Peer pressure, academic and social experience of secondary school teenagers in the outskirts of Mbarara municipality, Uganda

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Peer pressure, academic and social experience of secondary school teenagers in the outskirts of Mbarara municipality, Uganda

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to get scientific explanation of how teenagers constructively and destructively influence others in academic and social context. Cross-sectional design, qualitative method, and focus group discussions were employed. Randomly selected students (n =40) from purposively selected secondary schools (N=4) were recruited into the study. Participants in each school were divided into groups and each group given topics of discussion. It was realized that peer pressure almost weighs equally on both positive and negative scales of teenagers' academic and social experiences. Teenagers also had varied strategies of avoiding negative peer pressure influences. It was concluded that though teenagers knew how to bolster bad peer pressure, some find it a challenge to cut a rational balance between accepting peer engagement and being themselves.

Keywords: peer pressure; teenagers; academic experiences; social experiences; secondary schools

1. Introduction

Peers are individuals with whom a teenager identifies (Keen & Evans, 2009), who are usually but not always of the same age group (Shaffer, 2000). Due to changes in culture and social structures, most teenagers spend longer time with peers in schools than at home (Philpchalk & McConnell, 1994). As a result, they take more time talking with friends than with their parents and are more influenced by their fiends about day-to-day decisions (Cobb, 2000; Maio & Haddock, 2010). As a result of constant interaction with peers, teenagers at times feel coerced to follow group or particular individual's behaviour, socially defined as peer pressure (Taylor, 2009). Peer pressure occurs when an individual experiences persuasion to adopt values, beliefs and goals of others, which sometimes amounts to coercion (Feldman, 2011; Wade, 2004, 2005).

Due to peer pressure many teenagers "go off the rail" or "get in with bad crowd" (APA, 1980; Hayes, 1993). Teenagers seek out friends who engage in similar activities (Suls & Wallston 2003) who appear to be their role models (Maibach & Parrot, 1995) and, in turn, are influenced by such activities and peer support remains an important phenomenon in lives of teenagers (Bruess & Glenn, 1989; Neil, Neil & Buskist, 2007). Cobb (2000) brings out one such example in which after similarities in age, grade in school, sex and race, peers are most likely to be similar in their use of narcotics such as marijuana. Similarly, Cobb asserts that following a pair of friends over a two-year period found out that individual friends (and not the social crowd) were the major influence in whether teenagers were likely to smoke.

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Not only is the behaviour of teenagers influenced by that of their peers, but so are their feelings. As a result, teenagers are more likely to choose friends whose moods are similar to their own, though this is gender determined (Cobb, 2000).

Though parents and researchers generally tend to emphasize the negative influences of peers, adolescents themselves often describe positive peer pressures, such as encouragement to avoid unhealthful behaviours and engage in healthful ones (Gray, 2007). Furthermore, according to Gray, extensive studies in China report that peer pressure is viewed there by parents and educators as well as by teenagers, much more as a positive force than as a negative one. Thus in China, young people as well as adults place great value on academic achievement and teenage peer groups do homework together and encourage one another to excel in school (Gray 2007; Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2006).

In addition, available literature shows that peer pressure is a source of good and productive life among teenagers (Ragland, 1980). Actual pressure from peers to misbehave or for misconduct may be relatively slight. Teenagers therefore are more likely to sacrifice significant aspects of their lives for good behaviour such as keeping up with school work or developing their talents in order to be popular with peers. Socially and academically competent teenagers are likely to seek the company of similar teenagers and their interactions in turn, often amplify the initial advantages of each (Cobb, 2000).

Positive influences, however, in most cases are a complement of the values established by parents. This perhaps explains why teenagers with similar family backgrounds are likely to be friends (Cobb, 2000). Despite the role of peers in teenagers' choice of activities, parents continue to remain significant sources of strength and reference.

2. Method

The study employed cross-sectional survey design due to the nature and big size of the study population. In this design qualitative methods were used to collect data using focus group discussions. Focus group discussions were used to generate as many ideas as possible about the topic of the study.

2.1. Objective

The aim of the study was to investigate how teenagers positively and negatively influence their peers academically and socially. The study was guided by three objectives:
  ▪ To explore the effects of peer pressure on the academic aspect of teenagers.
  ▪ To explore the effects of peer pressure on the social aspect of teenagers.
  ▪ To establish the strategies teenagers use to resist peer pressure.

2.2. Participants

Secondary school students were considered as participants in this study. Ten participants were randomly selected (to give both girls and boys equal chances of representation and eliminate bias) from each of the four purposively selected secondary schools. Schools were purposively selected to get only co-educational schools. Co-educational schools were particularly preferred because their nature allows male and female students to interact with and influence each other. Initial permission to conduct discussions was obtained from heads of the respective schools.

2.3. Instrument

An interview guide was employed to generate data from participants. The interview guide was used because it allowed flexibility and generated as many ideas from students as possible. The instrument was designed in such a way to elicit answers to

questions of the study: a) how does peer pressure affect teenagers (i) academically? (ii) socially? b) What strategies do teenagers employ to avoid peer pressure?

2.4. Procedure

The first step was to introduce the study to the head teacher or deputy head teacher and to brief them regarding the study. Thereafter permission was sought from the school administration to allow access to students. Head teachers would then introduce the researcher to the head prefect or teacher on duty. The head prefect would organise and help to identify potential participants in respective classes, who would participate on voluntary basis. The students would be allowed to randomly pick small folded pieces of paper with numbers written on them, from small box. Those students who could pick papers marked one to ten were allowed to participate in the study.

After identifying the potential participants, they were briefed regarding the aim of the study and assured that their answers to study questions were to remain confidential and that participation was purely voluntary. Next was to verbally ask for their consent.

Following consent, participants in each school were divided into four groups and each group was given relevant themes to discuss with close supervision of the investigator. The researcher helped each group to choose a secretary who, together with the researcher, recorded all the points of discussion on a specially designed form. Forms from all the groups were collected and ideas coded and interpreted to answer the research questions.

2.5. Data analysis

The obtained data was analyzed using content analysis and content comparison methods. Participants' discussions and answers to specific questions were scrutinized to see what themes emerged-to identify what students talked about most and to see how the themes related to each other. Indicators of categories in events of peer influence were named and coded. The codes were then compared to find consistencies and differences among the phenomena being investigated.

3. Results

3.1. Influence of Peer Pressure on Academics of Teenagers

All groups asserted that peer pressure increases academic performance and grades. This was backed up by one of discussants who had this to say: " you may find someone having a boy friend encouraging each other to read, not to dodge classes but on the other side, …" (FGD, student, March 2006).

The participants also most frequently mentioned improving talents as one of the effects of peer pressure. Joining clubs for example was attributed to peers.

Another frequently mentioned idea was competition for higher grades. Participants revealed that with peer pressure, students learn how to "cooperate' academically and make rational choices "especially girls who take sciences" (FGD, student, March 2006). The students however did not elaborate on what "cooperate" meant in this context. They also noted that peer pressure made them too ambitious as one of them emphasized: "being too ambitious can affect a person negatively' (FGD, student, Mach 2006).

3.2. Influence of Peer Pressure on Social Experience of Teenagers

On this topic, participants suggested that peer pressure makes teenagers get influenced by risk behaviours. This was reflected in some of the students' assertions: "sometimes boys pressurize you to do bad things", "why do some boys pretend to be brothers to some girls while they are not related and force them to have sex?", "smoking is bad but because of friends, you find yourself going to aunt's hide out…" (FGDs, students, March 2006). The students further indicated that peer pressure helps

them to "acquire information", "excel in sports", "prove that they are no longer kids"," escape parents' demands" and "learn about taboo subjects especially abstinence from sex".

3.3. Strategies used to resist Peer Pressure

The suggestions outlined below featured most regarding how to resistance of peer pressure:
- Not to spend time with people they do not know
- Evaluate the risk e.g. "are you doing smoothing regrettable?"
- Proper communication- say "No" with force
- Anticipating the expectations of your group
- Walk away in times of trouble
- Avoid some situations and people e.g. ring leaders of strikes
- Get involved in positive activities such as sports
- Seek guidance from elders-parents and teachers

4. Discussions

When attention was given to teenagers' responses, it was visible that they experience both explicit and implicit pressure from their peers. It is explicit in that teenagers have to conform to peer's expectations for well-defined standards and establish out ward behaviours that define their groups. They experience implicit peer pressure because sometimes the coercion arouses self drive and motivation to act in accordance with peers' standards. These observations agree with Kosslyn (2004) and Wade (2004) who asserted that when teenagers are in a group, their personalities are masked by the group making them subject to persuasion. The results of the study are confirmed with Slee's and Shute's (2003) argument that teenage hood is a period peculiarly susceptible to external influences.

The results are also in agreement with the articulation that conformity reflects a relatively rational process in which youngsters construct a norm from other people's behaviour in order to determine correct and appropriate behaviour for themselves (Hogg's and Vaughan's, 2008; Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). Hoggs and Vaughan (2008) however caution that if teenagers are already confident and certain about what is appropriate and correct, then others' behaviour will be largely irrelevant and thus not influential.

From the expressions of the students which agree with available sources, it is clear that because of peer pressure, children do things they would otherwise not have done if they were alone (Breckler, Olson, & Wiggins, 2006). They engage in risky behaviours (Scambler, 2006), due to their peers as reported that "sometimes boys pressurize you to do bad things" (FGD, student, March 2006) and that one of the effects of peer pressure is "making irrational choices, especially girls who take sciences" (FGD, student, March 2006). These observations, however, are not in isolation as Karon (2000) asserted that teenagers sometimes act against their will because of peer influence. The observations are however in agreement with Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2006) who suggest that peer involvement leads to de-individuation and that de-individuation helps teenagers commit antisocial acts.

Further analysis of the students' discussions suggests that teenagers do not only experience pressure from peers but from adults too. As indicated in their responses, "some teachers lead to academic success by contributing towards at-risk behaviours, and some male teachers engage students in fornication" (FGD, student, March 2006). This is in agreement with Cobb (2000) who observed that teenagers are usually coerced by parents and teachers to undertake certain activities against their will and this at times becomes a source of conflict between parents and their children. When viewed with respect to the results of this study, we would be right to observe that apart from peers, both parents and teachers affect teenagers' behaviour.

Positively, it is implied that teenagers derive the necessary social and academic support from peer groups and peer involvement. There is vast literature available to

support these findings: Woolfe, Strawbrigde, and Dryden (2010) suggest that peer support is a growing feature of educational institutions, and that peer support systems can be especially helpful in reducing bullying and its effects. Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2006) also agree with the argument, asserting that peer status has strong influence on behaviour within groups of students working together.

Though the impact of positive peer influence cannot be overemphasized, teenagers themselves often describe its significance such as encouragement to avoid unhealthful behaviours and engage in healthful ones (Gray, 2007). The academic and social benefits of peer influence therefore remain eminent, both in the eyes of students, parents and educators (Gray 2007; Hockenbury & Hockenbury, 2006).

Finally, the results of this study show that teenagers' strategies to resist peer pressure are diversified. They also indicate and confirm earlier studies that most children at teenager stage have developed a full conscience to decide what is right and wrong for them (Farrant, 2002). Whereas their responses may represent individual teenager's values and character, it is important to reflect on how different characters affect each other in communities like schools. We can then conclude that when teenagers have mature conscience, they are responsible and want the best for their peers (Linda, et al 2003). They are careful not to exert negative peer pressure and also not easily allow their peers to influence them (Gross, 2008).

5. Conclusions

(a) Teenagers experience pressure to make both negative and positive decisions and they attach importance on positive peer pressure especially if it is expected to help them academically.

(b) Teenagers know about desirable and undesirable peer pressure and trust themselves that they can use various strategies to resist peer influence.

(c) Though teenagers know about how to resist peer pressure, this does not guarantee that they always do away with it. Some of them find it a challenge to get a rational balance between which peer beliefs, values and experiences can be adopted for themselves (Jones-Nelson, 2000).

(d) There is chance that though teenagers will seek refuge in adults for protection from peer pressure, they are likely to develop negative attitudes towards norms and customs of the adult community due to peer pressure.

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