Peer Pressure and Resilience in Young People

Lorraine Hirst

Definition of Peer Pressure

Wikipedia:

- Peer pressure is the influence exerted by a peer group or an individual, encouraging other individuals to change their attitudes, values, or behaviors in order to conform to group norms.

- Social groups affected include membership groups, in which individuals are "formally" members (such as political parties and trade unions), or social cliques in which membership is not clearly defined.

- There is a choice – we can choose to be involved in a group or not...

Links to Resilience

Co-founder and Program Director of the Center for Learning Connections, Dr. Cal Crow identified several additional attributes that are common in resilient people:

- Resilient people have a **positive image of the future**. That is, they maintain a positive outlook, and envision brighter days ahead.

- Resilient people have **solid goals**, and a desire to **achieve those goals**.

- Resilient people are **empathetic and compassionate**, however, they don't waste time worrying what others think of them**. They maintain healthy relationships, but don't bow to peer pressure.**

- **Resilient people do not think of themselves as victims** - they focus their time and energy on changing the things that they have control over.

What's all the fuss about?

- Some researchers say that 'social acceptance provides more overall protective factors than risk factors'

- *Discuss in groups...*

Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney (2005). The two faces of adolescents' success with peers. Adolescent popularity, social adaptation, and deviant behavior. *Child Development, 76*, 757-760.

Implications of negative peer pressure

- Victimization and bullying
- Anti-Social Behaviour
- Substance/alcohol misuse and smoking
- Poor educational outcomes
- Crime and gang culture
- Suicide and self-harm?
- Over-sexualisation, STDs and teenage pregnancy
- Other?

How peer pressure can be examined

- Research into peer pressure/ peer influence is written about from the following perspectives:

Psychodynamic - **Social learning** - **Systemic**
(internal process) *(social beings/ (context)*
modeled behaviour)

- More recently neuroscience and neuropsychology have come to the fore...

The teenage brain

- Pre-frontal cortex which controls **impulsivity** as well as **planning and prioritizing** is involved.
- Increased attentiveness to **social rewards and pleasure.**
- Teens brains are not fully developed until around the age of 25 or so.
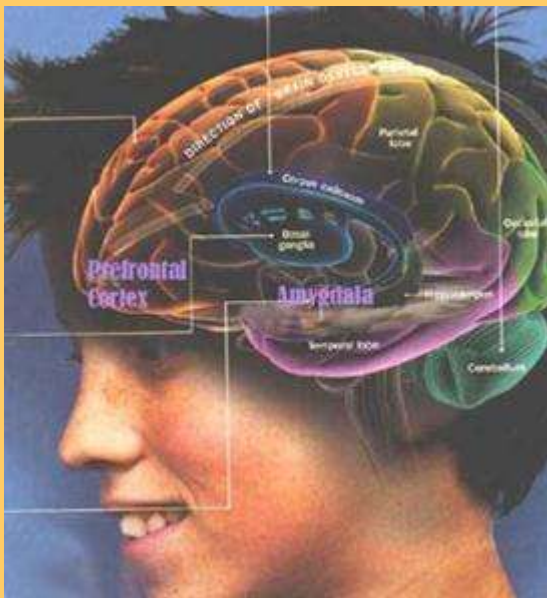
✿ Making choices on a social and personal level are affected.

✿ Sensation seeking behaviours and experimentation.

✿ Teens cannot handle peer pressure as well as adults.

Additional brain theory

Prof Jennifer Pfeifer, University of Oregon, 2011:

- Pre-teens brains are developing skills to resist risky behaviour

- Children aged 10, and then at aged 13, filled out surveys about ability to resist peer pressure a

- fMRIs found increase in activity in ventral Striatumin (linked to emotions and motivation) deep in the brain over 3 year period

N.B. Small sample size

(Builds on work carried out by Tomáš Paus at the University of Nottingham, 2007)

The Driving Game

Researchers at Temple University, Philadelphia:

- Teenagers, college students and adults to play a driving video game whilst in a scanner (MRI)

- No difference in risk taking, whether friends were watching or not

- N.B. Teenagers ran **???** more yellow lights and had **???** more crashes when they knew their friends were watching

Driving Game – Part 2

- Teenagers ran **40%** more yellow lights and had **60%** more crashes when they knew their friends were watching

- Brain regions associated with reward also showed greater activity at the time

- Teens were responding to 'perceived' peer pressure! (I.e. No one was actually watching..!)

Social Learning Theories

'A person's behaviour, environment, and personal qualities all reciprocally influence each other' - Albert Bandura

- Known for his early 1960's experiments using an inflatable clown, 'Bobo'

- We learn by modelling behaviours

- N.B. Later study showed that when the model was witnessed being punished, aggressive 'copying' behaviour decreased

Maybe TV is not so bad after all?

- Feshbach and R.D. Singer believed that television actually decreases the amount of violence in children.

- Juvenile boys that viewed the non-violent shows were more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior than the juvenile boys that witnessed the violent shows.

- They think individuals learn criminal behaviour in adolescence from family members and peers.

'If Your Friends Jumped Off of a Bridge, Would You Do It Too?'

Delinquent Peers and Susceptibility to Peer Influence, 2009:

- *'Association with delinquent peer groups is one of the most salient predictors of delinquent behavior.'*

- Study of Mexican-American adolescents, exploring the interaction between susceptibility to peer influence (individual) and association with delinquent peers (external influence).

- Delinquent peer effect is amplified when the adolescent is more susceptible to peer influence.

Criminal Justice research - Holly Ventura Miller

Conforming to community norms

- Shoveller et al. (2004) Canadian study:

- Young people aged 18–24 years described a need to conform to their community's sexual norms – to avoid being 'ostracized' by their families and peers and in an attempt to 'fit in'.

- Not about views of any friendship groups

Religion as protective factor

- 220 high school students were surveyed on several dimensions:
  - different forms of peer influence (i.e., peer conformity and perceptions of peer behaviours) and
  - their own pro- and anti-social conduct.
- Some religiosity dimensions (i.e., the Bible and social justice) were found to be more protective than others in predicting conduct in the context of peer conformity.

From: Can religious beliefs combat negative peer influence during adolescence? From: Mental Health Religion and Culture – Leslie Grier & Wendy Gudiel, 2011

Options for intervention

- Do we need to focus mainly on the susceptibility of some vulnerable young people?

  (i.e. boost their internal resilience)

  OR…

- Do we need to work on peer-led interventions, or 'whole system' approaches, such as school-wide projects or community interventions?

  (i.e. boost external forms of resilience)

- *Discuss in groups…*

Protective factors in school

- Bonnie Benard, of the University of Minnesota's National Resilience Resource Centre writes:

- **Peer programmes** that encourage children to work together and cooperate in their learning is the single most effective strategy a school can use to reduce alcohol and drug use among pupils.

- Schools that **provide opportunities for pupils to develop caring relationships** with each other, and with teachers, are filling a vital gap for those pupils who don't get these things at home.

What can parents or care-givers do?

On a very practical one-to-one level:

- Avoid angry confrontations – stay calm

- Find a good time to talk

- Listen and wait for the hidden message

- Empathise with the desire to be similar to or be liked by your friends

- Provide access to other adults (teacher, nurse, coach)

What is Peer Support:

"**Peer support** occurs when people provide knowledge, experience, emotional, social or practical help to each other."

 - Wikipedia

How can Peer Support help?

❖Enabling and empowering approach

❖Building self-esteem

❖Building emotional well-being and resilience

❖Reducing barriers to learning

❖Can be linked to other projects and family/ community support

What else can help? 1

- A 'life skills-based' curriculum, in and out of school, can enable young people to 'challenge harmful gender norms, resist peer pressure and critically assess mass media stereotypes'.
  - United Nations Population Fund

- Media campaigns targeting young people:

- E.g. 'Should I let my friends control my sex life?' Teenage Pregnancy Unit-funded campaign

- 'Talk to Frank' drug awareness showing teens dealing with peer pressure

- Solving Problems Together - Psychoeducational Group Counseling Model – based in schools

What else can help? 2

- Peer Education? – In one study peer education changed the peer sexuality educators own self-esteem, personal development and sexual behaviour

- Peer contracting - as a response to potential suicide in adolescents

- Online peer support

- *What else..? Discussion in groups*

Lessons/ conclusions

- We cannot under-estimate the effect of peer influence on resiliency

- Brain research has a lot to offer but does not explain all phenomenon in relation to peer pressure

- Some of what we are talking about is a natural 'right of passage' for teenagers

- Early years and healthy attachment is very important, as is good parenting, pastoral support and peer support in the teen years

- Not all pressure is necessarily negative

- Need to look at ways in which positive aspects of peer influences may flourish and could be integrated into work with young people

Reinforcing the "natural (positive) social bonds between young and old, between siblings, between friends that give meaning to one's life and a reason for commitment and caring. To neglect these bonds is to risk the survival of a culture"

 - Werner and Smith, 1982