

The role of positive and negative relationships within children's peer groups

Wendy Ellis, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
King's University College
wendy.ellis@uwo.ca

The Importance of Peers

- Children spend the vast majority of their time in interaction based groups

"Birds of a feather flock together"

"Mixed-up with the wrong crowd"

The identity of friends determines many outcomes

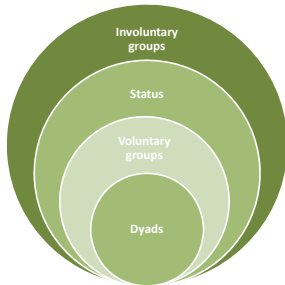
Overview of Topics

- Social landscape of childhood
- Scope of peer influence
- How do peers exert influence?
 - Empirical studies on group interactions and group status
- How can we capitalize on positive peer effects and deter negative peer effects?

The Social Landscape of Childhood

- Why do Friends matter?
 - Because they matter to children! (And adults!)
 - Understand life in school settings and peer-based activities
- Emotional and Cognitive development
- Children with at least one friend have better adjustment!

The Social Landscape of Childhood



The Social landscape of childhood

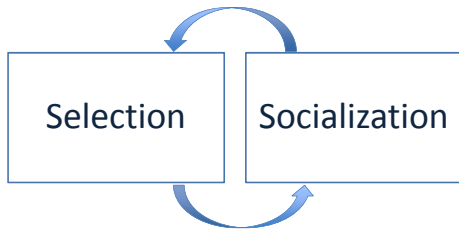
- Age and Gender differences
 - Interaction based group emerge in early adolescence, stronger group identity
 - Girls – smaller groups, greater intimacy, dyadic interactions

The Social landscape of childhood

- Relationship characteristics vary, predict well-being
 - Friendship Quality
 - Quality vs. Quantity, Stability, **Identity**
 - Peer group
 - Cooperation vs. coercion, Status, Size, Stability, **Identity**

The Scope of Peer Influence

Friends are similar, WHY?



The Scope of Peer Influence

Over time groups shape:

- Physical and relational aggression
- Deviant/antisocial behaviour
- Substance use
- School motivation and performance (higher and lower)
- Internalizing symptoms (depression)
- Physical health and weight
- Dating abuse and quality

The Scope of Peer Influence

- prosocial groups
 - Members have more prosocial behavior and lower rates of anxiety and isolation
- aggressive groups
 - Members have more aggressive behaviour negative adjustment

The Scope of Peer Influence

- Group characteristics even interact with parenting!
 - Antisocial and coercive group norms
 - lower positive parental effects (Chen et al., 2005)
 - exacerbate outcomes of maltreatment and abuse (Ellis & Wolfe, 2009)
- BUT high quality interactions can offer protection too!

How do Groups Influence?

- Indirect
 - Self-socialization based on the intrinsic need for social connection (Social Identity Theory)
- Direct
 - Peer pressure, manipulation, reinforcement, deviancy training (positive reinforcement).

How do Groups Influence?

- **BUT**
- Influence is not uniform across group members, or even groups
- Who is most susceptible? Most powerful?
- Can positive, respectful interactions protect children from negative group influence?

Research on group Interactions (Study 1)

1033 students (444 boys, 589 girls)

M age = 11 year, Grades 4-8 across 8 schools, London

66% Caucasian, 9% Asian-Canadian

Ellis, W., Zarbatany, Z., Chen, X., Kinal, M., Boyko, L. (2017). Peer groups as a context for school misconduct: The moderating role of group interactional style. *Child Development*. 1-16. DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12722

Procedure

Time 1: October
1033 students completed self-reports (including school misconduct)
Identified 999 in peer groups

Time 2: January
705 students were recoded in peer group observations

Time 3: May
1021 students completed self-reports (including school misconduct)

Observations

- Conversations
 - Negative, insulting or offensive laughter
 - Positive laughter
- Limited Resource
 - Negative interactions (e.g., forceful, aggressive behaviour)
 - Positive interactions (e.g., sharing, advice giving, cooperative)

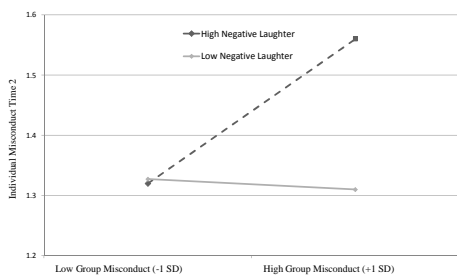
Results

- Multi level modeling
 - Group interaction as the moderator between group Time 1 misconduct and individual Time 2 misconduct

NEGATIVE interactions and NEGATIVE laughter strengthened the peer group influence effect.

POSITIVE interaction and POSTIVE laughter lessened the peer group influence effect.

Figure 1. Interaction between Negative Laughter in Conversation Task and Group Misconduct in Predicting Time 2 Individual Misconduct



Conclusions

- Socialization effects are not inevitable
- Coercive relationships might lead to peer contagion out of fear or punishment.
- Group members may feel more secure in positive groups and show more individuality

Research on Group Interactions

- Follow up effects of group interactions
- At the group level, negative interactions predicted more symptoms of ill health
- AND positive peer group interactions predicted children's self-esteem

Research on Group Status

- What other factors relate to the strength of socialization effects?
- Resource Control Theory (Hawley, 1999)
 - High status groups control material and social resources.

Research on Group Status (Study 2)

- Observations of high status groups
 - 258 (Mage = 15 years) in peer group triads (n =86)
 - Hypothetical dilemmas
 - Decision making task
- Measured agreements, disagreements, commands, dominance, openness, prosocial behaviour.

Ellis, W., Dumas, T., Mahdy, J., & Wolfe, D. (2012). Observations of adolescent peer group interactions as a function of within and between group centrality status. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 22, 256-266. DOI: 10.1111/j.1532-7795.2011.00777.x

Research on Group Status

Results

High Status Groups
Coercive and demanding (more commands)
Less open to other ideas
Direct styles of interaction
and most Prosocial Behaviour

Research on Group Status

- High status groups have greater expectations for group norms.
- Within groups low status members show greatest vulnerability.
- Are high status groups dangerous contexts?

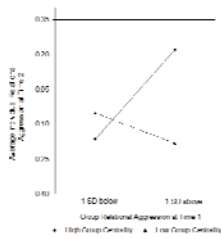
Research on Group Status (Study 3)

- 526 10-14yr olds in 116 groups
- Individual and group scores for deviancy, relational aggression, and prosocial behaviour were measured in the Fall and Spring

Ellis, W. & Zarbatany, L. (2007). Peer group status as a moderator of group influence on children's deviant and aggressive behavior. *Child Development*, 78, 1240-1254. DOI:0009-3920/2007/7804-0013

Research on Group Status

- High status groups = stronger socialization
 - Aggression, deviant behaviour AND prosocial behaviour



Summary

- Peer group identity remains a critical factor in predicting outcomes.
- Group members become more similar overtime

BUT

Influence is not inevitable or always negative.

Summary

- Who is most susceptible?
 - Members of high status groups
 - Groups with negative interactions
 - Low status group members
- Who is least susceptible?
 - Members is average status groups
 - Groups with positive, respectful relationships

Implications

- Teaching healthy respectful relationships among groups will lead to more resistance to socialization effects.
 - In groups settings this will mean cooperation, problem solving (turn-taking), prosocial behaviour
 - Group security, open to individual differences

Implications

In high status group have power that can be used for both positive and negative outcomes.

- Most decisions are made with social positions in mind!
- High status groups are the models for behaviour and getting them to support any interventions is important

Questions and Discussion
