



**SSK 1204 - Applied Independent
Learning Methods**

Adolescents and Peer Pressure

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According to Erik Erikson, adolescence is the age in which people must set up an identity to escape identity diffusion and confusion. At this age, adolescents give much importance to their friends who have a power over them. This phenomenon is called “peer pressure.” Oxford English Dictionary defines peer pressure as the influence from members of the same group. One may think of many kinds of peer pressure that may have a positive or negative aspect. Peer group is a term commonly used by psychologists to describe people of a similar age, often when talking about adolescents. There is peer pressure in different ages and different places. For instance, workers at the same factory have peer pressure which is positive because each one of them tries to do his or her best at work. There is peer pressure among small kids; they try to do the same gestures and have the same toys and there is also peer pressure in ethnic groups. Finally, there is peer pressure among adolescents which is the most important kind since it influences the adolescents’ personality and intervenes in the development of their morality.

Indeed, peers are one of the most factors that influence the adolescent’s psychological development. Bronfenbrenner (as cited in Oswald and Suss, 1988), a Russian psychologist who had developed many theories in the developmental psychology, asserts, “the first level of the ecology or the context of human development is the microsystem ... [that is] family, school, peer groups as well as the specific culture within which the family identifies.”(349) This means that adolescents are mostly influenced by their families and their surrounding. In previous findings, family was the only responsible for adolescents’ behavior, yet recent research find out that peers have a more powerful influence on adolescents, especially in what concerns academic achievement (Oswald and Suss, 1988). Even if in Bronfenbrenner’s model, family comes before outer world which is school and peers, researches prove that the role of peers is more significant than parents’ role. This role is important because at teen’s age, youths become interested in knowing who they are. They

try hard to find out their identity as this stage is known as the “identity versus identity confusion” in Erik Erickson’s Theory of Identity Development. This goes and says that peer pressure is important and even unavoidable in adolescence. Peers are crucial for adolescent’s development because development needs to be in context which mainly means family and peers (Oswald and Suss, 1988). In fact, peer pressure has more negative than positive effects which influence adolescents’ personality.

Drug abuse is an illustration of the dangerous negative effects that peer pressure has on adolescents. According to Lamsaouri (1994-1995) the cause of substance over use among peers is that everyone else is using it and there is no problem to use it. This is the answer of all adolescents that are caught overusing drugs. Another reason for which adolescents abuse of drugs is the pressure peers have on each other. All peers in the same group are obliged to do the same thing and conform to the rules of the group. Therefore, adolescents start using drugs even if they are convinced that they are harmful for their health. Besides, over using drugs, for peers, means that adolescents are strong and they can break down general rules that they learnt from their parents or their teachers. In general, adolescents, use drugs to full fill their need of belonging since it’s a source of self esteem for teens. In fact, Haynie (2002) find out that adolescents get their self esteem from the group they are belonging to and they cannot imagine themselves outside that gathering. Without a group, youths have a low self esteem and they are powerless. They see friends or peers as a vital component in their life without which they cannot live.

There are many problems with substance overuse among adolescents, but the biggest one is addiction. Members of the same group overuse drugs and new members have to the same. However, when it comes to addiction, no one is responsible for anybody else. When a peer becomes addicted to smoking, drinking, or illicit substances, it is his/her own responsibility to solve the problem and never tell that he or she was influenced by someone

else (Cang and Hawk, 1996). If he or she tells someone else that there is a peer that he/she is hanging out with, the trouble starts with the peer which leads, in most cases, to violence and even death. In deed, Howell and Decker (1999) declares, “because the growth in youth gang violence coincided with the crack cocaine epidemic, the two developments were generally perceived to be interrelated.” (4) As a result, there is a strong correlation between the use of drugs and violence among adolescents. In fact, when adolescents start over using drugs, they start fighting over illicit drugs since they are expensive and sometimes when they over use drug they lose control and they can do anything they could not do while they are conscientious.

In his book *Drogue, Adolescence, et Milieu Social*, Sidi Ahmed Lamsaouri (1994-1995), conducted a research on drugs and adolescents in Morocco and found that 55, 13% of teens are introduced to drugs by the intermediary of peers. This huge rate indicates the salient and strong influence that peers have on each other, especially drug abuse. Kawaguchi (2004) inserts, “Peer effects or peer pressure is identified as a critical determinant, since the use of substance is considered to be a highly social behavior.” (351) Consequently, substance is introduced to peers through a social intermediary which is mostly people from the same age. There are many examples of why peers encourage each other to overuse drugs. Sometimes, peers use substance to overcome stress and they conserve a good feeling, so that they advice each other to use it. Besides, some peers got addicted by others and they cannot recover, therefore, to take their revenge on, they try to make others addicted and based on the weak personality adolescents have, the result is easily gotten. The last, reason for which peers push each other to abuse substance is conformity. In teen’s age, adolescents want to conform at any price and sometimes addiction to illicit drugs is the price they pay.

Appearance is another example of negative effects that peer pressure has on adolescents. Peers often push their friends to change their appearance. This is a negative aspect because it leads youth to lose their identity and dissolve within the group. They become dependent on their peers' choice and stuck to their judgments (Lamsaouri, 2005). Members of the same peer wear the same clothes and they are often unique ones and reveal an idea or a view that the peers hold or share. They can wear hip-hop clothes if they are fan of hip-hop, or they can wear a gang fashion that shows that they are violent and they belong to another gang group. Besides, all peers try to wear the same clothes and they cannot wear something different. If they do so, they will be hardly criticized by their friends which lead them to have low self esteem in addition to the adolescence' crisis they are living.

Girls are the most influenced by peers and they suffer from the pressure put on their backs which is sometimes more than the pressure boys have. They have to dress nicely and they have to wear fashionable clothes because if they do not, they will be rejected by their friends. For girls, there is another kind of pressure added to peer pressure which is media pressure (Sheid, 2005). In fact, media tries to give a standard beautiful body to all girls without any distinction. Adolescent girls have, in most case, a role model who has a perfect body, so they want to be like her and possess the same attractiveness that she gets from her body. As a result, and as it is explained by Harvey (2002) girls undergo many eating pathologies such as bulimia which is mainly due to the stress to own a perfect body and since it is difficult and even impossible, they start eating whatever crosses their way. Or anorexia which is characterized by the through out whatever they eat because they are obsessed by a perfect body and eating is considered as crime for them.

In fact, adolescents care a lot about their appearance in the teen age; however, peers add more pressure that in most of times influence youth's identity and make them loose their choice and their personal way of expression. Appearance is one of the most indicators that

show whether the adolescent has a way of expression that comes from a strong personality or not. Therefore, if it is influenced by outside factors and manipulated, this will give a strong indication that the youth is lacking independence and a strong personality.

Moreover, there is a strong relationship between appearance and self-esteem during adolescence. Since adolescents pay more attention to others' feedback and appearance is the link between the self and the others, each remark about appearance goes directly to the self (Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison 2004). Accordingly, adolescents get their self esteem from their peers and never forget their comments. Peer pressure then plays an important role in the process of identity development since adolescents get their body image model from their peers. In fact, peers try to get their own appearance and oblige each member to conform to rules.

The last aspect that concerns negative effects of peer pressure is manipulating adolescents' attitudes and behavior. Adolescents like to hang out with friends from their age because they have similar ideas and they feel comfortable with each other. The sense of belonging is the most salient aspect that pushes adolescents to conform to a group and share thoughts and beliefs that sometimes harm the youths' identity (Haynie, 2002). Parents always hear youths saying my friends did this, so I have to do like them or my friends think this way, so I have to think like them. Thus, peers influence a lot each other in what concerns thoughts and beliefs.

In deed, during adolescents, teenagers spend a big proportion of their times with friends and the parents are not aware of the danger friends represent. They think that since their children are happy with the friends they have chosen, there is no problem with that. However, parents do not know that their children are undergoing a brain-washing that changes all the beliefs and morals for which they spent years to teach them to their children

(Morrison and Kalin, 2004). In fact, parents spent many years teaching their children morals and help them to feel happy about their identity, parent's social status, and appearance. Conversely, peers try to get them rid of their beliefs and thoughts and start to model their own identity and personality, especially that they are hidden from their families.

However, the problem that rises with peer pressure in relation to attitudes and behavior is that adolescents influence each other in a negative way and let them lose their values and even believe in things they would not accept before. For instance, peers can influence adolescents' religion and make him or her convert to another religion without the agreement of their parent and sometimes the parents do not even know about this issue. Accepting others ideas can be explained by Lawrence Kohlberg's Cognitive Development Approach to Adolescent Morality and precisely in the Interpersonally Normative Morality stage. During this stage adolescents give more importance to the others expectations and pleasance of others rather than "goodness." This stage explains well why adolescents gives more importance to their peers' approval than parents views because they see that the moral support from people of the same age is more credible than from aged people.

This influence in behavior adds to the behavioral disorders that adolescents have namely "Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), a pattern of negative, defiant, and disobedient behavior", "or Conduct Disorder, where adolescents repeatedly and persistently violates rules and the rights of others, [especially parents] without concern or empathy." ("Focus Adolescent Services," 2000). As a result, if these disorders are added to the peer pressure, the adolescents will be manipulated and will never be the real person he or she is. Besides, and more dangerous than this, if these disorders are not treated the time they appear, the adolescents will accumulate them in their psychology and will give other psycho-traumatic disorders later. In the summary of Erik Erikson stages, Rolf, R. Muuss (1996) sates:

“Each item of the vital personality is systematically related to all others; they all depend on the proper development in the proper sequence of each item.” (44) Consequently, there is an on-going occurrence of the eight ages of man, therefore, if a stage occurs and encounter a disorder, the next stage will occur and the disorder will reappear later since it was not cured.

To conclude one can perceive the importance of the socio-cultural environment for the identity development of adolescents. In deed, adolescents need to be in a precise context in order to develop their own identity. Peer pressure as previously explained is one of these contexts, but the problem with peers is that they influence adolescents in a negative way. They introduce them to drug abuse which has gives social drawbacks such as violence and delinquency. Besides, it gives personal disadvantages such as addiction, health problems, and mental disorders. Appearance is also affected in this critical stage by the peer’s pressure. In fact, peers influence adolescents’ appearance by limiting their own choices and providing them with small room to express themselves and impose their personality. The last aspect which is also influenced by peers is adolescents’ attitudes and behavior. Adolescents have to conform to the group and also they have to adapt their thoughts according to the group’ ones. This is very negative because peers break down all what the parents are constructing from the birth of their child.

Peer pressure is one of the most dangerous aspects of adolescence to which teenagers are exposed. Consequently, parents should care more about their adolescents until they overcome this critical age. They should be helpful to their children and they should talk to them as friends not as authoritative parents because adolescents are convinced more when they are with an open-minded person who shows both understandability and kindness. Otherwise, adolescents will encounter crisis and will hide them in their psychology and as

explained by Lawrence Kohlberg, and these disorders will appear lately with more psycho-traumatic troubles.

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