

# *CLARIFYING PEER RELATIONS AND DELINQUENCY*

EDWARD PABON  
ORLANDO RODRIGUEZ  
Fordham University  
GERALD GURIN  
University of Michigan

**According to a number of researchers,** there is a strong connection between peer relations and adolescent problem behaviors, especially delinquency and substance abuse. Peer relationships have been central to the logic of most adolescent delinquency and substance abuse theories. Furthermore, much of the research designed to provide guidelines for prevention and intervention services has come to focus on this association. As a result, peer intervention as a service focus for adolescent prevention and intervention has grown in popularity. Yet, much of the theoretical research on the impact of peer relationships and adolescent problem behaviors has been rather narrow, neglecting the different dimensions of peer associations. This narrow perspective on the impact of peer relations might account for the limitations and lack of success of most peer group intervention strategies.

## **PEER INTERVENTION AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS**

Multivariate studies employing a delinquent peer bonding measure together with conventional bonding measures have nearly always found the delinquent peer measure to be the strongest single predictor of delinquency. Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton (1985) state

YOUTH & SOCIETY, Vol. 24 No. 2, December 1992 149-165  
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that the research to date clearly establishes that association, attachment, commitment, and other dimensions of bonding to delinquent friends are related to involvement in delinquent behavior and substance use. As a result, it is now a matter of routine for researchers to include a measure of involvement with delinquent peers in their studies.

But Hirschi (1969), in particular, believes that the causal significance of friendships has been overstated, arguing that because delinquents are less strongly attached to conventional adults than are nondelinquents, they are less likely to be attached to each other. Hartup (1983), in a review of research on peer relationships, declared that delinquency among adolescents and young adults can be predicted mainly from one dimension of early peer relationships, that is, not getting along with others.

Despite the large number of studies that have examined the effects of delinquent peers, the issue of the nature and quality of peer relationships and its linkage to delinquency and substance use is largely unclear and unresolved. In most studies, researchers simply measure the number of an adolescent's friends who are delinquent or the frequency with which peers commit delinquent acts or use substances. For example, Elliott et al. (1985) measured integration into a delinquent group by merging involvement or time spent with peers and the delinquent or conventional orientation of the peer group. The peer involvement measure assesses the amount of time spent with friends during afternoons, evenings, and weekends in an average week. The exposure to delinquent peers scale measured the proportion of a subject's close friends who engaged in each of 10 different illegal acts, ranging from trivial offenses to serious felony crimes. Elliott et al.'s Involvement with Delinquent Peers Index was found to be large and positive for youths heavily involved with a delinquent peer group and negatively large for youths heavily involved with conventional peers.

There have been few empirical attempts to examine the nature of social psychological dimensions of peer relationships, dimensions that might help to clarify the nature of interaction between the individual and delinquent peers and guide design directives for prevention and intervention services. Some concern about this lack have been expressed in the literature, and there have been calls for

more exploration of the dimensions of peer relations and their linkages to delinquency and substance use.

The neglect of the social psychological dimensions of peer relationships is surprising for several reasons. Differential association and social learning theories suggest that the influence of delinquent peers on delinquency will be conditioned by several dimensions of peer interaction, not just time association. In fact, Short (1960), after examining the relationship between delinquency and its linkage to intensity, frequency, duration, and priority association with delinquent peers, urged researchers to examine how these dimensions affect one another and how they interact in the etiological pathway of delinquency. Similarly, Marcos, Bahr, and Johnson (1986) called for the examination of the dynamics of peer influence because they may vary according to the nature of peer relationships. Second, this neglect is surprising because knowledge of the dimensions of peer relations and their impact on behavior has grown in recent years. Research points to several dimensions of peer relations that may condition the effect of peers on child and adolescent behavior in general, not just delinquent behavior.

### **EXPLORING PEER DIMENSIONS**

The idea that social relationships can be conceptualized in terms of different levels of experience is not unique to the literature on peers. Indeed, such a conceptualization forms the cornerstone of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development. According to Bronfenbrenner's perspective, any analysis of human behavior must consider several separate, but related, spheres of experience.

Researchers have begun to differentiate between the various forms or features of children's peer relationships when studying the contributions of agemates. For instance, Linden and Hackler (1973) distinguish four dimensions of the relationship between the adolescent and his or her peers: closeness to peers, visibility of the adolescent's behavior to peers, the responsiveness of associates to the adolescent's behavior, and the behavioral preferences of the adolescent's peers. Thus, if a particular associate is very close, very

likely to know of the actor's behavior, and very likely to change his or her opinion on the basis of this knowledge, then the associate should have maximum influence. Giorando, Cernkovich, and Pugh (1986) posit three major dimensions of peer interaction. The first dimension is rewards of friendship, including the intrinsic rewards (e.g., conversation and sharing of confidence), the extrinsic rewards (e.g., money, labor, information, material goods), and identity support (i.e., providing a comfortable arena in which to express identity concerns). The second dimension concerns the patterns of interaction and influence, such as the amount of time spent with friends, the length of the relationship, and the pressure that friends exert on one another to behave in certain ways. The third dimension deals with the vicissitudes of friendship, including the amount of conflict between friends and the extent of loyalty among friends in the face of trouble. Giorando et al. argue that each of these dimensions affects the influence of the peer group on the individual. However, these researchers do not empirically examine the extent to which these dimensions condition the impact of delinquent peers on delinquency.

We find conceptualization distinguishing between dyadic and group relationships particularly useful from the point of view of understanding the influence of peers on problem behavior. In this conceptualization, friendship is a specific, dyadic, bilateral construct that refers to a particular type of experience between two individuals, whereas popularity is a general, group-oriented, unilateral construct that represents the view of the group toward an individual. Dyadic and group relationships may offer children different opportunities for learning and development and may also differ in adaptive significance (e.g., the ability to protect children from disorder or place them at risk, depending on the form, availability, and quality of the relationships).

This fundamental distinction between various levels of social relationships has been further refined by Furman and Robbins (1985) in their theory of the "social provisions" that they believe to be differentially available to the child in intimate friendships versus peer relations generally. Furman and Robbins propose that affection, intimacy, and reliable alliance are social provisions more

characteristically obtained and given by children in close friendships than in other peer relations; instrumental aid, nurturance, companionship, and enhancement of worth can be derived from either type of relationship; and sense of inclusion is predominantly derived from general peer relations.

Dyadic relationships are viewed as providing many types of support, whereas group-oriented relationships provide one type of support. Supportive or dyadic friendships provide esteem support, information support, instrumental support, and companionship support. *Esteem support* refers to statements or actions that convince people of their own worth or value. This type of support has also been called emotional support (Thoits, 1985). The term *information support* refers to advice or guidance that is helpful in coping with problems. Many studies of developmental changes in conceptions of friendship and impressions of actual friendships have found significant increases in reference to information support (Berndt, 1982). The provision of resources or services that is necessary for solving practical problems is referred to as *instrumental or tangible support*. Often, the simple opportunity to share activities with another person, or to have a companion, is supportive. This type of support is also called *belonging or companionship support*. It is this latter type of support that is generally characteristic of the type of support provided by group-oriented relationships.

This theoretical framework is important because it explicitly delineates a set of properties that distinguish dyadic relations from the more group-oriented aspects of peer experience. Any conceptualization of peer relationships associated with delinquency needs to take into consideration these distinct realms of experiences. Is an individual's association with delinquent peers characterized by group-oriented relationships in which the focus is on the experience of being liked or accepted by the members of one's peer group, or is it a dyadic relationship that refers to a specific, close particular type of experience between two individuals?

Dyadic and group relationships may provide different opportunities for learning and development (e.g., close companionships vs. group belongingness) for adolescent problem behaviors, that is, delinquency and substance use. These two distinct aspects of peer relations may also differ in adaptive significance as risk or protec-

tive elements in adolescent problem behaviors and, as such, provide support for different prevention and intervention strategies.

On the basis of these distinctions, we argue that peer relationships among delinquents provide *a sense of group belongingness* but have none of the other attributes linked to supportive friendships. Some evidence for this is provided by the observation that, although 75% of adjudicated juveniles commit offenses in concert with other juveniles, only 30% of these juveniles indicate that they are involved with a group of friends who are involved in crime (National Institute of Justice, 1990). This suggests that many are committing delinquent offenses in concert with a group of peers whom they do not consider to be or do not have as their primary group of friends. Our exploratory analysis addresses this issue.

## METHOD

This study explores the relationship between peer involvement and delinquent behavior by moving beyond the traditional measurement of peer bonding and exploring the nature or dimensions of peer relationships between the individual and his or her involvement with and commitment to delinquent peers. We present some *preliminary* findings exploring the differential relationships with delinquent peers that follow from group and dyadic relationships. The findings must be viewed as preliminary because the survey data and the nature of the questions asked were not designed to explore the issue of peer dimensions. As such, the findings present suggestions, not answers to the nature of peer relationships between the individual and the peer group.

Data were obtained from the Puerto Rican Adolescent Survey (PRAS), a two-wave panel data set composed of a sample of Puerto Rican male adolescents residing in the South Bronx of New York City. The area is one of the lowest-income districts in the United States and the area of greatest Puerto Rican concentration in New York City. The survey was based on a probability sample of households in 130 South Bronx census tracts identified through a multistage, cluster sampling design. Sample screening yielded 1,170 eligible males, 1,077 of whom (92%) agreed to participate in

the study. Respondent loss in the second wave, one year after the first wave, was 17%, resulting in an overall response rate of 76%. Respondents were between the ages of 11 and 19 years (mean age = 15.7 years).

Confidential face-to-face interviews were conducted in the respondent's home; arrangements to conduct interviews elsewhere were made when privacy could not be guaranteed in the home. Respondents were guaranteed that the information they provided was confidential and would not be revealed to any person or agency without their consent.

Delinquency measures included 27 offenses representative of the full range of offenses reported in the Uniform Crime Report. Self-reports were obtained using items worded to represent common language expressions of Uniform Crime Report categories. The measures include all Uniform Crime Report Part 1 offenses, with the exception of homicide. Respondents were asked to report all offenses committed over the 12 months prior to the interview date.

The PRAS drew on most of the major concepts and measures used in Elliott et al.'s (1985) study because one of the significant aims of the study was to test a theoretical model taking as its point of departure Elliott et al.'s integrated social control model of delinquency and substance use and extending it to take into account factors relevant to the situation of inner-city Puerto Rican adolescents.

The portion of the interview devoted to peers started with a series of questions asking the respondent to identify a "group of peers" that he "ran around with" the past year, and the amount of time he spent with them. Measures to explore the dimensions of group and dyadic relationships between the individual and his delinquent peers were adopted from a series of questions measuring specific perceptions of interaction and feelings.

Several individual questionnaire items were used to measure fundamental distinctions between various levels of peer relationships:

I feel close to my friends.

My friends do not take much interest in my problems.

Sometimes I feel lonely when I'm with my friends.

I don't feel that I fit in very well with my friends.

My friends are willing to listen if I have a problem.

Responses ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. All items were recoded to standardize high values as reflecting lack of intimacy or closeness. These specific questions appear to touch on elements of the various closeness dimensions of the peer relationship. Questions about the youngster's feelings about whether friends listen or care and whether the youngster fits in or feels lonely among his friends explore feelings of intimacy or closeness with one's peers. In line with Furman and Robbins's (1985) concept of social provisions in intimate friendships, the youngster's responses measuring closeness, loneliness, and fitting in indicate feelings about the availability of esteem support. Whether friends are willing to listen reflects perceptions of availability of information support. Finally, the availability of instrumental support is reflected in the responses to the question of interest in the youngster's problems within the delinquent peer group.

Time association items asked respondents how many weekday evenings and afternoons they spent with their peers and how much time they generally spent on weekends. The time elements of association tap the concept of companion support because they focus on the opportunity to share activities.

Association with delinquent peers was based on each respondent's reports of how many of his friends were involved in 14 specific delinquent acts during the past year, with responses ranging from *all of them* to *none of them*. A high positive score reflected strong involvement with a delinquent peer group.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Using the greater data set in the PRAS to examine the applicability of the integrated social control model developed by Elliott et al. (1985), Rodriguez and Weisburd (1991) found a remarkable degree of consistency between Elliott's sample and the PRAS sample in that peer involvement in delinquency remains an impor-



tant factor in influencing a youngster's involvement in delinquent behavior.

This finding reinforces previous research as to the strong connection between peer relationships, delinquent peers, and adolescent delinquency. The strong connection between these factors has been traditionally interpreted as suggesting that a youngster's relationships with his or her delinquent peer groups are characterized by emotional closeness and gratification (Hansell & Wiatrowski, 1981). However, there have been few attempts to explore this interpretation empirically.

Examination of the nature or dimensions of an individual's association with delinquent peers would help to clarify the nature of the interaction between the individual and his or her delinquent peers. The lack of a relationship between the peer dimensions of intimacy and closeness and the number of friends who were involved in delinquent acts during the past year suggests that involvement with delinquent peers does not represent or refer to a specific, close particular type of experience between individuals.

Table 1 demonstrates the nature of the relationship between specific measures of closeness and support and involvement with delinquent behavior. No significant relationship was found as to whether youngsters' felt that they were close to their friends, that friends care, or that they did not fit in with their peers. However, in their involvement with delinquent peers, the nature of the exchange involves loneliness and estrangement as friends are not willing to listen to problems. Time association appears to be most critical to understanding the dimension of involvement with delinquent peers. However, the significance of time association appears to be limited to spending evenings with these peers. The narrow quality of time association to describe peer association also reinforces the lack of intimacy and closeness in peer relationships and emphasizes the companion support inherent in these relationships.

To explore the association further, factor analysis was used to examine the commonalities and uniqueness within the set of peer dimensional variables. Table 2 reports the results, which show a clear delineation of two constructs: Factor 1, which represents Peer Emotional Distance and Factor 2, which represents Time Associa-

**TABLE 1**  
**Dimensions of Peer Relations and Association**  
**With Delinquent Peers—Standardized Coefficients**

|                          | <i>Delinquent Peer Association</i> |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Afternoon with friends   | .0202                              |
| Evenings with friends    | .1597**                            |
| Weekends with friends    | .0375                              |
| Not close to friends     | .0641                              |
| Friends do not care      | -.0393                             |
| Feel lonely with friends | .0875                              |
| Does not fit in          | .0173                              |
| Friends do not listen    | .0905*                             |
| $R^2$                    | .05129                             |

\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

tion. The two constructs were entered into a regression equation with the dependent variable, association with delinquent peers. The standardized coefficients show that Emotional Distance and Time Association significantly characterized a youngster's involvement with delinquent peers. Although youngsters spend considerable time with their delinquent peers, the focus of the importance of their relationship is on time rather than emotional intimacy or bonding. The lack of strength of intimacy and closeness in delinquent peer relationships suggests the weaknesses in service programs that focus on the shifting of the goals of delinquent peer groups to prosocial activities. The premise of peer group cohesiveness is faulty.

Within the limitations of the data concerning the ad hoc nature of the measures used, the findings strongly suggest the "tentative" nature and quality of the bond between the individual and the delinquent peer group. The lack of a strong association between involvement in delinquent behavior and measures of intimacy and closeness in social relationships, the feeling of emotional estrangement between the youth and the peer group, and the narrow importance of time association do not provide evidence for the picture of cohesiveness and emotional closeness between the individual and his or her delinquent peers perceived by many delinquency researchers.

TABLE 2

*A. Factor Analysis Results for Peer Relation Dimensions*

|                          | <i>Emotional Distance</i> | <i>Time Association</i> |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Afternoon with friends   | -.0361                    | .79673                  |
| Evenings with friends    | -.01279                   | .81476                  |
| Weekends with friends    | -.18914                   | .61331                  |
| Close to friends         | .53768                    | -.19925                 |
| Friends do not care      | .65941                    | -.05362                 |
| Feel lonely with friends | .65246                    | .07342                  |
| Does not fit in          | .73505                    | -.03203                 |
| Friends listen           | .62351                    | -.20653                 |

*B. Regressions Results of Factor Analysis With  
Delinquent Peer Association—Standardized Coefficients*

| Beta | .1272* | .1446* |
|------|--------|--------|
|------|--------|--------|

\* $p < .001$ .**IMPLICATIONS: ETIOLOGY AND PREVENTION**

How the decision to participate in delinquency develops into a pattern of persistent behavior is a critical and, as yet, unanswered question. Sutherland and Cressey (1978) suggest that the impact of delinquent peers is conditioned by the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of association with such peers. The studies that have examined the additive impact of these separate dimensions on delinquency have argued that intensity of association is the most important of these dimensions (Short, 1958). Intensity has been defined as having to do with "emotional reactions to the association" (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, p. 81).

However, the results of this study cast doubt on this hypothesized influence of intensity of association. Emotional estrangement between the youth and the peer group is characteristic of the nature of involvement with delinquent peers, rather than the intimacy of such groups. Moreover, positive associations for involvement in delinquent behavior and with delinquent peers were found only for the time element of association during the evenings. This suggests that peer relations among delinquents, rather than being characterized as a particular type of experience between individuals provid-

ing esteem support, information support, and instrumental support, provides even limited companion support.

Understanding the processes of how peer association influences the individual's involvement in delinquent behavior requires further research to examine the social psychological dimensions of these peer networks. An analysis of peer networks should orient us to the cast of characters in an individual's social world, to the interrelationships among these people, and to the connections between differently structured social networks. Understanding these "interrelationships" should provide direction as to the important questions of how bonds are formed, are maintained, and disappear in delinquent peer groups, and the social processes that sustain "groupness."

These questions must also be addressed across ethnic groups because social cultural considerations might have an impact on the processes of peer formation. Data were obtained for this study from a data set composed of a sample of Puerto Rican male adolescents residing in the South Bronx of New York City, limiting its generalizability to other ethnic groups. Hispanic adolescents face peculiar sociocultural stresses in inner-city communities, that is, survival and familism, which might condition the nature of group and dyadic interactions with peers. Edelman (1984), in his exploratory study of Puerto Rican adolescent delinquency in the South Bronx, found that a constant preoccupation on the part of adolescents with protection against violence shaped in many ways their associations with other adolescents and consequently played a role in inducing delinquency among some adolescents and in avoiding it among others. The decision to associate with a delinquent peer group because of its benefit of survival, rather than emotional attachment, would no doubt influence the degree of "intimacy" between the individual members of the group. Thus, other factors salient to the lives of different ethnic adolescents in inner-city communities must be considered in understanding the nature and quality of the individual's relationship with the peer group.

Findings about the connection between involvement in delinquent behavior and the social psychological dimensions of peer relations have implications beyond etiology in terms of program development for services designed to increase the beneficial impact

of friends' support on the individual's social behavior and reduce the negative impact of association with deviant peers.

Peer group interventions to reduce the risk of delinquent and substance use behavior have been suggested by the observation that youths who engage in delinquent or substance use behavior tend to have delinquent or drug-using friends. As a result, group treatment techniques have been employed by nearly all helping professions, including social work, psychology, psychiatry, and counseling. Peer group interventions, ranging from peer counseling (Varenhorst, 1984) through sensitivity training (Benne, Bradford, & Lippitt, 1964) to different forms of group psychotherapy (Hill, 1974) to the currently popular concept of guided group interaction or peer group culture (Gottfredson, 1987), have been widely used in schools and prevention programs.

The lack of support for the assumption of closeness in delinquent peer relationships suggests why policy and programs that emphasize social processes within delinquent peer groups may be less effective than efforts to reintegrate *individual* delinquents within the larger social process of conventional (prosocial) groups, neighborhoods, and community. These programs do not meet with remarkable success in delinquent and substance use behavior prevention largely because the structure and preconditions for promoting positive changes have been absent. The rationale for most of these peer group intervention programs is that the group utilizes the emotional closeness or cohesiveness among its members to channel its members' energies in a positive direction. As a result, intervention groups have been largely composed of delinquent youths. Not only has the peer composition of such groups resulted in formidable countertherapeutic pressures, including deviant role models and strong rewards and reinforcements for delinquent behavior, but, most important, the rationale for the composition is at odds with the findings of this study. Delinquents do not congregate with each other for esteem, instrumental, or information support. Emotional closeness or cohesiveness among the group members is nonexistent.

The explanatory power of association with delinquent peers and the tentative nature of peer relations between the individual and the delinquent peer group reinforces current thinking that preventive and intervention programs for delinquents might be better directed

toward the creation of nondelinquent environments that reinforce nondelinquent peer relations (Feldman, Caplinger, & Wodarski, 1983). The target for intervention should not be the group but the individual group member. The optimum condition for behavior change for delinquents ought to occur in contexts in which only one or two delinquents are integrated into small groups that consist entirely of nondelinquent members involved in recreational, academic, work, and social activities that they are likely to encounter in their daily lives. A treatment program must attempt to reorient the delinquent's reference group and normative orientations, utilize ambivalent feelings that result from the conflict of conventional and delinquent standards, and provide opportunities for recognition and achievement in conventional pursuits. It must offer rewards that are realistic and meaningful to the delinquent youth, including peer acceptance for law-abiding behavior. And it must be characterized by a social climate in which the delinquent youth is given opportunities to examine alternatives that permit a realistic choice between delinquent and nondelinquent behavior. *Such opportunities are highly unlikely in preventive and interventional service programs composed solely of delinquent peers.*

On a wider community level, several studies have documented the effectiveness of the informal support networks, especially in regard to youth development and reduction of delinquent group activity (Fattah, 1987; Woodson, 1981). Informal support networks or systems include family and friendship groups, local informal caregivers, voluntary service groups not directed by professional helpers, and mutual help groups. Findings show that community members together are using their own resources to deal with the problems of delinquent youth. In many cases, youths who were once an anathema to community stability have reversed roles and are now acting as protectors of their own neighborhoods.

The common ingredient in the programs described above has been an approach that separates the individual from his or her group and involves him or her with conventional, nondelinquent peer group activities. Policy and programs that emphasize social processes within groups or specific group behaviors may be less effective than efforts to reintegrate *individuals* within the large social processes of conventional (prosocial) groups, neighbor-

hoods, and community. Future directions for prevention and intervention services might be to strengthen informal and formal non-delinquent controls, reduce the isolation of both youths and their neighborhoods, and promote interactions with the larger conventional network of community institutions (i.e., nondelinquent peer groups, schools, etc.).

If peer association can foster delinquent or substance abuse behavior by providing examples, provocation, or encouragement or if such associations can restrain youths from such behavior by example, approbation, or reasoning, then interventions designed to alter the nature of peer interaction are plausible approaches to delinquent and substance abuse prevention. However, different types of peer relationships serve different functions in child development (Putallaz & Gottman, 1982). And the nature of these differences must be acknowledged in terms of their impact on specific strategies that seek to use the power of peers as agents of change. Thus much more research on the nature of the linkage between peer relations and adolescent problem behavior is needed to guide and strengthen peer group intervention programs.

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*Edward Pabon is an associate at Fordham University's Hispanic Research Center and program director of the Family Resource Center, a family support program in Peekskill, New York. He received his doctorate in social welfare from Fordham University, Graduate School of Social Services. His research interests include delinquency, drug abuse, and child welfare issues among minority families and youngsters. His most recently published work involved the contributions of delinquency and drug use to school dropout among inner-city youths.*

*Orlando Rodriguez is Director of Fordham University's Hispanic Research Center and a professor in Fordham's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia University. His research interests are problem behavior among minority adolescents and mental health and criminal justice issues relevant to minorities. His most recently published works concern*



*issues related to delinquency and drug abuse among Puerto Rican adolescents and an evaluation of a psychiatric program for seriously mentally ill patients.*

*Gerald Gurin is Professor of Higher Education, University of Michigan, and Visiting Scholar, Hispanic Research Center, Fordham University, Bronx, NY. He received his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Michigan. His research interests are adult socialization, postsecondary education and occupational mobility, and minority issues in education and mental health. He has written extensively in the field, having authored or coauthored over 50 articles and monographs.*