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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# HOW DO PEER PRESSURES INFLUENCE TEEN'S HEALTH BEHAVIOR? - HEALTH PEER PRESSURE REVISITED

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to revisit the studies reported in the area of peer pressure with reference to health behavior. Peer groups are social groups that consist of people of the same age and have similar interests and usually equal in terms of the education and social class. Peer groups are important as they tend to provide a space to make friends. They also help provide social and emotional support as well as an identity and a sense of belongingness to a social group, especially during adolescence. In exchange, adolescents try and behave in ways that are usually consistent with the norms and expected behavioural standards of the group. The authors have found the need for investigating how positive peer pressure is useful for fostering positive health behavior rather than looking at the negative influence of peer pressure on human behavior. The authors have found that most of the studies in this area have been developed have been assessing the negative aspects of peer pressure. This paper is concluded with the recommendations for conducting studies in this direction for understanding various positive dimensions of peer pressure in the light of current social change as a result of social networking, eating habits, risk taking behaviours ,etc.

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## INTRODUCTION

As a stage of development, adolescence is characterized by rapid physical, social and emotional changes. It is a transitional period that brings in a link between childhood and adulthood (Santrock, 2011). Adolescence is a stage of identity formation and there is a lot of turmoil and challenges. There is a change in the affiliations wherein individuals give more importance to peer groups and friends rather than family relationships. This leads to increased exploration and risk taking for adolescence. While risk taking is considered a part of adolescent development, these behaviors often endanger the lives, health and well-being of adolescents (Sales & Irwin, 2009).

While research on adolescents has portrayed the stage of adolescence in a negative light, this is not always the case. While peers do influence adolescence to engage in negative and anti-social behaviors like smoking, alcohol intake, drugs, anti-social activities, etc., they also influence the members in positive ways like in the field of academics, participating in school level activities, engaging in pro-social behaviour, etc. Despite the rapid change, the majority of adolescents cope successfully with the demands of physical, cognitive, and emotional development during this time period (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002; O'Donohue, Benuto & Tolle, 2013).

## Conceptual Basis

Peer group affiliations are of significant importance in the life of adolescents. These groups help shape the individual identity and provide a base for the individual to grow and explore, while giving a safe and secure backdrop. The following section looks at the peer group affiliation and its importance while also looking at peer pressure that tends to make the adolescents behave in ways that are in accordance to the norms and the behavioural patterns of the peer group that the adolescents seek out. The section also identifies what are health behaviours and the different health behaviours that are taken up by adolescents.

Erik Ericson (1968) states that peer - group affiliations are necessary for the healthy development of adolescents. Being a part of a group like a clique or a club or even loosely associating with a group with similar interests helps provide acceptance, identity and friendships (Brown, 1989). Peer groups allow teenagers to formulate relationships, give up dependence on parents and yet maintain a sense of belonging to a certain group (Clasen & Brown, 1985). Adolescence, being a stage where identity development takes place, adolescents are in a state of confusion regarding their identity. They question about themselves, their identity and also what they want out of life. Peer group relations help individuals to develop a sense of identity (Santrock, 2011). The security and support, which is found in peer groups acts as a comforting contrast to the

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uncertain sense of self of adolescents. Thus, belonging to a peer group emerges as a prominent developmental task early in adolescence, but peer-group affiliation is not strictly a matter of individual choice (Newman and Newman, 1976; Clasen & Brown, 1985). Peer-group relations form an integral component of adolescent socialization (Hartup, 1983) and is very influential. While in groups, people often behave in ways that are in accordance with social norms. Social Bonding Theory (Hirschi, 1969) state that peer group is particularly strong bond that exists when there is an absence of strong bonds between family members. Being a friend or part of a larger group or loosely affiliating with a crowd with similar interests (e.g., sports, music, drugs) provides great benefits of acceptance, friendship, and identity, but can also demand conformity (Brown, 1989; Simons-Morton & Farhat, 2010). Hence, adolescents often adopt behaviours that tends to be consistent with standards or expectations (norms) of the group. Peer group affiliation becomes particularly important and influential during adolescence (Brown, 1989).

Peer socialization, often referred to as peer pressure is an aspect of peer socialization. Peer pressure is a method to convey group norms and also maintain loyalty among group members. Social exchange theory, according to Thibaut and Kelly, states that, people stay in a relationship in which they receive maximum benefits and less costs and the relationship has a positive outcome. The relationship is ended when the negative outcomes overcome the positive (Crisp & Turner, p 365). Similarly, friendships and group memberships also expect conformity to group and following the group norms in exchange for the group affiliation. One of the most important attributions of belonging to a peer group is the pressure to think and behave in ways that are prescribed in the peer group guidelines. This is known as peer pressure (Clasen & Brown, 1985). Peer pressure is the encouragement from one's age group to engage in activities that they may or may not want to engage in (Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar, 2000). Belonging to a certain peer group facilitates certain behaviors that are consistent with the group norms. These behaviours may not be purely individual choice but they are followed or performed because following these behaviours, membership into a particular group is ascertained. To be accepted, the adolescent takes on the attitudes and behaviors of the group (Evans, Powers, Hersey, and Renaud 2006, Simons – Morton & Farhat, 2010).

Health, according to the World Health Organization, 1948, is the complete physical, mental and social well-being and not just the absence of disease or infirmity. While, traditionally health is looked at from a purely biological perspective, this definition of health tends to look at the concept of health from a biopsychosocio perspective, that is, an overall perspective that takes physical, social as well as mental health into consideration. Health behaviours are the behaviours that are undertaken by the individual to enhance their health. According to Kasl and Cobb, 1966, health behaviours can be defined in three ways. They are health behaviour, illness behaviour and sick role behaviour. Health behaviour aims at preventing diseases while illness behaviour is aimed at seeking cure whereas sick role behaviour is activities that a person takes up to get well. Health behaviours can be both health enhancing behaviours like

exercising, getting a regular health checkup, having a proper, balanced diet, etc. and health impairing behaviours like smoking, taking drugs, engaging in risky sexual behaviours etc.

Peer pressure is a major source of risk behaviours like alcohol use, drug use etc. Peers are influential factors who can introduce peers to risky behaviours and also pressurize them to pursue it. Due to these behaviours, adolescents tend to view negative peer activities as socially acceptable behaviours. Various studies on peer pressure look at how negative peer pressure influences adolescents to take up behaviours that tend to pose a risk to the health of the adolescents. There are a few studies that focus on positive peer pressure and its influence on adolescents. Studies on positive peer influence have shown that adolescents tend to encourage peers to engage in school and school level activities that tend to foster positive development (Li, Lynch, Kalvin, Liu & Lerner, 2011). They also tend to encourage adolescents to engage in behaviours that are pro-social in nature (Hanes, 2012).

There is a dearth of studies in the area of positive peer pressure on the health of adolescents. The aim of the present study is to revisit the studies that are reported in the area of peer pressure with reference to health behaviours. The study aims to investigate how positive peer pressure is useful in fostering health behaviours rather than looking at the negative influence of peer pressure on human behavior.

### **Empirical Basis**

The present study was done by reviewing articles on peer pressure and their effect of health behaviours. The articles that are taken up for the present study range from peer pressure and its influences on alcohol, smoking, drug use and sexual behaviours of adolescents. The articles chosen for the studies are empirical articles as well as review articles. The articles are taken from various sources namely Science Direct, Jstor, Taylor and Francis, Oxford Journals, Springer, Bio Medical Central, PubMed as well as Wiley Online Library. The articles used for the present study are of different ages ranging from 1978 to 2014.

Peer group membership is a very powerful socializing agent and can have strong influence on the perceptions, opinions and behaviours of adolescents. Peers have significant influences on young people's behavior. Studies on alcohol use, smoking, drug use and delinquent behaviors (Lansford, Dodge, Fontaine, Bates and Pettit, 2014) have shown that adolescents tend to socialize with people who have similar behavioural patterns that they follow. These types of selection patterns tend to give rise to an amalgamation of risky behaviours among the adolescents of various groups (Haye, Green, Pollard, Kennedy & Tucker; 2014). Studies conducted on adolescents also show that they are most likely to take up behaviours or practices when they perceive their peers engaging in similar behaviours. In a study conducted by Prinstein, Boergers & Spirito in 2001, it was seen that adolescents who reported to engage in behaviours like substance use, violent behavior, and attempts to suicide also reported to have pressurized their friends to engage in similar behaviours. During adolescence, peer factors like the perception of risky sexual behavior have been found to be

related to adolescents' risky sexual behavior as adolescents tend to take up similar behaviours (Cavanagh 2004; Prinstein, Meade & Cohen 2003). Peer influence has been shown to reinforce or change individual attitudes and behaviors regarding sexual activity that leads adolescents to engage in sexual activities (Albarracín, Kumkale & Johnson, 2004, Stanton, Li, Feigelman & Baldwin 1998).

Substance use is another factor in which adolescents tend to face peer influence (Kandel, 1978). Susceptibility to peer influences may vary by gender and race (Hoffman, Monge, Chou & Valente, 2007). Peer influence has been identified as important in future smoking intentions among adolescent smokers and non-smokers (Ling & Glantz, 2002; Vitoria, Salgueiro, Silva & Vries, 2009) as well as in the development of nicotine dependence in adolescent smokers (de Leeuw, Engels, Vermulst & Scholte, 2009). Several studies on smoking have identified peer influence to smoking as a significant predictor of adolescent smoking (Conrad, Flay, & Hill, 1992; Kobus, 2003; Leventhal & Cleary, 1980 as cited in Hoffman, Monge, Chou & Valente, 2007). Alcohol use during adolescence occurs in the context of peers (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2006; Ingram, Patchin, Huebner, McCluskey, & Bynum, 2007 as cited in Trucco, Colder & Wieczorek, 2011). Peers directly or indirectly initiate alcohol use among adolescents. The direct peer pressure can be in the form of directly offering alcohol while indirect pressure can be in the form of refilling the empty glass, ordering alcohol without asking. Also, perceiving or observing peers drinking alcohol can also lead to use alcohol among adolescents.

Body image is another factor where both parental and peer influence can have a strong effect on adolescent boys and girls. Studies conducted have shown that close friends are highly influential in promoting body image issues among adolescents (Jones, 2004; Jones & Crawford, 2005, 2006; Helfert & Warschburger, 2011). Research in this area has been conducted more among girls than boys. However, increasing number of studies have shown that boys too face body image issues and dissatisfaction with body image as well (Jones & Crawford, 2005; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Banfield, 2000; Helfert & Warschburger, 2011). Girls prefer thinner bodies while the image issues differ with boys with some desiring thinner bodies while some others desire more muscular bodies (Smolak, 2004; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001; McCreary & Sasse, 2000; Helfert & Warschburger, 2011).

While peers play an influential role in the tendency of adolescents to succumb to peer pressure, other factors too play a role in the lives of adolescents. Adolescents tend to look for approval and care and support from their peers and are highly susceptible to peer pressure when there is lack of parental support, monitoring and care and there is high amount of neglect from homes. Parents, who have drug habits, neglect their children that lead to adolescents to look for care, support and approval in their peers. (Quensel, McArdle, Brinkley, Blom, Fitzgerald, Johnson, Kolte, Michels, Pierolini, Pos, & Stoeckel; 2002). High levels of family dysfunction, low social acceptance and parental pressure play a role in the adolescent engaging in activities that require peer approval to join peer

groups (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn & Steinberg; 1993; Quensel, McArdle, Brinkley, *et al.*; 2002).

Gender differences exist in the peer pressure faced by adolescents. The predictor of adolescent boys' drinking was based on their friends drinking behaviours, whereas for girls' it was related to intrapersonal problems. Peer pressure was a predictor of drinking among older adolescent girls while peer pressure was present among adolescent boys throughout (Barber, Bolitho & Bertrand; 1998; Prinstein, Borges and Spirito, 2001). Females face more pressure regarding dressing as well as being socially active. Girls were also pressurized to maintain long-term, healthy heterosexual relationships (Brown, 1982). Boys faced pressure for engaging in taking drugs and drinking and also engaging in anti-social behaviours well as sexual relationships (Brown, 1982; Bullock, Deckard & Leve, 2006). Girls are also more influenced by friends who smoke than boys while boys tend to engage in more deviant behaviours (Quensel, McArdle, Brinkley, *et al.*; 2002; Simons-Morton & Farhat, 2010).

In a study conducted by Steinberg in 1987, gender differences were found among adolescents who came from different family structures and peer pressure. It was seen that adolescents from intact families were less susceptible to peer pressure than others. It was seen that boys in stepfamilies and with single parent were involved in deviant while girls living in stepfamilies were less involved in deviant activities when living with single mothers but more often than girls living in extended-family households or girls living with both natural parents.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Peer groups are important socializing agents that tend to have more influence on the lives of adolescents than family as they tend to move away from the familial influences. Peer groups provide security and a feeling of belongingness while giving the adolescents the freedom to explore and form their identities (Clasen & Brown, 1985). However, in exchange, they demand conformity and behaviours that are in accordance to the group behaviours conformity (Hirschi, 1969; Brown, 1989 as cited in Simons-Morton and Farhat, 2012). These behaviours usually are risky behaviours like alcohol use, drug use, smoking and risky sexual behaviours. These behaviours tend to have a negative influence on the health of adolescents.

The present study aimed at reviewing the existing literature related to health behaviours like smoking, alcohol use, drug use and risky sexual behaviours that adolescents engage in when faced with pressure by their peers or the members of the peer group that they are a part of. The literatures published in the area of peer pressure have been highly focused on the negative influence of peer groups on the behaviours of adolescents. There are very few studies that focus on the positive influence of peer pressure on adolescents. Gender differences are found in the different areas of peer influence. Females are found to be more susceptible to peer pressure regarding their appearance and relationships while boys are pressurized to engage in risky behaviours. Studies have shown that parental influence and family structures has an impact on the adolescent susceptibility

to peer pressure. Adolescents from dysfunctional families are highly susceptible to peer pressure while adolescents who come from intact families are less prone to peer pressure.

There is a need to explore the impact of peer pressure on the positive health related behaviours among adolescents in the light of current social changes taking place due to social networking, eating habits of people as well as risk taking behaviours among adolescents. Peer pressure may not always lead people or adolescents to engage in behaviours that are unhealthy in nature. The studies on positive influence of peer pressure can focus on how the positive health behaviours can be brought about in the lives of adolescents.

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