

Examining the Effect of Changes in the Peer Group on Attitudes: A Longitudinal Study

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Peer interactions are an important part of adolescence and have been the focus of much research in both psychology and criminology. The relationship between peer behavior and a youth's own behavior has been demonstrated multiple times in prior research. Little is known, however, about how peer behavior may affect individual attitudes. This is surprising given that many prevention programs, particularly skills building programs, focus on changing and shaping individual attitudes to change/prevent behavior. This dissertation partially addressed this gap by focusing on the relationship between peer behavior and individual attitudes. This dissertation accomplishes three main goals through the use of three waves of data from a multi-site sample of 3,820 middle school youth. First, this dissertation assessed the causal ordering surrounding the relationship between peer behavior and individual attitudes. Second, prior research has shown that peer groups hold both antisocial and prosocial values and norms, which can affect individual attitudes in both conforming and nonconforming ways. Therefore, this dissertation examined the relative effect of prosocial and antisocial peers as well as the effect of the ratio of prosocial to antisocial peers on attitudes. Finally, this study examined how attitudes change in relation to changes in the peer group.