CHAPTER 1

Current Issues in Peer Influence Research

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Perhaps one of the most consistent findings revealed in the social science literature pertains to the remarkably potent effects of peer influence. Indeed, developmental psychopathologists interested in identifying the developmental precursors to adolescents' health risk or aggressive behaviors, social psychologists aimed toward understanding the sources of influence on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, sociologists exploring whether individuals' attitudes may be nested within the attitudes of a larger group, and marketing researchers examining how popular ideas or behavioral practices enter the cultural zeitgeist of youth all have arrived upon a similar, and deceptively simple finding: There is a remarkably strong association between youths' behaviors and the behaviors of their peers.

This volume examines current theoretical and empirical evidence to understand the breadth of peer influence effects, as well as the mechanisms and moderators that may be targeted by prevention efforts to reduce susceptibility to peer influence. In this Introduction, we offer a brief summary of several pressing issues that has attracted recent attention of investigators in the field.

HOMOPHILY

Studies of peer influence effects, or of social processes that may facilitate them, have been ongoing for quite some time. A half-century ago, sociol-

ogists noted that social contact occurs at a higher rate among similar individuals than among dissimilar individuals, a phenomenon known as "homophily" (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). A similar phenomenon has been identified by psychologists studying the behavior of adolescents in groups called "cliques" (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988; Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). Desehields and Kara (2000), in their studies of peer influence in marketing, noted that the study of homophily in sociology paralleled the study of homogamy (similarity in marriage) in classical anthropology.

The two most prominent explanations for homophily are selection and socialization. *Selection effects* refer to the tendency of youth to affiliate with peers who exhibit similar attitudes or behaviors as themselves. This explanation has been heralded by Kandel (1978). It does not presume that individuals influence each other; rather, similar individuals are simply attracted to each other, an idea captured by the saying, "Birds of a feather flock together." Long ago, Plato (1968) wrote in his work *Phaedrus* that "similarity begets friendship" (p. 837). *Socialization effects* refer to the process by which youths' behavior may be affected by their affiliation with other peers. This explanation posits that initial dissimilarity among affiliates will grow into similarity over time through peer influence.

Since homophily theories were introduced, several hundred empirical investigations have examined processes of selection and/or socialization among different populations of youth, with respect to a wide variety of attitudes and behaviors. Although some equivocal findings have emerged, there now is fairly consistent evidence supporting selection and socialization effects for a wide variety of behaviors, including delinquency (Thornberry & Krohn, 1997); violence (Elliott & Menard, 1996); covert antisocial behavior (Keenan, Loeber, Zhang, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1995); early and high-risk sexual behavior (Dishion, 2000); substance use behaviors, including use of alcohol (Bosari & Carey, 2001), marijuana and "hard" drugs (Andrews, Tildesley, Hops, & Li, 2002; Dishion & Skaggs, 2000); weight-related behaviors (Christakis & Fowler, 2007; Paxton, Schutz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999), self-injurious and suicidal behavior (Brent et al., 1993; Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001), as well as internalizing symptoms, such as depression (Prinstein, 2007; Stevens & Prinstein, 2005). Recent evidence also has suggested similar selection and/or socialization effects for prosocial behaviors (e.g., volunteer work, academic activities, altruism), as well as health-promotive behaviors, such as exercise and fitness-related behaviors (Barry & Wentzel, 2006; Rancourt & Prinstein, 2006).

Over the past decade, studies have emerged to indicate that socialization effects reflecting peer influence also operate in intervention

groups that bring together similar deviant youth for the purpose of treatment (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). Harmful effects of being placed with deviant peers have been shown in juvenile justice (Lipsey, 2006), mental health (Dodge & Sherrill, 2006), education (Reinke & Walker, 2006), and after-school (Lansford, 2006) settings. These studies are methodologically powerful in demonstrating peer influence because of the random assignment of youth to peer groups. Furthermore, these studies highlight the fact that placement of a deviant youth with other deviant youth is the most common intervention in public policy toward these youth (Dodge, Lansford, & Dishion, 2006), costing more than $10 billion annually in the United States alone. The questions of whether peer influences operate to enhance social competence or exacerbate deviance, how homophily emerges, and the processes that catalyze selection and socialization effects are crucial ones for social science theory, clinical practice, and public policy.

GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE

Past work has offered a tremendous contribution by demonstrating the wide impact of peer influence effects on a variety of outcomes. Still, substantial work is required to understand selection and socialization phenomena more fully. For example, remarkably little is known regarding basic descriptive aspects of peer influence effects, including the behaviors that may be most salient for friendship selection, or most susceptible to socialization effects. More work is needed regarding developmental issues that may predispose youth to peer influence or the extent to which socialization effects endure over time. The bidirectional nature, or reciprocity, of peer influence effects between youth and their peers also has remained relatively underexplored, despite general acknowledgement that selection and socialization effects are due to sophisticated transactions between youth and multiple contextual factors.

Some gaps in prior work may be due, in part, to the lack of a consistent methodology in studies of peer influence. Perhaps most frequently noted within the literature is an overreliance on cross-sectional designs that severely limit the ability to distinguish selection and socialization effects. In addition, prior research has varied considerably, particularly across social science disciplines, in the manner in which "peers" are operationalized. In much research, *peers* refer to youths' best and closest friends. Typically, studies have examined a single dyadic relationship, or occasionally, multiple close friends identified by youth themselves. However, in other work, "peers" include interaction-based cliques of youth

based on reciprocal nominations, members of the broader peer context who do not share a dyadic relationship with the target adolescent, members of reputation-based peer crowds (e.g., athletically oriented "jocks"; academically oriented "brains"; deviant "burnouts," etc.), or an undefined reference group of "peers" (i.e., others).

When examining selection or socialization effects, past research also has differed meaningfully in the assessment of youths' and their peers' behavior. In some work, youth are asked to report their own behavior as well as the behavior of their peers. This approach captures youths' perceptions of their peers' behavior, and shared method variance should be considered when interpreting the magnitude of selection or socialization effects. In other work, separate informants (e.g., youth and peers themselves) are asked to report their frequency of a relevant behavior, and associations between these independent reports are used as evidence of peer influence.

Information regarding the descriptive characteristics of peer influence, and methodological uniformity in the study of peer influence effects, will offer needed contributions from a basic science perspective. Ultimately, this information will prove useful for the development of prevention and intervention programs designed to mitigate the effects of peer influence on maladaptive behavior, or possibly to promote peer effects on healthful behavior. To date, an obvious strategy to reduce deleterious effects of peer influence has involved attempts to discourage potentially harmful friendship affiliations or to disaggregate groups of deviant peers. In the gang prevention domain, such attempts have been extremely difficult, with little evidence of positive effects based on an overall review (Klein, 2006) and occasional evidence that attempts to disrupt gang influence can actually amplify crime (Klein, 1995). Indeed, adolescents in particular may be sharply resistant toward attempts to modify their peer preferences and friendship choices, and attempts to do so can sometimes strengthen ties with their original choices.

FILLING THE GAPS

Fortunately, rigorous research on peer influence from diverse disciplines has proliferated in the past decade. This volume is organized around three research questions addressing the processes and mechanisms that apparently drive selection and socialization effects, factors that moderate, buffer, or exacerbate peer influences, and contexts in which the possibility of homophily effects has been underexplored. These are themes that may provide directions for more efficacious prevention and intervention strategies.

Peer Influence Mechanisms

The first section of this volume specifically examines mechanisms of peer influence. Multiple theories have been offered in the past to understand how and why youth emulate the behavior of their peers. For example, past research has suggested that youths may emulate the deviant behaviors of their closest friends following friends' verbal or nonverbal reinforcement of deviant utterances, a process known as deviancy training (Dishion, Poulin, & Burraston, 2001). Other theories suggest that conformity may be due to youths' interpretations of social norms. Conformity thus is due to a specific desire to be aligned with an admired group of peers, to help distance one's identity away from undesired peers, to adhere to presumed frequencies of behavior within a relevant reference group, or may be subsequent to the adoption of beliefs that are presumed to underlie the observed behaviors of others. Still other theories have suggested that peer affiliation enhances labeling by the self and others, which leads to self-fulfilling prophecies in behavior (Dishion & Dodge, 2006).

It may be that intervention efforts can provide an alternate avenue for addressing the underlying functions of peer influence, thereby reducing the drive to conform to peers. For example, social norms or identity-based theories of peer influence suggest that identity enhancement interventions may obviate the need youth to conform to their peers.

In this volume, Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, and Mahon (Chapter 2) provide a succinct history of research on peer influence, from Asch's (1951) laboratory studies of conformity through recent field studies of influence in real-world settings (Deković, Wissink, & Meijer, 2004). They then propose a comprehensive transactional model of peer influence that emphasizes life events and contexts that trigger influence in adolescence.

Gibbons, Pomery, and Gerrard (Chapter 3) examine social-cognitive mediators of peer influence effects. These investigators' work on the prototype-willingness model suggests that individuals' beliefs of others' engagement in behaviors, and individuals' perceptions of the rewards that may be associated with these behaviors, can contribute to the motivation to conform (Bandura, 1973; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Fisher & Fisher, 1992). Specifically, motivations to engage in risk behavior may be especially high if the norms in question are associated with high-status or popular groups (Gerrard et al., 2002; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1997; Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 1998). In other words, individuals are likely to emulate not behaviors that match any social norms but specifically those behaviors that are associated with a group that individuals wish to join because of its social prestige.

Dishion, Piehler, and Myers (Chapter 4) expand on deviancy training models by offering and testing three new social interactional hypotheses of possible mechanisms: social augmentation, arrested socialization, and intrasubjectivity. Social augmentation suggests that deviant peer affiliation is a normal response to atypical family and school experiences. The arrested socialization hypothesis suggests that deviant peer affiliation impedes the development of specific skills that might have increased resistance to peer influence. Interactions within a deviant peer context may offer intrinsic reinforcement of deviant attitudes, values, and engagement in behaviors (i.e., intrasubjectivity hypothesis).

Finally, Blanton and Burkley (Chapter 5) propose deviance regulation theory to explain the apparent reinforcing effect of deviant behavior on oneself and one's peers. These authors argue that adolescents in particular struggle to establish an identity that conforms to the values of peers, but simultaneously differentiates from peers enough to maintain uniqueness. The deviance regulation theory suggests that the desire to establish and maintain a positive self-image primarily will dictate individuals' decisions either to conform to, or create distance from, "normative" attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, social norms are most relevant for influencing behavior if they are created or evaluated by a salient reference group. Thus, if a salient reference group conveys social norms regarding behaviors that are important to that groups' (or its members') identity, then individuals may feel intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to conform to these norms.

Altering Peer Influence Effects: Moderators and Interventions

The second theme of this volume pertains to the examination of factors that may alter youths' susceptibility to peer selection and socialization effects. These chapters include reviews for basic science research investigating factors that are associated with differences in peer influence susceptibility, as well as reviews of applied work that have attempted to manipulate the mechanisms that are thought to underlie peer influence effects.

Basic science research examining moderators of peer influence remain relatively rare, yet extant work has suggested many possible factors that increase susceptibility/resistance to peer influence. For example, past research has suggested that specific characteristics of youth (e.g., demographics, psychological symptoms, peer status), characteristics of peer influence prototypes (i.e., influencers), or variables that characterize the nature of the relationship between target youth and prototypes all may be relevant for changing the potency of peer influence effects. In sum, past results have suggested that susceptibility to peer influence may be due to two central factors. First, youth who are most likely to con-

form to peers include those who have some uncertainty regarding their self-concept or social identity (sometimes manifested as social anxiety, low self-esteem, etc.—Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Prinstein, 2007). Uncertainty may be heightened especially during times of transition, including school transitions or opportunities for behavioral experimentation (e.g., transitioning from an experimenter to regular user of substances). Second, peer conformity appears to be especially likely when youth are in the presence of another who is of higher perceived status. This may be because the presence of a higher status peer promotes uncertainty or dissatisfaction regarding one's own status, or perhaps due to the perceived social rewards that are thought to be associated with emulation and affiliation to high-status peers.

Bukowski, Velasquez, and Brendgen (Chapter 6) offer a theory of peer influence moderators that is framed in terms of disequilibrium or discrepancy with regard to the self. They propose moderators at each of multiple levels of a complex social system. At the individual level, the desire for friendship and low self-esteem enhance susceptibility to peer influence effects. At the social group level, reinforcement and support provided by specific types of peers enhance influence. Finally, they propose that the strength of peer influence might vary as a function of characteristics of the culture.

Several prevention and intervention avenues also have been explored in attempts to modify peer influence processes. Allen and Antonishak (Chapter 7) propose that under some circumstances peer influence, and the susceptibility to being influenced by peers, may not be such a bad thing after all, especially during adolescence. They tie peer influence to attachment theory and argue that being socialized means being ready to be influenced by others as one navigates the social world. Allen and Antonishak argue that the best way to modify peer influence effects may be to change the values that adolescents communicate with one another. A recent outreach program developed by these authors offers preliminary evidence to support this principle.

Prentice (Chapter 8) reviews social norm and pluralistic ignorance theories, and how applications of these theories have been used to modify alcohol usage, particularly on college campuses. This research has involved attempts to change peer norms, to benevolently exploit peer infuence processes; the use of individualized, personal feedback regarding relevant social norms; as well as strategies that attempt to correct false assumptions regarding the motives that underlie others' engagement in risk behaviors.

Berger (Chapter 9) casts influence in terms of identity signaling. His work suggests that individuals will conform to specific values, or engage in particular behaviors so long as the behavior is uniquely associated with an identity that they wish to project. As the behavior is adopted by

other groups, it loses its meaning as a signal of a desired identity. If the behavior is later adopted by those with an undesirable image, it will quickly be abandoned by those who initiated the behavior.

Peer Contexts

The final section of this volume pertains to the multiple peer contexts in which peer influence has been observed to occur. Evidence from past research suggests that youth likely are exposed to multiple messages regarding potential engagement in adaptive or maladaptive behaviors. These messages, communicated by friends, school peers, neighborhood peers, or romantic partners, for example, may be concordant or perhaps conflicting. Research understanding which peer contexts are most influential in affecting youths' behavior, or the processes by which youth may resolve conflicting messages, may offer an important opportunity for interventions. It may be that prevention or intervention messages can be framed in an effective manner by replicating these natural decision-making processes.

Furman and Simon (Chapter 10) suggest that in addition to the friendship context, peer influence may occur among adolescent romantic partners. They also emphasize contextual factors that trigger influence, such as the role that a romantic partner plays in social support for an adolescent.

Juvonen and Galván (Chapter 11) examine peer influence in another context, that of bullying and victim relationships in youth. They propose that influence effects can be interpreted in terms of social structure, norms, and personal motives.

CONCLUSION

This volume offers a summary of research from leading investigators examining peer influence mechanisms, moderators, and contexts. We hope that this volume will help to encourage additional research on peer influence, multidisciplinary investigations, and an enhanced understanding of these powerful phenomena. The implications of this work are substantial and can have potentially wide-reaching effects of policy.

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