



Peer influence, friend selection, and gender: How network processes shape adolescent smoking, drinking, and delinquency

Cassie McMillan*, Diane Felmlee, D. Wayne Osgood

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Keywords:

Peer influence
Friend selection
Gender differences
Adolescent friendship
Problem behavior

ABSTRACT

We examine gender differences in the extent to which the social network processes of peer influence and friend selection explain why adolescents tend to exhibit similar risky behaviors as their friends for three problem behaviors (smoking, drinking, and delinquency). Using dynamic Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models (SAOMs), we analyze five waves of data on a large sample of 13,214 adolescents from 51 friendship networks. While both processes explain patterns of risky activities for girls and boys, the delinquent behavior of girls is more susceptible to influence and girls are especially likely to select friends who have similar smoking behaviors to their own.

© 2018 Published by Elsevier B.V.

This research examines the degree to which gender differences exist in two crucial peer processes that impinge on several risky adolescent behaviors, including smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol, and delinquency. Harmful actions on the part of adolescents do not occur within a social vacuum. The social ties of both the young and old embed them in a web of potent connections that plays a part in influencing their behavioral choices, health outcomes, and other indicators of well-being (Smith and Christakis, 2008). The friendship network ties of adolescents, in particular, both shape, and are shaped by their participation in problem behaviors (Haas et al., 2010). However, there exists considerable variation among the social networks of adolescents. For instance, previous work finds that the structure and nature of friendship networks often are characterized by notable gender differences (e.g. Benenson, 1990; Stehlé et al., 2013). Girls tend to be situated in smaller networks that consist of emotionally intimate relationships, while boys surround themselves with larger friendship groups that are characterized by joint participation in extracurricular activities (Perry and Pauletti, 2011; Rose and Rudolph, 2006). Through the adoption of a social network perspective, we can develop unique insight into the causes and consequences of risky youth behaviors, as well as how gender moderates these associations.

Considerable research documents that young people tend to participate in similar risky behaviors as their friends. This homogeneous problem behavior is the result of two social processes: peer

influence and friend selection. Adolescents may initially select friends who already exhibit similar behaviors as their own or be influenced by friends to adjust their behavior so it is more like that of the group (Kandel, 1978). While previous work considers how peer influence and friend selection operate in the general population of adolescents, significantly fewer studies question whether these processes vary for girls and boys (for exceptions, see Haynie et al., 2014; Kretschmer et al., 2018; Mercken et al., 2010). Gender is a crucial social structure that shapes our lived experiences (Risman, 1998), including the norms, goals, and expectations that adolescents bring to their social relationships (Maccoby, 1998; Rose and Rudolph, 2006). Yet despite the salience of gender, it remains unclear whether the key social network processes of peer influence and friend selection are also gendered processes. Studies that test for gender differences in peer influence and friend selection often uncover mixed findings, likely because they rely on small samples with limited statistical power (e.g., Fortuin et al., 2016; Haynie et al., 2014) or only consider a single behavior type (e.g., Kretschmer et al., 2018; Mercken et al., 2010). Additional work is needed to determine how gender shapes peer influence and friend selection processes so scholars and practitioners can better characterize the complexity of adolescents' social worlds.

The current research seeks to further improve our understanding of gender differences by analyzing data derived from one of the largest studies of its kind, consisting of five waves from 51 school networks. Using Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models (SAOMs) we test whether the perceived relational choices of adolescents, including peer influence and friend selection, are moderated by their gender. Additionally, by considering three separate risky behaviors, this study aims to further our understanding as to whether gendered

* Corresponding author at: Department of Sociology and Criminology, Pennsylvania State University, 211 Oswald Tower, University Park, PA, 16801, USA.
E-mail address: mcmillan@psu.edu (C. McMillan).

experiences with influence and selection are consistent or variable across multiple behaviors. Testing for variations across multiple behavior types can improve our understanding as to whether gendered patterns are due to inherent, structural differences between girls' and boys' friendship networks or if they vary according to the behavior of interest.

Background

Friendship homophily, influence, and selection

According to the principle of homophily, individuals prefer to associate with those who share similar characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors to their own (McPherson et al., 2001). While there is evidence for homophily in a variety of different social relationships, it is particularly apparent within adolescent friendship groups. If a pair of adolescents are friends, both parties are likely to share many attributes, including similar participation in problem behaviors (Kandel, 1978).

There are two general mechanisms that help to explain why homophily on risky behavior is commonly observed within adolescent friend groups: peer influence and friend selection. Peer influence occurs when an adolescent's attitudes and behaviors are shaped by those of a friend so that the pair becomes more homogeneous than it was prior to the relationship's inception (Kandel, 1978). Friend selection, on the other hand, refers to the tendency for adolescents to form friendships with peers to whom they are similar. If two adolescents share the same trait or characteristic, it is more likely that a friendship will form between the pair (Kandel, 1978).

Initially, most scholars relied on influence theories to explain homophily in adolescents' risky behavior. Sutherland's (1947) classic differential association theory argues that peers and intimates introduce individuals to "definitions," or behavior patterns that can encourage risky behavior. If individuals' associates overwhelm them with definitions that promote substance use or delinquency, for instance, their odds of participating in these same behaviors increase. Akers's (1973) social learning theory extends Sutherland's work by incorporating behavioral learning theories from psychology. Most notably, Akers argues that individuals learn to commit deviant acts through their interactions in social settings. Individuals' choices to participate in risky behavior are guided by their observations of how these behaviors are punished or reinforced by their peers. Thus, both theories argue that friendship homophily is the result of influence processes.

Alternatively, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) control theory posits that deviant youth seek out friends with similar risky behaviors as their own, suggesting that friend selection mechanisms are responsible for homophily in adolescents' behavior. According to this theoretical framework, adolescent risk behavior is not the result of influence processes. Instead, adolescents' decisions to experiment with delinquency and substance use are shaped by their individual self-control, or impulse regulation. Youth with low self-control are more likely to participate in risky behaviors and tend to seek out friends who exhibit similarly low levels of self-control. Because of these two associations, adolescents often participate in the same problem behaviors as their friends, and thus, the friend selection process, not peer influence, is primarily responsible for behavior homophily observed within adolescent friend groups.

As the growing sophistication of social network analysis has spread to the study of adolescent friendships, research has begun to consider the extent to which peer influence and friendship selection contribute to homophily in adolescents' risky behavior. Thus far, the overwhelming consensus is that influence and selection are not mutually exclusive processes. Indeed, the influence any ado-

lescent receives is determined by which friends he or she initially selects. Much empirical research supports the importance of both processes, finding that influence and selection both notably contribute to homophily for adolescent risky behavior (e.g., Kretschmer et al., 2018; Mercken et al., 2010; Osgood et al., 2013; Pearson et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2015).

Gender variations in friendship

While many scholars have studied how influence and selection processes operate in the general population, few consider how gender shapes individuals' experiences with these network processes. However, the existence of gender variations should be anticipated, since previous work highlights the ways in which boys' and girls' friendships differ with regard to both their structure and character (Perry and Pauletti, 2011; Rose and Rudolph, 2006). Boys' friendship networks tend to be more expansive and characterized by greater numbers of heterophilous ties, while girls' networks are smaller and primarily contain best friends (Benenson, 1990). Female friendship networks often are densely interconnected and characterized by higher degrees of reciprocation and transitivity (Kreager et al., 2011; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999). While boys and girls both prefer intimate friendships, they tend to seek out this intimacy through different means. Girls define intimacy as being characterized by high degrees of emotional investment, while boys consider their friendships to be more intimate if they are organized around participation in shared activities (Ko et al., 2014; Rose and Rudolph, 2006).

Several theoretical arguments can help explain why gender differences exist in adolescent friendships. First, differences in male and female friendships can be explained by the gendered behaviors and personality traits that individuals begin to acquire during childhood; they are not the result of inherent characteristics (Hollander et al., 2011). Children learn gendered behavior by both intentionally and unconsciously modeling the actions of those around them as well as from reward systems that positively reinforce adherence to gender roles (Bandura, 1977; Chodorow, 1978). While boys are taught to value objectivity and independence, girls are encouraged to be better attuned to social dynamics and cooperation with their friends (Chodorow, 1978). These gendered attitudes are further reinforced through children's interactions with peers as young girls and boys tend to gravitate towards same-gender friendships (Maccoby, 1998).

After gendered expectations are engrained during childhood, gender continues to be socially constructed and is consistently "performed," or displayed, by individuals (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Adolescent friendships represent one context within which "doing gender" occurs. Girls often take on a nurturing role in their relationships and are expected to disclose intimate matters to their friends, whereas boys are encouraged to minimize displays of emotion. Nevertheless, note that girls are not necessarily encouraged to cooperate with or nurture their rivals, enemies, and other actors who may either victimize them, or who they may victimize. Furthermore, adolescents can "perform" gender however they please, but failing to follow societal gender norms can have serious ramifications, including loss of popularity or targeting for aggression (Felmlee and Faris, 2016). To avoid suffering from these consequences, the majority of adolescents enact gender in a way that complements their sex categorization.

Social institutions further shape beliefs about gender differences and pattern our social interactions (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999). Gender itself can be understood as a system, or social structure; even when individuals reject gender norms and male dominance, they are often forced to continue making gendered choices because of institutional pressures and social costs (Risman, 1998; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Individuals are systematically

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7538193>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7538193>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)