



Avoiding antisocial behavior among adolescents: The positive influence of classmates' prosocial behavior

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Prior research has shown that classmates' behavior serves as a descriptive norm for adolescents' individual behavior. While earlier studies primarily focused on negative peer influence, classmates' prosocial behavior might be associated with positive individual development. We hypothesized more classroom-level prosocial behavior predicts a lower likelihood of future antisocial behavior of individual students over and above the effect of classmates' antisocial behavior. We further assumed this effect is mediated by adolescents' attitudes toward antisocial behavior.

Methods: To test our hypotheses, we used three data collection points from a longitudinal study among lower secondary school students in Switzerland ($N = 864$; mean age at T1: 13.81 years; male gender: 52%). Participants completed self-reported assessments on prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, and antisocial attitudes. Data were analyzed using multilevel models.

Results: Results indicated higher levels of prosocial behavior among classmates predict lower levels of individual students' future antisocial behavior. However, the effect of classmates' prosocial behavior was not mediated by individual attitudes toward antisocial behavior.

Conclusions: While in the context of antisocial behavior the peer group is often assumed a risk, our results indicate that school peers can also exert positive influence. Hereby our finding of an effect of prosocial peer norms over and above antisocial peer norms suggests that building up prosocial behaviors in the classroom may be a promising approach for the prevention of antisocial behavior.

Antisocial behavior is a major concern in adolescent development. It is characterized by recurrent violations of socially prescribed norms in different contexts, such as in public, at home, or in school (Simcha-Fagan, Langner, Gersten, & Eisenberg, 1975). Antisocial behavior includes "physical or verbal abuse of a person, damage to or theft of property, or victimless clandestine juvenile behaviors such as truancy and drug or alcohol use" (Loeber, 1985, p. 77). Adolescents differ strongly in the degree of antisocial behavior they exhibit. While high levels of such behavior are a main risk factor for long-term criminal involvement (e.g., Monahan, Steinberg, Cauffman, & Mulvey, 2009), even less frequent antisocial acts can harm other people, such as peers and family. For adolescents themselves, exhibiting antisocial behavior increases the risk of failing in school, developing other psychological disorders, and being socially rejected (Quinn & Poirier, 2004). To counteract these outcomes, it is important to identify factors that may help prevent or reduce antisocial behavior.

One important factor related to adolescents' antisocial behavior is negative peer influence. Negative peer influence can occur within various types of social networks, such as dyadic friendships, cliques, or classrooms (for an overview, see Dishion & Tipsord,

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2011). While there is ample evidence negative peer influence has an unfavorable impact on antisocial behavior, a predominantly negative view of peer influence has also been criticized (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008). Nevertheless, to date limited empirical knowledge exists regarding the potential effects of positive peer influence on antisocial behavior and its underlying processes. Thus, we investigated whether higher levels of peer prosocial behavior contribute to less future antisocial behavior in individual adolescents. Prosocial behavior can be understood as a “broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself — behaviors such as helping, comforting, sharing, and cooperating” (Batson & Powell, 2003, p. 463). As a potential underlying mechanism, we examined whether individual attitudes toward antisocial behavior mediate the effect of peer prosocial behavior on individual antisocial behavior. Concerning peer group, we focused on classmates in lower secondary school.

11. Classmates' behavior and students' individual behavior

Adolescents interact with their classmates and other friends from school on a daily basis, and these social networks from school often carry over into spare time (Kiesner, Poulin, & Nicotra, 2003). In class, students may not only be influenced by the words and actions of their close friends or dominant students, but also by behaviors observed in the entire classroom (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008; Powers & Bierman, 2013; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000). For example, Dijkstra et al. (2008) found that bullying by popular students was related to increased acceptance of bullying within the classroom and hence decreased rejection of individuals who engaged in bullying.

The current study is interested in behavioral influence among all classmates within a classroom (for an overview, see Müller & Zurbriggen, 2016). This focus on all classmates allows for insights into the effects of an involuntary, non-self-selected peer group, and enables investigation of peer influence effects that are not confounded with selection effects (Juveno & Galván, 2008). In addition, understanding the role of the whole classroom may provide future perspectives for classroom-wide interventions.

The behavior of all group members (i.e., the classroom mean of antisocial behavior) is often referred to as a descriptive norm, which represents typical behavior in a group (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). According to social learning theories, different mechanisms may underlie a direct effect of descriptive norms on individual student behavior. These processes can include, for example, imitating, reinforcing, or sanctioning specific behaviors (Akers, 2009; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Burgess & Akers, 1966; Cohen, 1964; Shaffer, 1983). It can be assumed that certain salient behaviors (i.e., those related to popularity; Jonkmann, Trautwein, & Lüdtke, 2009) will be reinforced by peers whereas others will be negatively sanctioned.

Empirical evidence suggests an effect of descriptive norms on individual future behavior within the same behavioral domain. Regarding antisocial behaviors, several studies found that more positive descriptive classroom norms toward such behaviors are directly related to more individual antisocial behavior in the future (e.g., Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman, & Wells, 2004; Megens & Weerman, 2011; Mercer, McMillen, & DeRosier, 2009). Mercer and colleagues' longitudinal study, for example, investigated the influence of classroom-level aggressive behavior on individual aggressive behavior. The authors found an increase in individual aggression when classroom-level aggression was high. In terms of prosocial behaviors, classmates' prosocial behavior was found to be associated with more future prosocial behavior among individual students (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004). However, it is less clear if cross-behavioral influence exists: Does prosocial peer behavior affect students' future antisocial behavior? Investigating this question may shed light on whether individual antisocial behaviors can potentially be reduced by promoting prosocial behavior at the classroom level.

22. Effects of classmates' prosocial behavior on individual antisocial behavior

Prosocial and antisocial behaviors are assumed to represent different yet related constructs, instead of representing two extremes of one scale (Veenstra, 2006). They are typically considered to be contrary to each other. For example, if a student hits a classmate in a highly prosocial classroom, this action is perceived as going against the prosocial norm. Supporting this conceptual relationship between the two constructs, studies have shown that antisocial and prosocial behaviors/attitudes are negatively correlated (e.g., Boxer, Tisak, & Goldstein, 2004). From an empirical perspective, it would thus be reasonable to expect that in a context of more prosocial peer behavior, students will have a lower likelihood of developing antisocial behaviors.

Some studies found evidence that classroom prosocial norms are related to less antisocial behavior among individual students. For example, Henry and Chan (2010) followed students from Grade 6 to Grade 8 and found classroom-level norms regarding nonviolent problem solving were negatively related to future occurrence of individual aggressive behavior and to positive attitudes toward aggression. Using a similar study design, Henry, Farrell, Schoeny, Tolan, and Dymnicki (2011) reported the same effects when considering the influence of school-level norms. While these studies provide important initial results, it must be noted they measured injunctive norms, which refer to peers' attitudes (Cialdini et al., 1991). As attitudes and behavior may differ, the role of the classmates' actual prosocial behavior remains unknown. It is also unclear whether prosocial peer influence is related not only to aggression but also to a broader range of antisocial behaviors. In addition, to our knowledge, no study has yet sought to identify the psychological mechanisms through which classmates' prosocial behavior influences individual students' antisocial behavior. A pure imitation process is unlikely, as students can only imitate behavior in the same behavioral domain (e.g., imitation of peers' antisocial behavior leads to individual antisocial behavior). It is thus possible that classmates' prosocial behavior is related to individual antisocial attitudes, which in turn affect future behavior. Hence, peers' prosocial behavior may indirectly influence adolescents' antisocial behavior.

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