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The role of feared possible selves in the relationship between peer influence and delinquency

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of a feared delinquent possible self on the relationship between exposure to negative peer behaviors and violent and non-violent self-reported delinquency. Previous research strongly supports that deviant peers influence adolescents' delinquent behavior. Yet, few studies have explored intrapersonal factors that may moderate this influence. Possible selves include what one hopes, expects and fears becoming and are believed to motivate behavior. Thus, it was hypothesized that adolescents who were exposed to deviant peers and also feared engaging in delinquency would be more likely to self-report delinquency. Seventh grade students ($n = 176$) identified feared possible selves in the future, their exposure to negative peer behavior and self-reported violent and non-violent delinquent behavior. Findings suggest that exposure to negative peer behavior is associated with self-reported delinquent behavior. For violent behavior, possessing a feared delinquent possible self moderates this relationship. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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Delinquency is a serious concern during the period of adolescence. In 2011, nearly a million adolescents under the age of 18 were arrested for crimes ranging from larceny to murder ([Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011](#)). Involvement in delinquency places adolescents at risk for physical injury and is associated with greater likelihood of engagement in other non-normative behaviors (e.g., alcohol and drug use; [Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000](#); [Valois, Mckeown, Garrison, & Vincent, 1995](#)). Adolescent delinquency also places an enormous economic burden on society in general ([Miller, Fisher, & Cohen, 2001](#); [Waters, Hyder, Rajkotia, Rehwinkel, & Butchart, 2004](#)). Given the serious individual, social and economic costs of engaging in such activity, it is important to understand risk factors associated with involvement as well as factors that may buffer their impact.

Adolescents are remarkably similar to their friends on many traits and behaviors ([Kandel, 1978](#)). Previous research and theory overwhelmingly suggests strong associations between peer behavior and adolescents' perpetration of delinquency ([Agnew, 1991](#); [Akers & Jensen, 2006](#); [Akers, Krohn, Lanza-Kaduce, & Radosevich, 1979](#); [Brehwald & Prinstein, 2011](#); [Brook,](#)

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Brook, Rubenstone, Zhang, & Saar, 2011; Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklen, 1997; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, & Patterson, 1996; Fergusson, Vitaro, Wanner, & Brendgen, 2007; Griffin, Scheier, Botvin, Diaz, & Miller, 1999; Kandel, 1978; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson et al., 2000; Prinstein, Boergers, & Spirito, 2001; Simons, Johnson, Beaman, Conger, & Whitbeck, 1996; Snyder, Dishion, & Patterson, 1986; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994). Despite consistent support for this relationship, there is a dearth of research exploring the potential mechanisms through which this influence is expressed, including exacerbation and dampening of effects by individual-level characteristics of the target youth (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). The present study expands our current understanding of individual-level characteristics by examining the role that fear of participating in delinquency plays in the relationship between negative peer influence and violent and non-violent self-reported delinquent behavior.

Delinquency and negative peer behavior

Delinquent behavior increases in prevalence during adolescence and is common among youth (Moffitt, 1993). However, although most adolescents engage in some delinquent behavior during this developmental period, many do not (Moffitt, 1993). Furthermore, most adolescents who engage in delinquent behavior do not continue to engage in delinquent or criminal activity into adulthood (Moffitt, 1993). Therefore, an important question remains regarding the factors that lead to delinquent behavior for some, and abstinence or desistance from such behavior in others.

The social learning theory of deviance (Akers & Jensen, 2006) contends that the acquisition of delinquent behavior occurs through association with individuals who model such behavior. Through these relationships, negative behavior is imitated, conditioned and reinforced and definitions favoring the behavior are formed (Akers & Jensen, 2006). Differential association with deviant peers may be particularly important in explaining delinquent behavior (Akers & Jensen, 2006). Adolescents' delinquent behavior has been frequently linked to that of their peers (Agnew, 1991; Akers & Jensen, 2006; Brook et al., 2011; Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Dishion et al., 1996, 1997; Fergusson et al., 2007; Griffin et al., 1999; Kandel, 1978; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson et al., 2000; Prinstein et al., 2001; Simons et al., 1996; Snyder et al., 1986; Thornberry et al., 1994; Young & Rees, 2013). During this developmental stage, peers become more important and consequential to adolescents' social lives (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). Social learning perspectives suggest that behavior will most closely match those with whom the individual spends the most time and with whom their relationship is closest (Agnew, 1991; Akers & Jensen, 2006).

Numerous factors may buffer the impact of peer behavior, including both inter- and intrapersonal processes (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Characteristics of the peer relationship such as strength of attachment or time spent together can affect behavior modeling (e.g., Agnew, 1991). Previous research also suggests that the relationship between peer deviance and delinquent behavior and substance use is moderated by characteristics of the target youth, including depressive symptoms (Prinstein et al., 2001); susceptibility to peer influence (Prinstein, Brechwald, & Cohen, 2011); novelty seeking and timing of pubertal maturation (Fergusson et al., 2007); and low autonomy development and poor social skills for handling deviance (Allen, Chango, Szewedo, Schad, & Marston, 2012). Meldrum, Miller, and Flexon (2013) found that the positive relationship between susceptibility to peer influence and self-reported delinquency was exacerbated by high levels of self-control. Furthermore, Dumas, Ellis, and Wolfe (2012) found that the association between perceptions of peer pressure and delinquent behavior was moderated by identity status. Thus, the relationship between peer behavior and delinquency is not the same for all individuals. Factors associated with the self-concept (e.g., possible selves) may also interact with peer influence in predicting delinquent behavior. It is plausible that the expected impact of negative peers may depend on adolescents' belief that they could engage in that behavior.

Possible selves

Previous research and theory has focused on the importance of the self-concept in guiding cognition and behavior. Markus and Nurius (1986) extended the notion of the self-concept to include possible future selves in addition to conceptions of the self in the past and present. Possible selves are elements of the self-concept that "can be viewed as a cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats ... [T]hey provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation" (Markus & Nurius, p. 954). Notions of the self are believed to guide the interpretation of self-relevant information, such as social, contextual and situational factors (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves can include what one expects to become, hopes to become as well as what one fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These possible selves are believed to become motivators of action (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Hopes and expectations are believed to be accompanied by action plans to achieve these goals. Similarly, feared possible selves are believed to represent failures to achieve important goals; thus, individuals are motivated to avoid these possibilities. The concept of possible selves has been used to examine a variety of different phenomena and behaviors, including identity formation (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001), self-esteem and self-worth (Knox, Funk, Elliot, & Bush, 1998), academic performance (Fraser & Eccles, 1995a; Leonardi, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004), health-related behaviors (Aloise-Young, Hennigan, & Leong, 2001), and delinquency (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993), as well as gender and age-related differences (Anthis, Dunkel, & Anderson, 2004; Cross & Markus, 1991; Fraser & Eccles, 1995b; Knox, Funk, Elliot, & Bush, 2000).

Oyserman and colleagues (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a, 1990b; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993) have explored the relationship between possible selves and delinquency. Oyserman and Markus (1990a) assessed expected, hoped for and feared possible

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