, mentally, emotionally, academically, morally, etcetera [2,1]. As this individual ages and develops, however, sources of influence increase and extend outside the home as social circles expand [3].

As a result of particular interest in this subject [4], much research has been performed on the relationships between individuals and those who influence them. Wang, Peterson, and Morpheu [5] investigated the question of who influences adolescents more during early adolescence – parents or peers (friends). In their 2007 study, Wang et al. [6,1,2] questioned 135 seventh graders about their sources of influence in regard to numerous short-term and long-term developmental choices, such as music taste, clothing, educational success, and alcohol and drug use. Students responded to the 28 statements by way of a rated response scale – 1 meaning “strongly disagree” and 5 meaning “strongly agree” (Wang, Peterson, and Morpheu, 2007, p. 106) [7]. In response to a question of particular interest – whether participants would rather spend time with parents or peers – participants indicated a preference for spending time with parents more than peers (Wang et al., 2007, p. 107). After thorough analysis, Wang et al. decided that neither parental nor peer influence was shown to be universally dominant in the developmental choices assessed (Wang et al., 2007, p. 113). Results also supported the claim [2] that both parents and peers are equivalent sources of influence on early adolescents in regard to intimacy, particularly trust, confidentiality, and understanding (Wang et al., 2007, p. 113).

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While these research findings are extremely relevant to the amount of influence peers and parents have on adolescents, they do not examine the relationship between such influences and the age of the individual. The conclusion that parents and peers are generally equivalent influences in early adolescence poses another question: does this magnitude of such influence shift in late adolescence? Given these previous findings, we hypothesize that peer influence decreases as college students age [9].

Method

Participants

The 204 participants (51% women) were all undergraduate students at the University of Richmond in Richmond, VA. Participants were required to participate in the study to receive credit in the Introduction to Psychology course. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 23.

Procedure

Participants filled out on-line questionnaires via “SurveyMonkey” about the important people in their lives. The first two questions required participants to select their age and gender. The remainder of the questionnaire consisted of 20 specific statements about parental and peer influences on the participant. These statements examined the participants’ willingness to spend time with parents and peers (“I would rather spend time with my friends than my parents”), personal choices (“If my parents did not like my clothes, I would wear something different”), academic and career goals (“I care what my friends think about my career goals and plans”), and intimacy with parents and peers (“I can talk to my parents about any problem”). Participants responded to each statement by rating their agreement/disagreement with the statement on a scale: 1 indicated “strongly

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disagree” and 5 indicated “strongly agree.” Upon completion, participants submitted the questionnaire on-line.

Results

Given the time constraints of our research, we chose one sample item from the survey to use as an operational definition of peer influence (“I would rather spend time with my friends than my parents”). To examine the possible relationship between age and willingness to spend time with peers over parents, a one-tailed bivariate correlational analysis was run using SPSS. Figure 1 presents the results of this test. Although participants’ preference to spend time with friends over parents did decrease with age, this trend was not significant ($r = -0.60, p = .198$).

Discussion

The results did not support the hypothesis that as an adolescent ages, the individual becomes less heavily influenced by peers [10]. The correlation between age and levels of influence does not imply causation.

The results in this study do support the findings of previous studies, including those of Wang et al. (2007), in regard to the strength of parental influence. {Just as Wang et al. indicated an unexpectedly large amount of parental influence on early adolescents (Wang et al. predicted peer influence would dominate all developmental choices), Wang et al.’s prediction and inconclusive findings [12] about the increased importance of parental influence (and inversely the decreased importance of peer influence) on early adolescents in regard to long-term developmental choices are supported by our results;}

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[11,3] the participants preference to spend time with friends over parents decreased with age (Wang et al., 2007, p. 99). Although the results of this study did not directly support our hypothesis, it does indicate that there may be an important connection between late adolescence and decreased peer influence, {which could lead to an inverse association between late adolescence and increased parental influence.}[13] {Sources of influence may not extend outside the home and into social circles as far as previously thought.} [14]

Many limitations hindered the complete success of the study. Parental influence was an integral aspect of the study, yet participants were not even asked about the presence and/or involvement of parents in their lives. Even if one or both parents were present, parenting styles could play a huge role in assessing the significance of parental influence. Because participants were not asked about their ethnicity, cross-cultural differences cannot be investigated in whether or not such cultural differences regarding parenting account for some of the results produced. The specific age range (18-23) also proposes a few limitations. Because the majority of the participants were in the process of transitioning from high school to college, separation from parental figures and increased exposure to peers on campus could alter the results; conclusions may not apply to individuals of 16-18 years, which can still be considered late adolescence.

Additionally, all the participants chosen for this study were attending a prestigious college; experiments involving late adolescents who chose not to attend college may produce different results. The association in this study may have occurred for a variety of reasons, including participants' bias or affected response due to a particular, recent experience in their transition from high school to college [4]. Selection of participants who more accurately represent the category "late adolescents" and investigation of

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participants' ethnic and personal backgrounds can eliminate these limitations, allowing for a more efficient and reliable study.

The findings of this particular study provoke further experiments on parental/peer influences in adolescence. Numerous variables can be manipulated to more thoroughly examine these influential relationships. Gender differences may play a significant role in the influence peers and parents have on late adolescents. It would be interesting to see whether females or males are more likely to prefer parental input. While this experiment attempted to assess general influences, further research could benefit from focusing on one aspect of parental or peer influence, such as the influence parents have on individuals in regard to substance use. Previous research studies by Wang concluded that parents had a strong influence on an individual's alcohol, cigarette, and illegal drug use; case studies on past parental involvement in the lives of substance abuse victims could further support these findings (Wang et al., 2007, p. 112). Finally, further research on all three stages of adolescence (or middle adolescence in particular) could offer a more complete picture of the changes in parental and peer influence on individuals longitudinally.

The implications of the results found in this experiment extend beyond academia and into the real world. The finding that the influence of peers on late adolescents decreased over time should be further investigated and, if supported, could be generalized, within reason, and applied to current social issues, such as peer pressure. By acknowledging that peer influence declines in the long-run, adolescents may become less likely to succumb to peer pressure, which often results [15] in self-criticism, embarrassment, shame, and ostracism, and sometimes leads to violence, self-mutilation, and suicide. In addition, the strength of parental influence indicated by the majority of

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research literature in this subject can be used to encourage parental involvement in adolescents' lives. Despite the common presumption that teenagers in general do not value the opinion nor the approval of their parents, these findings support the theory that parental involvement is crucial in this period of an individual's growth [16].

[Graph not included] [5,4]

References

Wang, A., Peterson, G. W., & Morphey, L. K. (2007). Who is more important for early adolescents' developmental choices? Peers or parents? *Marriage and Family Review, 42*, 95-122. D.O.I: 10.1300/J002v42n02_06.

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I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

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