



# Peer influence processes for youth delinquency and depression



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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the multiple factors that account for peer influence processes of adolescent delinquency and depression using data from Waves I and II of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Random-effects longitudinal negative binomial models were used to predict depression and delinquency, controlling for social connection variables to account for selection bias. Findings suggest peer depression and delinquency are both predictive of youth delinquency, while peer influences of depression are much more modest. Youth who are more connected to parents and communities and who are more popular within their networks are more susceptible to peer influence, while self-regulating youth are less susceptible. We find support for theories of popularity-socialization as well as weak-ties in explaining social network factors that amplify or constrain peer influence. We argue that practitioners working with youth should consider network-informed interventions to improve program efficacy and avoid iatrogenic effects.

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Throughout adolescence, youths' peer groups and friendships form an important context for healthy or unhealthy development (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2007). Research on peer relationships provides evidence that peer networks influence a variety of youth behaviors, including aggression (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Faris & Ennett, 2012), delinquency (Haynie & Osgood, 2005), depression and internalizing behaviors (Conway, Rancourt, Adelman, Burk, & Prinstein, 2011; Van Zalk, Kerr, Branje, Stattin, & Meeus, 2010), substance use (Balsa, Homer, French, & Norton, 2011; De la Haye, Green, Kennedy, Pollard, & Tucker, 2013), bullying (Salmivalli, 2010), as well as positive behaviors like student achievement (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008) and physical activity (Voorhees & Murray, 2005). While these studies and others provide evidence of peer network influences, this study contributes to the literature by comparing influence patterns across psychosocial domains, accounting for the processes and amplify or constrain these influence processes, and examined both the main and moderating effect of social network position on adolescent behaviors.

## Peer influence of delinquency in adolescence

Recent research has cited differential association and deviancy training theories as processes of peer influence of delinquency behaviors (Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999). Differential association theory, originally introduced by Sutherland

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(1947), proposes a behaviorist perspective that deviant behaviors are learned through close relationships. The degree to which one engages in antisocial behaviors depends on the ratio between pro- and anti-social messaging and reinforcement one receives from the environment, in particular through relationships. Recent research, however, has also highlighted the importance of studying peer networks and social status, such that the impact of pro- and anti-social messaging may depend on how popular or central the messenger is within a network (Haynie, 2001). A theory of deviancy training emphasizes the differential reinforcement of delinquent behavior as youth provide positive feedback (i.e., laughter) to reinforce deviant behaviors (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Poulin et al., 1999). A simple non-verbal cue like a smile or head-nod affirms and reinforces deviant behaviors in youth enacted from a process of imitation learned from observation. When youth receive more reinforcement for deviancy in proportion to normal behaviors, particularly when immersed in deviant friendship groups and dyads, they are more likely to engage in that behavior (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). Both of these theories emphasize the transmission of behaviors and attitudes among peer groups that focusing on the cognitive processes that lead to the enactment of behavior.

### Peer influence of depression in adolescence

While most research has centered on individual risk factors for adolescent depression, recent studies suggest that peer groups may also play a part in the etiology of depression in adolescents and adults (Rose, 2002; Rosenquist, Fowler, & Christakis, 2011). One theory explaining the spread of depressive symptomatology across friendship networks is co-rumination, a process in which adolescents engage in self-disclosure and the discussion of negative feelings and problems in dyadic relationships (Rose, 2002; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007). Adolescents become vulnerable to their peers' depressive symptomatology when engaging in extended discussions of their problems and negative feelings with them. Co-rumination is understood to be transactional, whereby the complex interchanges between peer groups and adolescents create a bi-directional selection-influence process that contributes to adolescent depressive symptomatology over time (Hankin, Stone, & Wright, 2010). In addition, co-rumination may also trigger a developmental cascade that leads to further internalizing problems and maladjustment in interpersonal relationships (Hankin et al., 2010). Still, some research suggests that the effects of co-rumination may be overstated. Starr and Davila (2009) found evidence that co-rumination did not lead to long-term changes in depression in their study population, and that it may only be depressogenic for romantic relationships. Nevertheless, co-rumination as a developmental process remains a leading theoretical explanation for peer influence of depression in adolescents.

Other studies examining the peer influence of depression have examined social networks. One study using adult social networks constructed from longitudinal data in the Framingham Heart Study found that adults' depression was correlated with that of their friends and neighbors, and that women were more susceptible to this association (Rosenquist et al., 2011). Another study found that adolescents' reports of depressive symptomatology neared those of their peers over time, and that failure anticipation, or the expectation of failure when confronting future tasks, may mediate the relationship between peer group and individual depression (Van Zalk et al., 2010). In a longitudinal study of 11th grade adolescents ( $N = 100$ ), Prinstein (2007) examined adolescent social networks and found that girls with high social anxiety were more susceptible to depression contagion, as were boys who perceived their friends to be popular and with lower levels of positive friendship quality. Similarly, in a study of 648 middle school adolescents, Conway et al. (2011) found that more peripheral and less popular youth were more susceptible to depression socialization, and that girls were more susceptible to peer influence. While these studies emphasized the pathways of depression socialization, other approaches suggest that depressive symptoms are associated with friendship formation itself (Cheadle & Goosby, 2012). Yet, relatively few studies have examined the processes and moderators of depression socialization and influence from a network perspective, and those that have explored these processes suffer from either a lack of longitudinal design or restricted sample sizes.

### Linking delinquency and depression through peers

A growing body of research has examined the comorbidities of depression and delinquency, suggesting a link in these developmental processes that may be reciprocally and causally related over time (Beyers & Loeber, 2003; Meadows, 2007; Nocentini, Calamai, & Menesini, 2012). One study of high school adolescents found that depression in early adolescence is more predictive of later delinquency than early delinquency is for later depression, with this difference especially different for adolescent girls (Kofler et al., 2011). In a number of studies these trajectories of externalization and internalization processes are gendered, with a focus on depression in females and delinquency in males (Hagan & Foster, 2003; Kaufman, 2009).

Peer factors have also been associated with both depression and delinquency in youth. Mitchell, Ybarra, and Finkelhor (2007) found independent associations between a youth's reports of online victimization and depressive symptomatology, delinquent behavior, and substance abuse, and another study found that peer delinquency and depression were predictive of youth's violent and aggressive behaviors (Ferguson, San Miguel, & Hartley, 2009). These findings suggest that studies of peer influence may need to explore multiple pathways or domains of influence to explain peer influence and selection processes more effectively.

Another purpose of studying delinquency and depression together is to examine how social networks amplify or constrain the spread of behaviors with two different behaviors. Existing research has examined moderators that amplify or constrain

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