Peer pressure and adolescents’ problem behavior

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Abstract

The major goals of this study is to evaluate relationship between peer influence and adolescents’ problem behavior. According to the research hypothesis peer influence on adolescents’ problem behavior is mediated by the moral disengagement that refers to tolerant attitude toward deviant behavior. This study has a correlational design. Self-reported questionnaires were used to collect data. 150 adolescents aged from 14 to 18 participated in the research. The first group includes 60 adolescents who are in conflict with the law and the second group includes 90 participants who do not have the same experience. The results of the research show that peers’ problem behavioral model is the most important predictor of adolescents’ problem behavior. Correlational and regression analyses also show that peer control of problem behavior has negative correlation with adolescents’ problem behavior. On the basis of mediation analysis, revealed that moral disengagement is statistically significant mediator variable in the relationship between peer control and problem behavior. The intensity of the relationship between peer control and problem behavior decreases if adolescent’s tolerance attitude toward deviant behavior increases. The research results indicate to the effectiveness of a multi-system approach to the prevention of adolescents’ problem behavior. Multi-system approach is focused not only on adolescents’ individual characteristics, but also considers importance of social factors, particularly, peers and family in the process of preventing of deviant behavior.

Keywords: Peer pressure, Adolescents’ problem behavior, Prevention of deviant behavior, Moral disengagement.

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INTRODUCTION

The following research aims to study influence of peer relationship on adolescents’ problem behavior with the mediation role of moral disengagement. Peer relationship is an integral component of identity formation process in adolescence (Almulla, 2018; Erikson, 1969; Ragelienė, 2016). Importance of relationship with peer group and conformity to their pressure are related to adolescents’ striving to reach the feelings of uniqueness, maintain emotional autonomy from parents and satisfy the need for feeling safety (Galliher & Kerpelman, 2012). Adolescents try to maintain autonomy from parent and become an independent person, but in reality, they are not ready for being autonomous person. Peer conformity could be considered as a compensation of parental dependency (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Luczak & Kalbag, 2018). Besides striving to uniqueness and autonomy, Erikson emphasized that adolescents conform to peer pressure because they learnt that if they are related to peer group, there is less chance to become easy target for isolation, exclusion, bullying and etc., (Erikson, 1969).

The theoretical value and novelty of the research are are fully justified by the proposed multi-factor theoretical model, which combines the relevant individual and environmental characteristics linked to problem behavior in adolescence. The purpose of the study is not only to identify and evaluate risk factors for problem behavior, but also to examine the relationship between them. The practical significance of the research is related to the prevention of juvenile delinquency. Based on the results of the research, it is possible to develop evidence-based, culturally relevant and multi-factorial model for juvenile crime prevention policy.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship with peer group can become problematic when adolescent is related to peer group that is involved in deviant behavior. Such peer groups increase proneness to problem behavior, even when the other risk factors of problem behavior are controlled (Agnew, 2003). Problem behavior is considered as a deviation from formal and informal norms (Jessor, 2016). It contains several forms of adolescents’ external behaviors, including delinquency that is an illegal act committed by a person who is considered as a juvenile according to the legal framework of the country (Bartol & Bartol, 2014). Adolescents are especially inclined to delinquency. The amount of problem behavior is highest in adolescence than in any other age-group (Agnew, 2003). Normative and deviant groups of adolescents are different from each other not by the underlying mechanism of peer influence (striving to reach the feelings of uniqueness, maintain emotional autonomy and etc.), but according to the direction of this influence (pressure to involve in normative or pdeviant behavior). The direction of the influence is formed by the tolerant attitude toward problem behavior that are shared by the majority of the group members or a group leader (Brown & Larson, 2009). After an association with the peer group, adolescents’ normative values gradually weaken and at the same time, the degree of deviant behavior increases. This results could be explained from the perspective of social learning theory (Elliott & Menard, 1996; Tomé, de Matos, Simões, Camacho, & AlvesDiniz, 2012). According to Bandura et al. (1991), self-directive person, with the help of cognitive system, not only reacts on external stimulus, instead the person proactively change environmental influences, set aims and manage course of behavior. In term of self-directedness, person doesn’t conduct antisocial behavior, until the person has an arguments of moral justification of the behavior. Psychosocial mechanisms that help person to avoid internal control of behavior is called moral disengagement. Moral disengagement gives person possibility to conduct antisocial behavior in such a way to avoid self-sanctioning (Fontaine, Fida, Paciello, Tisak, & Caprara, 2014; Mazzone & Camodeca, 2019).

Literature about peer pressure and conformity suggests that association with a deviant group of peers does not directly affect on adolescents’ problem behavior, but it is mediated by the personal attitudes and beliefs toward conventional or unconventional behavior. In this research moral disengagement is considered as an illustration of tolerant attitude toward problem behavior and it is considered as a mediation variable between peer pressure and adolescents’ problem behavior. According to research hypothesis: 1. Peer problem behavior models have positive correlation with adolescents’ problem behavior and moral disengagement, 2. Peer control (that refers to expectancy of negative sanctioning of problem behavior from peers) is negatively related to moral disengagement and adolescents’ problem behavior, 3. Relationship between peer pressure and adolescents problem behavior is mediated by the moral disengagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for this correlational research were collected by the self-reported questionnaires. Before the major fieldwork, pilot research was completed for adaptation of the research instruments in Georgian Language.

Sample of Research

150 adolescents aged 14 to 18 participated in the research. The first group includes 60 adolescents who are in conflict with the law. They are beneficiaries of the probation agency of Georgia and center for crime prevention. The second group consists of 90 adolescents from Tbilisi public schools who do not have the same experience as the adolescents from the first group. The minimum age of the participants is determined by the Juvenile Justice Code of Georgia according to which the minimum age of criminal responsibility is 14 years old. The research sample contains 63.3% of males and 36.7%—females. Sample groups are not homogenous by sex because majority (87.4%) of children who are in conflict with the law are males (Garabal-Barbeira, 2015).

Research Instrument and Procedure

“Adolescents’ Health and Development Questionaire” 2002 was used to measure peer behavioral models and adolescents’ problem behavior. This inventory was created by Richard Jessor and his colleagues at the Institute of Behavioral Sciences at Colorado State University. The inventory is derived from Problem Behavior Theory and assesses the major causal factors of deviant behavior. The self-reported questionnaire is filled out by adolescents,
and, accordingly, the data reflects adolescents’ perceptions of peer behavioral models and peer control. Depending on the research goals, relevant subscales of the Adolescents’ Health and Development Questionnaire were selected, including: peer conventional and problem behavioral models and peer control (using 4-point scale where 1 means absolutely agree and 4 means absolutely disagree). Adolescents’ problem behavior subscale measures two major dimensions of problem behavior: 1. Delinquent behavior and 2. Substance abuse, particularly alcohol and marijuana. Each type of problem behavior is evaluated by the 5 point scale with its frequency.

Moral disengagement was measured but the moral disengagement questionnaires (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Questionnaire contains items that are divided into 8 subscales that assess 8 mechanism of moral disengagement: cognitive reconstruction of behavior, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, responsibility displacement, diffusion of responsibility, distorting consequences, attribution of blame and dehumanization.

Before collecting quantitative data, pilot study was implemented for adapting inventories in Georgian Language and determining psychometric properties of them. The sample of pilot study contains 45 adolescents from Tbilisi public schools and probation agency. Reliability index of the instruments were evaluated by Cronbach’s alpha coefficients (Table 1). Cronbachs’ alpha coefficients of most instruments is above .7 that indicate high reliability index for self-report questionnaires. Moral disengagement subscales (e.g., diffusion of responsibility, attribution of blame) have reliability index below 0.5, though given the number of the item (subscales consist of 4 items), Cronbach’s alpha coefficient should be considered satisfactory, indicating the internal agreement of the scale.

### Table 1: Means, standard deviations and reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s a) of the inventories (N = 45)

| Scale                                | N  | Item N | Cronbach’s α | M   | SD   |
|--------------------------------------|----|--------|---------------|-----|------|
| Peer conventional behavior models    | 45 | 7      | .69           | 16.85 | 3.48 |
| Peer problem behavior models         | 45 | 7      | .62           | 11.83 | 3.03 |
| Peer control                         | 45 | 7      | .71           | 23.21 | 3.31 |
| Moral disengagement                  | 45 | 32     | .91           | 77.25 | 18.07 |
| Cognitive reconstruction of behavior | 45 | 4      | .72           | 12.57 | 3.64 |
| Euphemistic language                 | 45 | 4      | .54           | 7.98  | 2.70 |
| Advantageous comparison              | 45 | 4      | .68           | 7.62  | 2.97 |
| Responsibility displacement           | 45 | 4      | .61           | 10.91 | 3.21 |
| Diffusion of responsibility           | 45 | 4      | .36           | 10.63 | 2.77 |
| Distorting consequences              | 45 | 4      | .58           | 8.45  | 2.64 |
| Attribution of blame                 | 45 | 4      | .43           | 9.99  | 2.84 |
| Dehumanization                       | 45 | 4      | .73           | 9.11  | 3.46 |
| Problem Behavior                     | 45 | 26     | .89           | 43.7  | 14.1 |
| Delinquency                          | 45 | 10     | .83           | 19.2  | 6.8  |
| Substance abuse                      | 45 | 16     | .86           | 24.5  | 9.2  |

Prior to collect quantitative data, formal consent was conferred by the responsible persons from probation agency, center for crime prevention and public schools. Legal representatives of minors as well as adolescents themselves confirmed their agreement to participate in the study written and oral way. Adolescents completed research questionnaires in a small groups of 8-10 members. Research administrator gave them standard information about their rights to participate in research and instructions how to work on inventories.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis process contains two steps. At first, adolescents were divided into groups according to their experience of being in conflict with the law, sex and age and compare them with each other by the research variables. Statistical procedures that were used to compare groups are Chi-square test of independence, t-test and ANOVA. After the first step of data analysis, correlational, regression and mediation analysis were used to assess relationship among peer pressure, moral disengagement and problem behavior. Data analysis was implemented on the basis of SPSS 21. The process macro for SPSS by Andrew F. Hayes was used for mediation analysis.
RESULTS

Compare Groups
The results of the analysis showed a statistically significant difference between the children who are in conflict with the law and those who do not have the same experience according to the school problems ($X^2(4, n = 150) = 27.55, p < .001$ Cramer’s $V = .43$). Adolescents who are in conflict with the law have more frequent experience of school rules violation and expulsion (57%), than children who are not in conflict with the law (16%). Also two groups of adolescents are different from each another according to the mean score of academic achievement ($t(148) = -2.7, p < .01$ two-tailed). Academic achievement of adolescents who are not in conflict with the law is higher ($M = 8.08, SD = 1.63$) than those who are in conflict with the law ($M = 7.4, SD = 1.12$). It should be noted that groups are not statistically significantly different in terms of moral disengagement and problem behavior.

Also, groups divided by the sex were compared with each other. Groups of boys and girls are statistically significantly different with each other with the mean score of problem behavior ($t(148) = 4.365, p < .001$, two-tailed). Boys ($M = 47.32; SD = 15.39$) have higher mean score of problem behavior than girls ($M = 37.05; SD = 8.39$). These two groups are also statistically significantly different by the mean score of moral disengagement ($t(148) = 2.91, p < .01$, two-tailed). As for problem behavior, mean score of moral disengagement is higher in male group ($M = 80.44, SD = 17.86$), than in female group ($M = 71.75, SD = 17.23$).

Means scores of problem behavior according to age were also assessed. Two groups of adolescents (middle adolescence- 14-15 years old and late adolescence- 16-17 years old) were compared by the mean score problem behavior. Data Analysis revealed that mean score of problem behavior is higher in late adolescence ($M = 45.87, SD = 16.18$) than in middle adolescence ($M = 41.52, SD = 11.16$).

Relationship Among Variables
At the second step of data analysis, correlation, regression and mediation analysis were used to assess relationship between major variables. As the results of the data analysis, there is strong positive relationship between peer problem behavior models and adolescents’s problem behavior. Also, moral disengagement is positively related to adolescents’ problem behavior and peer control is negatively related to the outcome variable (Table 2).

| Table 2: Correlation among peer behavior models, peer control, moral disengagement and problem behavior |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Peer Conventional Behavior Models | Peer Problem Behavior Models | Peer Control | Moral Disengagement | Problem Behavior |
| Peer conventional behavior models | -.286** | .311** | -.010 | -.086 |
| Peer problem behavior models | -.417** | .194* | .601** |
| Peer control | | | | |
| Moral disengagement | | | | |
| Problem behavior | | | | |
| *p < .05; ** p < .01 |

For the purpose of regression analysis group of variables (problem behavior models, peer control and moral disengagement) was used to predict adolescents’ problem behavior in statistical regression model. This group of variables is statistically significant and explains 43.4% of variation in the scores of adolescents’ problem behavior ($R^2 = .434, F (3,146) = 39.05, p < .001$). Peers problem behavior models ($B = .499, p < .001$) and moral disengagement ($B = .257, p < .001$) are statistically significant predictors of adolescents’ problem behavior. When the other variables in the model are controlled for peer problem behavior models explains 20.25% (part correlation coefficient = .450) and moral disengagement explains 6.25% (part correlation coefficient = .250) of variation in the scores of adolescents’ problem behavior. Peer control is not statistically significant predictor of adolescents’ problem behavior.
Statistical mediation was conducted to determine the role of moral disengagement as a mediator in the relationship of peers’ problem behavior model and adolescents’ problem behavior. Figure 1 shows b’s and p values for the effects. The results show that moral disengagement did not statistically significantly mediates the relationship between peers’ problem behavior models and adolescents’ problem behavior $b = -.17$, BCaCI $[-.02, .61]$.

**DISCUSSION**

The major goal of this study is to evaluate direct and indirect relationships between peer pressure, moral disengagement and adolescents’ problem behavior. As it was mentioned in the methodological part of the study, sample of the research contains two groups of adolescents. The first who are in conflict with the law and the second who do not have the same experience. The sample design is related to the limitations of self-report questionnaires used in adolescents’ problem behavior studies. Adolescents who are officially registered as being in conflict with the law have the tendency to minimize an importance of their experience in the self-report questionnaires, while adolescents who are not in conflict with the law emphasize an importance of their problem behavior despite the seriousness of their experience (Siegel & Welsh, 2016). As it was expected, results of the research showed that two groups of adolescents are not statistically significantly different by the mean scores of variables (problem behavior, moral disengagement and peer pressure) that were measured by the self report questionnaires, but the difference between groups are statistically significant according to the level of school rule violation, academic achievement and family structure because they are relatively objectively measurable variables.

Research results confirm the hypothesis that peers’ problem behavior models and moral disengagement have negative correlation with adolescents’ problem behavior and these two variables are statistically significant predictors of problem behavior. Research results did not confirm second hypothesis that moral disengagement is statistically significant mediator of relationship between peer pressure and adolescents’ problem behavior. This direct, unmediated effect of peer on adolescents’ behavior could be explained by the developmental perspective. As adolescence is the period of dramatic changes in the field of bio-psycho-social development, the personal attitudes and beliefs are modifying quiet often. Normative values are not internalized as firmly as it is necessary to cope with external influences (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The major source of external influences at the age of adolescent are peers (Brown & Larson, 2009), particularly those who are involved in problem behavior. From the adolescent’s point of view, peers who are involved in problem behavior own the resources (autonomy, independence, attention of authorities) that are especially desirable for adolescents (Moffitt, 2003).

**CONCLUSION**

The results of the study confirms importance of peer pressure on adolescents and also shows that moral disengagement is statistically significant correlate of problem behavior. This results indicate to the effectiveness of a multi-system programs of adolescents’ problem behavior prevention. Mechanisms of multi-system approach to problem behavior prevention are focused not only on individual, but also on social level of development. On the one hand, it is important to provide children with the skills like assertion, self-regulation and conflict management, that are important to cope with peer pressure and on the other hand, adolescents should be provided by constructive monitoring and supervision system from school and parents that helps them to be protected from unhealthy influences (Bartol & Bartol, 2014).
Research has several limits that should be considered for future studies. In spite of the fact that research sample contains children who are in conflict with the law that gives us possibility to compare groups of children with and without objective measured experience of deviance behavior, social desirability bias of self-report questionnaires affects on results. Given this limitation, it is important to use an alternative method of data collection in the study. In addition to methodological limits, in order to evaluate complexity of problem behavior, other important sources of social environmental influences, especially family and school factors, should be considered for the future research theoretical models.

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