



Resistance to peer influence during adolescence: Proposing a sociocultural-developmental framework



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ABSTRACT

Assumptions regarding the vulnerability of adolescents to peer influences permeate the academic and popular literatures, especially as explanations of adolescent risk taking. In developmentally-oriented research that has addressed age differences in peer resistance/conformity, a psychosocially-based account has prevailed which attributes higher resistance scores of older compared with younger adolescents to the development of autonomy and individuation. In this paper, we propose an alternative sociocultural-developmental framework for the study of peer resistances. Contributing to the framework are, first, sociocultural perspectives on resistance within cultural and feminist studies that have implications for peer resistance scholarship in their alternative conceptualization of person–context relations and the consequent reorientation of the nature of the questions as well as the methods appropriate for addressing these questions. We then draw on dialogical theory to extend these perspectives to a more comprehensive framework encompassing developing-persons-in-changing-contexts and illustrate the framework with a research example.

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In the introduction to their edited book, [Prinstein and Dodge \(2008\)](#) make the claim that, “Perhaps one of the most consistent findings revealed in the social science literature pertains to the remarkably potent effects of peer influence” (p. 3). Peer influence scholarship covers a wide territory, but the substantial literature on peer influences during adolescence has been driven, largely, by attempts to explain the worrisome behaviors of youth.¹ Within this domain, many would echo Prinstein and Dodge’s characterization of peer effects as “potent:” Decades of research abound with reports that peer variables—e.g., “association with deviant peers”—are key predictors of adolescent risk behaviors (earlier work is exemplified by [Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985](#); more recent examples are [Childs, Sullivan, & Gullede, 2011](#); [Costa, Jessor, & Turbin, 2007](#); [Vitaro, Brendgen, & Wanner, 2005](#)). Partly as a consequence of this research, peer influence continues to be a common explanation for adolescent risk taking, both in the

academic literature and in books or internet resources for parents and teens.

Given the pervasiveness of this portrayal of peer influences, it is not surprising that investigators have been prompted to pursue another line of research, related to but distinct from the above, focusing on the *response* to peer influence. Within the adolescent development literature, one direction of this research has situated resistance/conformity in a developmental framework, posing questions about changes in resistance across the adolescent age range (e.g., [Berndt, 1979](#); [Sim & Koh, 2003](#); [Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986](#); [Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009](#)). These studies are cited in support of the claim that adolescents are most vulnerable to peer influences at certain ages (generally early to middle adolescence). Further, age-related changes in peer resistance are seen as informing growth patterns of autonomy across the adolescent years. The development of autonomy has been a major emphasis from the earliest days of adolescent research in the U.S. ([Douvan & Adelson, 1966](#)) and has remained a priority topic ever since (reviews by [Hill & Holmbeck, 1986](#); [McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009](#); [Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003](#)).

Thus, developmentally-oriented studies of peer resistance/conformity are viewed as significant both in their implications for adolescent risk behaviors and autonomy development. Yet this

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¹ “Positive” peer influences have not been ignored, (e.g., [Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011](#); [Berndt, 2004](#)), but much more attention has been devoted to peer influences in connection with adolescent risk behaviors.

domain of research, broadly guided by psychosocial theory and based on questionnaire methods, is just one possible account of how we might envision and study peer resistance. Implicit if not explicit in this account are certain fundamental assumptions about the conceptualization of persons, of social contexts, of the relationship between persons and contexts, of autonomy, and of development.

Sociocultural approaches and their associated methods, based in different assumptions, offer alternative accounts. Largely unacknowledged in the adolescent literature is the considerable attention that has been devoted to the topic of resistance from discursive and constructionist sociocultural perspectives, particularly within cultural and feminist studies. Insights from this work, we suggest, can inform the study of resistance in the peer context and can underscore the value of looking beyond disciplinary boundaries. However, these perspectives do not offer a sufficient alternative to the prevailing account in that they do not speak to the developmental questions that have been central in the study of peer resistance for adolescent development scholars.

Our purpose is to draw on dialogical theory in proposing a sociocultural-developmental framework for the study of peer resistance/conformity during adolescence. This framework is informed by discursive and constructionist approaches to the study of resistance, but it goes further in speaking to assumptions and methods in the contemporary adolescent literature regarding development and autonomy. The paper is organized in three sections, the first of which highlights research in the adolescent development literature on age-related differences in peer resistance/conformity and the psychosocial framework that has guided this work. In the second section, we consider the implications for peer resistance scholarship of sociocultural approaches which importantly draw attention to resistances as interactional and contextually situated. In the third section, drawing on dialogical theory, we propose a broader sociocultural-developmental framework for conceptualizing peer resistance followed by implications of this framework for research and a research example. The paper concludes with a summary of the main features of the proposed framework.

To preface more detailed discussions in later sections of the paper, defining the concept of resistance is far from straightforward. Broadly speaking, resistance refers to some sort of opposition or refusal to comply, in this instance, within the adolescent peer context. But meanings linked to the concept of resistance and associated evaluation methods vary depending on theoretical framework.

1. A psychosocial framework: resistance as individual autonomy

1.1. Overview of the research

Of the early work on the development of peer conformity/resistance during adolescence, Thomas [Berndt's 1979](#) article has been acknowledged most frequently by subsequent investigators. This is due, in part, to his assessment of peer conformity via hypothetical situations, an assessment procedure that has been taken up or adapted by many others over the years. Beyond the measure, [Berndt's \(1979\)](#) research warrants attention for addressing the main question that has continued to be debated: What are the age-related changes in peer conformity? Perspectives differed on whether there would be a gradual decrease in conformity over the

adolescent years, or alternatively, increasing conformity through mid adolescence followed by a decrease. In the two studies reported in his article, Berndt's general findings² indicated (a) a decrease with age in conformity to parents in neutral situations; (b) a rise in antisocial peer conformity from 3rd through 9th grades, and a slight decline by 11–12th grades; and (c) minimal age changes in other types of influence situations. In his discussion, Berndt commented on the relatively small age differences in this study, which generally has been the case in later research as well.

Frequently cited studies that have focused on age differences using Berndt's procedure are those of [Steinberg and Silverberg \(1986\)](#), [Brown, Clasen, and Eicher \(1986\)](#), and [Sim and Koh \(2003\)](#). Some use Berndt's terminology (peer conformity), while others label the concept as peer resistance. [Steinberg and Silverberg \(1986\)](#) were interested in adolescent autonomy, particularly in the different ways that it had been conceptualized and measured. The finding relevant to this discussion is the similarity of their results to those of [Berndt \(1979\)](#): Peer resistance decreased (i.e., conformity increased) until the 8th grade, at which point it leveled off, and these age differences were somewhat more pronounced for antisocial than for neutral situations. A similar curvilinear effect for resistance to peer influence was reported by [Brown et al. \(1986\)](#). However, these age trends were described as "comparatively weak" (p. 528), and they occurred for students in an urban but not in a small-town setting. [Sim and Koh \(2003\)](#) expanded Berndt's hypothetical situations into five domains of susceptibility to peer pressure. In their study of 13, 15, and 17 year old students in two Singapore schools, susceptibility to peer influence was greatest for the domains of school and family involvement (particularly at age 13), somewhat less so for peer involvement, and least for the domain of misconduct, although the latter did show the typical pattern of an increase from age 13 to 15 and a subsequent decline.

During the past decade, age-related resistance research has turned away from [Berndt's \(1979\)](#) procedure and from the expansion of domains in the measurement of resistance advocated by [Sim and Koh \(2003\)](#). Three studies ([Monahan, Steinberg, & Cauffman, 2009](#); [Steinberg & Monahan, 2007](#); [Sumter et al., 2009](#)) have all used a ten-item measure with items structured as follows: "Some people think it's more important to be an individual than to fit in with the crowd. But other people think it is more important to fit in with the crowd than to stand out as an individual" ([Steinberg & Monahan, 2007](#), p. 1543). Respondents choose one of the two options and then indicate whether this option is "Really True for Me" or "Sort of True for Me." The rationale for the development of this measure, as explained by [Steinberg and Monahan \(2007\)](#), is that (a) neutral rather than antisocial item content may be a better measure of "true magnitude of adolescents' susceptibility to peer influence" (p. 1532); and (b) when specific hypothetical situations are used (as in Berndt's procedure), and when assessment is limited to antisocial content, age-related differences may occur for a variety of reasons other than resistance to peer influence. Their solution, then, was the use of a measure that avoids mention of specific situations and avoids (aside from two items) antisocial content. In contrast to the curvilinear age-related pattern typically found for misconduct/antisocial content, these studies report a general upward trajectory of peer resistance during adolescence.

1.2. Assumptions

The research questions and interpretations in these articles draw from theory which emphasizes normative development and concepts of psychosocial maturity ([Greenberger & Sørensen, 1974](#)), particularly with reference to autonomy, individuation, and identity. Adolescent individuation is a maturational concept proposed by [Blos \(1962\)](#) which refers to the relinquishing of childhood

² [Berndt's \(1979\)](#) study included variables and analyses beyond those discussed here.

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