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Brief report: Personality correlates of susceptibility to peer influence in adolescence



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ABSTRACT

Adolescents show a heightened susceptibility to peer influence compared to adults. Individual differences in this susceptibility exist, yet there has been little effort to link these with broader personality processes. Reward sensitivity and impulsive behaviour are also heightened in adolescence and could affect the tendency to be influenced by peers. This study examined associations between self-reported resistance to peer influence, facets of reward sensitivity and impulsivity, and subjective social status in a sample of 269 British sixth form students (mean age 16.79). Multiple regression analyses showed that negative and positive urgency were significantly negatively associated with resistance to peer influence. The relationship between negative urgency and resistance was moderated by subjective social status, such that individuals reporting low status showed a stronger negative relationship. Results suggest that a susceptibility to peer influence is linked with a tendency to act impulsively when in heightened emotional states. Adolescents high in negative urgency who feel lower in their social hierarchy may be particularly vulnerable. © 2014 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Affiliating with peers becomes particularly important during adolescence, yet the ability to resist peer pressure is not fully developed until around age 18 (Spear, 2000; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). Individual variation is observed in this normative pattern, and a lower resistance to peer influence may propel individuals into risk-taking or antisocial behaviour that they might otherwise not engage in (Allen, Porter, & Mcfarland, 2006). It is not yet clear why some adolescents develop a stronger resistance to peer influence than others.

Adolescence is also a period of elevated reward sensitivity and immature impulse restraint (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008; Galvan et al., 2006), possibly due to the early development of neural regions responsible for socioemotional processing in comparison with those responsible for cognitive control (Steinberg, 2010). These psychological characteristics also show individual differences, reflected in scores on personality trait measures (Harden & Tucker-Drob, 2011), and may influence susceptibility to peer influence. Adolescents with an increased sensitivity to reward might value peer acceptance especially highly, whilst those with low impulse control may be less able to regulate their behaviour when faced with peer pressure.

There has been little research into the relationships between responses to peer influence and traits reflecting reward sensitivity and impulsivity. One study that examined resistance to peer influence alongside a broad measure of impulsivity,

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the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale (Patton, Stanford, & Barratt, 1995), found a modest, negative association (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). However, consensus is growing that impulsivity is best conceived as multiple discrete traits, reflecting deficits in conscientiousness (lack of premeditation and perseverance), tendencies to act impulsively when in depressed or euphoric moods (negative and positive urgency), and sensation seeking (Cyders & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2007; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Analysing resistance to peer influence alongside separate impulsivity-related traits may help to clarify the distinct processes underlying susceptibility. For instance, is low resistance related to a reduced ability to think about the consequences of one's actions, or the result of being less able to regulate behaviour under extreme emotion? This study aims to utilise recent developments from the individual differences literature to address this question.

Relationships between personality traits and resistance to peer influence may be affected by social context. Social exclusion weakens self-regulation (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005), and leads to increased risk-taking in individuals low in resistance to peer influence (Peake, Dishion, Stormshak, Moore, & Pfeifer, 2013). Adolescents who feel that they have low social status and are highly reward sensitive may be more inclined to acquiesce to their peers in order to gain social rewards such as peer approval, whilst low status, impulsive individuals may have limited regulatory resources to resist their peers. These relationships have not been previously tested. In this study subjective social status will be tested as a moderator of relationships between traits and resistance to peer influence.

Method

Participants and procedure

Data were collected as part of a prospective study examining risk factors for adolescent substance use. Participants were 269 sixth form students from two schools in east London, United Kingdom. Two additional participants were excluded due to incomplete data. Representatives of these schools responded to email requests for participation sent to 20 schools in the London area. The sample was 73% female and ranged in age from 16 to 18 ($M = 16.79$ $SD = .54$). This gender ratio is representative of humanities subjects in UK sixth forms (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). Data regarding individual ethnicity and socioeconomic status were not collected. Reports of the schools' entire student body note that 80% of students from school 1 and 50% from school 2 are from minority ethnic groups. The majority of participants ($n = 228$) were recruited from school 1.

The study was approved by the Goldsmiths Psychology Department Ethics Committee. A passive consent procedure was used whereby participants' parents/guardians were informed about the study and given the option to exclude their children from participation. Questionnaires were administered in groups of around 20 during class time under test conditions with the researcher and a teacher present. Participants gave written assent prior to completing the questionnaires.

Measures

Reward sensitivity

The Behavioural Activation System scales (Carver & White, 1994) assess three aspects of reward related behaviour: drive, fun seeking, and reward responsiveness. Items are measured on a four point Likert-type scale. The scales have been found to be applicable to adolescents (Cooper, Gomez, & Aucote, 2007). Reliability coefficients, estimated using Cronbach's alpha, were: drive = .74, fun seeking = .71, reward responsiveness = .62.

Impulsivity

The UPPS-P Impulsive Behaviour Scale (Cyders et al., 2007; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001) is a 59 item measure assessing five facets of impulsivity. Items are measured on a four point Likert-type scale. The scale shows good validity characteristics (Cyders et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007). Scores were coded so that higher values reflect higher impulsivity. Reliability coefficients in this sample were: lack of premeditation = .84, lack of perseverance = .77, sensation seeking = .86, negative urgency = .83, positive urgency = .90.

Resistance to peer influence

The Resistance to Peer Influence scale (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007) assesses levels of resistance in neutral situations. Participants are presented with 10 pairs of statements that describe types of people. For each pair, one statement reflects people who are resistant to peer influence, and the other reflects those who are susceptible. Participants indicate which of each pair best reflects themselves, and then whether this is 'sort of true' or 'really true'. The scale was modified in this study due to time considerations. Participants were asked to select the statements reflecting themselves but did not indicate the degree to which this statement was true. One point was scored for each resistant statement. The reliability coefficient was .73.

Subjective social status

Status was assessed using adapted versions of the MacArthur scales of subjective social status (Goodman et al., 2001; Sweeting, West, Young, & Kelly, 2011). Participants were shown six 10-rung ladders representing social standing, three in reference to their friendship group and three to their school year group. They were asked to mark the rung which best

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