Adolescent Identity and Delinquency in Interpersonal Context

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ABSTRACT: The relationship between delinquent involvement and the perceived importance of a variety of others in influencing, creating, and sustaining identity was explored in four subsamples (n = 238) of teens of varying levels of official delinquency. More delinquent teens were more likely to view conventional peers, delinquent peers and lifestyles, or no one at all as influencing their sense of self and identity. They were less likely to perceive parents and other adults as influential.

KEY WORDS: Delinquency; adolescent identity; social influence.

Current approaches to adolescence share a common premise that a central developmental task of this period is the creation of a sense of self which will provide a bridge into the adult world[1,2,3]. Virtually all important theories of the self[2,4,5,6,7,8,9] have posited that one's self or identity is a social construct requiring the active and ongoing participation of others[10,11,12,13,14]. Similarly, the notion that identity creation is a social task which can be influenced critically by the responses of others in one's social environment is integral to much theorizing on deviance and delinquency[15,16,17,18,19,20].

Traditionally, adolescence has been seen as a time during which the influence of parents wanes and the influence of peers and the peer group increases[14,21,22]. However, there is evidence that the influence of parents remains important during adolescence[22,23]. Parental influence is sometimes viewed as particularly important in deterring the onset of deviant behavior and in influencing the adolescent's long term plans or goals[24]. Further, although an increase in the impact of peers

is sometimes viewed as normative and developmentally appropriate[25], involvement in peer culture and attachment to peers is also viewed as potentially criminogenic[24,26,27,28,29,30]. It is not clear whether delinquents are more or less influenced by peers than are nondelinquents. Thus, a recent study found no difference in extent of identity support received from peers by delinquent and nondelinquent youth[31]. Although differences have been found in the extent that delinquent and nondelinquent youth feel supported by their parents[32], some findings[29] suggest that parent variables may be less closely related to delinquent involvement than characteristics of the adolescents' friendships.

While peers may be supportive and reinforcing, without the input of adults, adolescents may be less equipped to delineate a sense of themselves as the adults-they-will-become which is both plausible and personally satisfying. Fellow teens cannot provide the link into the future that adults can. Studies to date are inconclusive about the extent to which youth who vary in their extent of delinquent involvement differ in their perceptions of the impact of adults as compared with peers on their sense of who they are now and may be in the future. This information is important if we are to develop intervention efforts relevant to the life experiences of teens. Therefore the present study explores the influence of others on identity in four subgroups of adolescents who vary in their degree of delinquency (ranging from public school teens to institutionalized delinquents).

Methods

Design of the Study

A total of 238 teens between 13 and 16 years of age, drawn from four subsamples distinguished by their degree of officially known delinquency (public school teens, community placed delinquent teens, group home teens, and training school teens) were interviewed. Recent reviews of diversion programs show that youth placed in community placement programs such as the one in this study, are likely to be involved in less frequent and/or less severe delinquent activities than youth confined in more restrictive settings[33]. Similarly, a recent review of community based interventions for delinquent youth, suggests that the vast majority of group home programs self-define as serving less severely delinquent youth than those in closed, training school facilities[34]. Thus, the four subsamples could be said to form an ordered scale of average severity or intensity of delinquent activities, with public school teens being the officially nondelinquent teens, and training school teens being the most delinquent teens. An effort was made to reduce possible socioeconomic differences among groups by sampling public schools within inner city areas

and sampling delinquency programs into which teens from these schools would be placed when officially processed for delinquent behavior. By controlling for the region from which teens in all four groups were drawn, the impact of socioeconomic status and race on processing for delinquent activities was limited. Further, because all teens came from the same region, they were likely to have been processed through the same area judicial frameworks. Thus any biases inherent in the juvenile criminal system should be uniform across groups.

Teens were interviewed individually with second interviews conducted with public school youth three months later in order to collect self-report delinquency data as well as information on the perceived importance of relationships with parents, teachers, and friends. Because delinquency data was to be collected, some of the public schools did not grant permission for second interviews, thus 85 of the 108 youth from the public schools were reinterviewed. Youth from the officially delinquent subsamples could not be reinterviewed as a condition of entry into these programs was that interviewing would be completely anonymous with no identifying information about these youth retained, making it impossible to link interviews.

Sample

The total sample included 141 males and 97 females, of which 175 were black, and 63 were white, reflecting the racial distribution of the city. Teens' grade level ranged from 6th to 12th, with 11 of the teens taking General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) courses rather than being placed in a conventional grade level. Average grade level was ninth grade, and over 60 percent of the students were in grades eight to ten; average age was 14.9. The four subsamples, to be described below, did not differ significantly by age or grade in school.

Public School. Teens attending seven inner city Detroit schools (n = 108, mean age = 14.3, mean grade in school = 9.2) formed the officially nondelinquent group. These inner city schools were selected because records from the programs from which the three remaining subsamples were drawn showed a high proportion of their clientele came from these schools.

Community Placement Programs. Teens attending area schools of observation, alternative and public schools in connection with a delinquency intervention program (n = 40, mean age = 14.9, mean grade in school = 8.4) formed the group with the lowest level of official involvement in delinquency. These teens had been officially processed to the least degree in that all were still living in their home environment. The community placement program, viewed as an alternative to traditional probation, provided teens with intensive supervision. Schools of observation are set up to be similar to conventional public schools; however, teens in these schools are picked up and brought to school in the morning (to reduce truancy) and are closely monitored throughout the day. The schools receive teens who have been expelled from other schools due to uncontrollable behavior in school—fighting with students and staff, chronic truancy, and minor delinquent activities.

Group Homes for Delinquents. Teens living in group homes formed the third group, the group with a moderate level of officially known delinquency (n = 31, mean age = 15.2, mean grade in school = 9.6). All of the group homes were semiautonomously run on a daily basis but were under a single central administration. Group home placement is normally sought after probation, community based intervention and alternative school programs have been tried or if the teen has been involved with a variety of delinquent activities that are frequent enough to warrant further intervention but not so frequent or so severe as to warrant training school processing.

The State Training School. Teens living in the institution of last resort for juvenile delinquent males in the state (n = 59, mean age = 15.6, mean grade in school for teens not in General Equivalency Diploma courses = 9.5) formed the fourth group, the group with the highest official involvement in delinquency. The average stay here is 13.8 months. Teens are typically placed in this institution after all other alternatives such as alternative school and delinquency intervention programs, or group homes, have failed or if the other, less restrictive alternatives are viewed as inappropriate due to the danger of the teens' delinquent activities.

Sampling Procedure

A random sample of teens (10 - 20 from each school), male, and female, from 13 - 16 years of age, was selected from each participating school in the nondelinquent subsample. School principals sent cover letters and consent forms (signed by the researcher and co-signed by the school or program) to the homes of the randomly selected teens. In the public schools, each principal was asked to send letters to 10 - 20 parents. None of the parents in the school sample refused consent.

The community placement subsample was selected from adolescents participating in a program that focused on extensive supervision of delinquent teens within the community. Teens participating in the program had all been officially processed for delinquent activities. The subsample interviewed was composed of 40 rather than the planned 60 adolescents (all the 13-16-year-old teens participating in the program) because in the midst of data collection the agency involved underwent extensive staff turnover so that it was no longer able to continue to cooperate in locating teens to be interviewed.

The group home subsample of 31 contained all (male or female) nonsiblings between the ages of 13 - 16 in the group homes when interviewing occurred for this subsample whose parents or guardians consented to the interview. In the group home subsample, five parents refused to have their children interviewed. Group home placement involves removing the adolescent from his or her home environment and placing the teen with a group of teens and teams of live-in staff; teens attend some form of school or work training program.

The training school subsample was composed of a random sample of 59 teens, 13 - 16 years old, who lived in two of the schools' residence halls, with the restrictions that the teens should not be undergoing treatment for psychiatric disturbance and that half the teens sampled should be white and half be black. Twenty-one of the parents-guardians in the training school subsample

could not be located by mail during the month prior to data collection so that their children could not be interviewed. All parents-guardians who were located consented to have their children interviewed, leaving a final sample of 59.

Thus, youth from all subsamples were interviewed only after parents or guardians were given the opportunity to refuse to have their children interviewed. Before being interviewed, each youth was also given both a verbal and a written explanation of the study's procedure and asked to sign a consent form at the time they were interviewed. Youth were told that the study focused on youth's conceptions of what they were like and what influences those perceptions. They were told that they could refuse to be interviewed or refuse to answer any part of the interview that they felt was too personal. No youth refused to be interviewed or to complete the components of the interview.

Interview Procedure

To maintain respondent confidentiality and anonymity, each teen was interviewed separately in a room within the facility. The interviewer read questions aloud to the respondent and recorded responses on the questionnaire. In this way the sampling procedure did not exclude youth with reading difficulties. Respondents had a copy of the questionnaire to follow along if they chose to do so. Responses took the form of a number, a word, or a short phrase. The respondent's name was not attached to any of the interview material. The respondent's identification number was attached only to the public school subsample questionnaire because these teens were interviewed twice and the questionnaires were linked for coding purposes.

Interviewers

The interviewers were trained in the use of the questionnaire, and in basic interviewing and empathy skills over a forty hour training phase which included reading assignments, role play, and interviewing pilot respondents. All interviewers were at least juniors at the University of Michigan, all were psychology majors, all had taken advanced course work in psychology and had spent at least one semester in the community working under supervision on a one-to-one basis with area local agencies. Teens in the sample had not participated with the interviewers in these programs. There were seven interviewers, three male, four female, and their ages were between 20 and 34. Only the female interviewers interviewed female respondents. Male respondents were interviewed by male or female interviewers.

Open-Ended Social Influence Measures

A series of open-ended questions were utilized to explore the youths' perceptions about social influences. This section was introduced globally—"The following questions ask you to tell us who or what has influenced the way you are now and what is possible for you in the future. Focus on people you have known or know now and things that have happened to you that have been

important to you." Youth were asked to respond to three specific probes relating to their current and likely future identities.* Interviewers were instructed to document all responses. While "no one" or "nothing" or "myself" responses were recorded, interviewers were instructed to probe for an explanation when any of these were given as an initial response.

Content analysis suggested four categories of responses: The first category contained references to the conventional influence of particular *adults* (primarily parents (80%), but also some mention of teachers, coaches, employers, and counselors). References to *friends* or *peers* that did not involve mention of delinquent activities made up the second category. Responses referring to *delinquent activities or relationships* (e.g. stealing, running away from the police, doing drugs with friends), and responses in which the respondent stated that "no one" or "nothing" influenced them made up the third and fourth categories respectively. Each youth's responses across the three probes were coded for the number of responses in each of the four categories. Although a very few youth described many influencers, most did not. To reduce variability due to differing verbal abilities, youth were encouraged to give more than one response and interviewers were instructed to probe until youth had either provided three responses or stated that no one else was influential.

Closed-Ended Attachment Measures

Ageton & Elliott's widely used measure of attachment to parents, teachers, and peers formed part of the second interview for the public school teens[35,36]. Within the parent domain, teens were asked how important it was to them to: 1. Have a family that does lots of things together, 2. Have parents you can talk with about almost everything, 3. Have parents who try to help you when you are unhappy about something, 4. Have parents who think you do things well, and 5. Get along well with your parents. The youths' responses as to the importance of each of the following four items formed the peer domain: 1. Have lots of dates, 2. Be asked to take part in things your friends do, 3. Have a special boyfriend/girlfriend, and 4. Have friends ask to spend time and do things with you. Finally, within the school and teacher domain, teens were asked how important it was for them to: 1. Do well even in hard subjects, 2. Do your own schoolwork without help from anyone, 3. Have teachers think of you as a good student, 4. Have a high grade point average, and 5. Have other students think of you as a good student. Items from the three domains were mixed and presented in random sequence.

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*1. "Many people feel that certain people or events have been important in making them the way they are now. Who would you say has been important in this way for you?" 2. "In the same way that people or events may have been important in making you the way you are now, they may also influence what you think is possible for you in the future. Who has influenced what is possible for you in the future?" 3. "Thoughts about what is possible for the future often change over time. During the past year, who was important in changing or influencing your thoughts about what is possible for you in the future?"

Self-Reported Delinquency

Self-reported delinquency data were gathered in the second interview with public school youth. Delinquent acts during the past 12 months were assessed using 10 self-reported delinquency items from the Teens in Transition questionnaire[17,37]. Respondents were asked how often in the last 12 months they had: 1. 'Hit a teacher or supervisor at work,' 2. 'Gotten into a serious fight with peers in school or at work,' 3. 'Hurt someone badly enough to need a doctor,' 4. 'Used a knife or gun or some other weapon to get something from someone else,' 5. 'Taken something not belonging to you worth over $50', 6. 'Taken a car that didn't belong to someone in your family without permission of the owner', 7. 'Gone into a building or house when you weren't supposed to be there', 8. 'Set someone's property on fire', 9. 'Damaged school property on purpose', 10. 'Gotten into trouble with the police because of something you did'. The scale was: 0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = two or three times, 3 = three or four times, 5 = five or more times[37].

Results

Analyses of covariance, examining the relationship between degree of official delinquency and perceived influences on the self-concept, controlling for the impact of sex, race, and age were performed. Separate analyses were conducted for each of the four dependent variables generated from the open-ended probes (number of mentions of a. conventional adults, b. conventional peers, c. delinquent peers and activities, and d. "no one at all influences me").

As can be seen in Figure 1, extent of official involvement in delinquency was significantly related to the extent that *adults* such as parents and teachers were perceived as influencing the youth's sense of his/her current and probable future identity. Public school teens generated responses in this category most frequently, while training school teens generated them least frequently, $F(3,195) = 12.20 \, p < .001$. Similarly, extent of official delinquency was also significantly related to the youth's perception of the impact of *conventional peers* on current and future identity. Public school teens were *less* likely to designate conventional peers as influential than were officially delinquent teens $F(3,195) = 2.63, p < .05$. More officially delinquent teens were also more likely to generating descriptions of *delinquent peers and activities* ($F(3,195) = 17.42, p < .001$), as well as state that *"no one"* or *"nothing"* had been influential $F(3,195) = 17.22 \, p < .001$) in creating or sustaining their present and probable future identities.

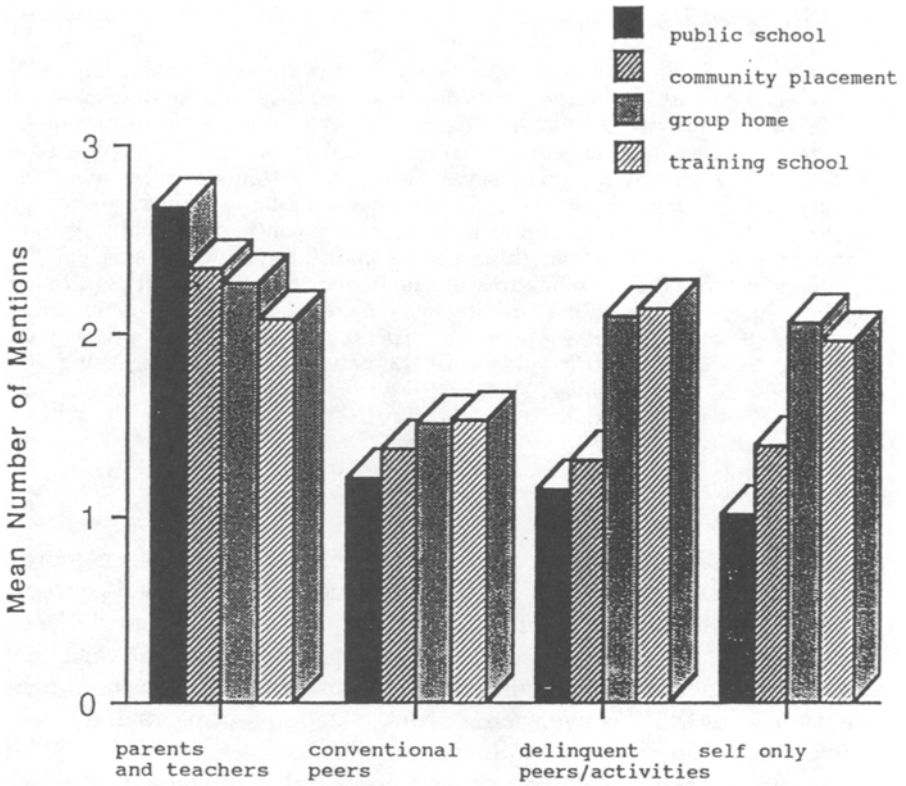To explore the above issues among the officially *nondelinquent*

Figure 1 Mean extent that parents and teachers, conventional peers, delinquent peers and activities, and 'self only' were nominated as influencing current and future identity. (Adjusted mean, where 0 = not nominated as influence source, 3 = nominated as influence source in past, present, and likely to continue to be in future.)

youth, the relationship between self-reported delinquency and each of the three measures of attachment (extent of attachment to parents, peers, and teachers/school) was examined, again controlling for sex, age, and race. Since initial analyses showed that the females self-reported virtually no delinquent activity and that extent of self-report delinquency did not differ by age (13-16 years of age) or race, the following analyses concern males only, using all ages and both races.

Male officially nondelinquent respondents (public school students) who were more attached to their parents reported engaging in less delinquent activity than did males reporting less parental attach-

ment, $F(1,36) = 7.57$ $p < .01$. Similarly, less self-reported delinquency was described among males reporting higher attachment to school and teachers, $F(1,36) = 5.09$ $p < .05$. However, attachment to peers and friends was not significantly related to self-reported delinquency.

Discussion

The data suggest that more delinquent youth may be more influenced by peers in the absence of influence by conventional adults - parents and teachers. Many perceive themselves to be relatively cut-off, not influenced by others. Major influence comes from peers, whether conventional or deviant. These findings mesh well with a patchwork of theoretical work and empirical findings which, taken together, suggest four main points: the influence of teachers and parents tends to be normative or conventional; friends do not necessarily press for solely conventional identities or self-conceptions; socially isolated youth with no strong attachments are particularly likely to also exhibit deviant behaviors; and youth with strong attachments to delinquent youth are also likely to be involved in delinquent activities[20,23,24,32,38]. Thus, it may be that peer influence is toward both conventional and deviant identities. In the absence of adult influence on self-concept or identity, youth may well come to define themselves and their future goals in terms of the deviant images suggested by their peers. When adult influence is also present, then the conventional identities endorsed by both adults and peers may be especially likely to be internalized by the adolescent.

The data limits generalization of the present findings to males. However, studies of teens who become pregnant out of wedlock suggest that similar relationship dynamics may be at work in this female population. Thus, a recent study by the Rand Corporation[39] reports that teens who do not become pregnant in high school report a closer relationship with their parents than do their peers who become pregnant. Data from this study further suggests that it was the *quality* of the parent-daughter relationship rather than the extent of supervision and control in the relationship that differentiated teens who become pregnant in high school from those who did not. Earlier studies comparing pregnant and nonpregnant teenaged girls also suggest that pregnant adolescents report worse relationships with their parents than do their nonpregnant peers[40,41]. Teens who do not become

single mothers report talking with their parents more than those who do[39]. Further, pregnant adolescents who chose to continue their pregnancies were found to be less involved in school, work or other meaningful activities[42]. Adolescents who later became pregnant were more likely to have friends involved in a variety of delinquent activities[43], and more likely to go to school with peers who do not rule out single parenthood as a possibility[39].

Summary

Social psychologists have provided ample evidence that the opinions of others are critical in the self-definition process[14,44,45,46]. Data from this study suggest that in intervening with youth who are at risk for delinquent behavior, it is particularly important to build or enhance the influence that adults have on these youths' sense of their current and perceived future identities. It may be that it is these adults' perceptions of the youth as being capable of conventional success that is particularly influential as the youth strives to make sense of his/her current and future possibilities.

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