

The Influence of Peer Pressure on Criminal Behaviour

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Abstract: Peer pressure is a reoccurring phenomenon in criminal or deviant behaviour especially, as it pertains to adolescents. It may begin in early childhood of about 5 years and increase through childhood to become more intense in adolescence years. This paper examines how peer pressure is present in adolescents and how it may influence or create the leverage to non-conformity to societal norms and laws. The paper analyses the process and occurrence of peer influence and pressure on individuals and groups within the framework of the social learning and the social control theories. Major features of the peer pressure process are identified as group dynamics, delinquent peer subculture, peer approval of delinquent behaviour and sanctions for non-conformity which include ridicule, mockery, ostracism and even mayhem or assault in some cases. Also, the paper highlights acceptance and rejection as key concepts that determine the sway or gladiation of adolescents to deviant and criminal behaviour. Finally, it concludes that peer pressure exists for conformity and in delinquent subculture, the result is conformity to criminal codes and behaviour. The paper recommends more urgent, serious and offensive grass root approaches by governments and institutions against this growing threat to the continued peace, orderliness and development of society.

I. Introduction

In every society, there exists groups that are part of the larger society but whose members adhere to norms and values that favour the violation of the norms of the larger society. Hence, Criminal behaviour often times represents a collective response that is directed by subcultural values and norms of distinct collectivities such as peer groups within the larger group. Individuals in society will usually make friends or have their closest associates from among their peer groups. Therefore, peer associates have a great influence on the lifestyle of their members. Infact peer group association as an agent of socialization, determines to a large extent, what social codes an individual learns (Sutherland 1949, Allen, 2003, Nsofor, 2013). This implies that individuals whose core group members believe and act criminal within norms will learn and internalize more of criminal codes than those that conform with the norms of the society.

As a result, they conclude that individuals become delinquent through association with people who are the carriers of criminal norms and that criminal behaviour is learned within primary groups in particular, peer groups. That is, Criminal behaviour in adolescents is as a result of social influence. It is important to note here, that primary groups are the smallest units of interactions in society and a small group within the society is more likely to have a stronger control over an individual's action or behaviour. Infact, Simmel (1971), observed that "a small group is likely to control the individual completely".

Again, behaviour that is deviant or criminal (that is behaviour that violates the norms of a society and is punished) is relative to different social contexts. Societies especially modern ones, consists of various groups with different subcultures. Hence, behaviour that conforms to one particular subculture, maybe considered or viewed deviant outside of it. For example, there might be a strong pressure on a member of a university cult group to prove himself by raping a girl or even killing a student. So also there may be pressure on someone in a position of affluence among the peer clique to engage in embezzling and tax evasion or to take or give bribe so as to be approved of or accepted. Peer groups or associations have their own cultures, sanctions or rituals into which members are socialized and accordingly, members (especially new members) who do not comply with any of these may be ostracised (Carlson, 2010).

Peer pressure extends to all groups. A peer group refers to persons that belong to the same age (or about the same age) and/or status. Examples of peer groups include, age peer group, school or educational peer group, social peer group, professional peer group and work peer group.

II. Criminal Behaviour

Behaviour that does not conform to the cultural norms or laws of a given society at a particular time and is often times negatively sanctioned, is referred to as criminal. This implies that non-conformity to a given set of laws or norms that are accepted by a significant number of people in a community, society or group is a criminal act. Society highly values conformity and expects it to be accepted and upheld by its members.

Accordingly, society has put in place processes and institutions that will ensure and establish the necessary peace, order and stability required for the progress and development of humanity and society. Socialization is one of such processes which is carried out by especially the family, the school and religious bodies.

Aside from these institutions, other informal primary groups involved in the socialization of individuals are the neighbourhood and peer group or friendship clique. Through the socialization process, it is intended that the cultural norms and values of society which spell out the approved and disapproved (right and wrong) behaviour of society is taught to its members. However, as a result of other mitigating factors in society as well as individual differences, the outright or subtle violation of societal laws (crime) and “criminal tendencies remain a feature of every society”. (Durkheim, 1966, Igbinovia, 2003 and Dambazzu, 2011). They argue that crime is inevitable in all societies. Igbinovia (2003) observed that ‘there is hardly any Nigerian living today that can claim that he or she has not advertently or inadvertently, by commission or omission been involved in crimes or benefitted directly or indirectly from criminality or deviance or the commission of crimes or the proceeds of criminality’.

Apart from individual deviance, non-conformity or deviation from societal norms also occurs as a group. In line with this, Iyoha, 1997, Carlson, 2010 and Esiri and Ejechi, 2013, noted that a greater part of group deviation occurs within society’s criminal subculture. Most important is the fact that the individual in a situation of group deviation, acts in conformity to the norms of the sub-culture which has rejected the norms of the larger society. It is further noteworthy, that peers identify themselves as members of a particular group on the basis of the adoption of particular behaviours. The definition of a group is often based on the ‘assumption that common symbols, language, clothing and behaviour will mark this membership (Allen et al, 2003). Some examples of delinquent behaviour include stealing, theft, armed robbery, murder, assault, rape, unlawful possession of firearms, kidnapping, prostitution, drug sales and usage, tobacco usage, tax evasion, embezzlement, money laundering, bribery and corruption.

III. Groups And Group Dynamics

In sociology, the word group connotes several meanings. However, a group maybe defined as consisting of people with common characteristics who interact in regular patterns and share consciousness of membership as well as expectations and responsibilities (Horton and Hunt, 1984 and Roshni, 2012). Members of a group depend on each other to fulfill their primary and secondary needs and share common interests, goals and meanings. They also, ‘develop a strong feeling of ‘us’ or ‘we’. What is most essential in a social group is not the physical contact of members but the consciousness of membership.

Individuals through group interaction and experience internalize the norms of their culture and begin to share goals, values and life sentiments which to a large extent control or determine their actions. Their feelings become affected by group membership and group acceptance becomes of great need and importance. Other needs that group membership fill are the need for approval, protection and safety. A social group therefore, is a very vital social reality that has profound effect upon the behaviour of individuals in all social situations. Thus, whether a person becomes a criminal or not may be more determined by group ties and influences than by individual characteristics or chances. Group choices become very relevant. Also, behaviour that is criminal can thus be acted or developed as a result of membership of a non-conformist in-group from which an individual expects recognition, loyalty and help. In-groups often reward members with rights and opportunities unlike out-groups. Out-groups are group individuals do not expect privileges from and towards which they feel contempt and opposition.

Asch, (1952) carried out an experiment to ascertain how influential groups can be in the lives of people. He tested fifty people and 33 percent of them gave in to the group half the time, giving that they knew to be wrong answers, 40 percent gave wrong answers but met as often and 25 percent gave the right answers consistently. The result revealed that groups can be so powerful that people will be willing to say things that they know are not true. This becomes worrisome especially when the group of fifty Asch used consisted of strangers. The implication is that when the group consists of friends, people whom the members value highly and depend on for getting along in life, the expected conformity will be much higher. Others such as Levine, 1999 and Bond, 2005 replicated Arch’s experiment and had the same results. These experiments illustrate the power of peer pressure and how easily people can succumb to groupthink. Henslin, (2008) noted that ‘groupthink’ if not prevented can lead to the destruction of a society’. Groupthink is one of the main causes of criminal behaviour by peer members. Janis, I (1972, 1982) used the term groupthink to refer to the collective tunnel vision that group members sometimes develop.

IV. Peer Group And Subculture

Modern society consists of several groups including peer groups. Peer groups, especially teenage and adolescent peer groups present to members models of behaviour. These models are not merely presentations but are actually rewarded sometimes and punished at other times. These groups sometimes do not only have

standards that differ from those of the larger society but which also, sometimes are in opposition. Yet because members desire to be accepted, they act like the 'meaningful others' (other members of the in-group). Ogbekor, (2012) identified that man learns by imitation and observed that in Nigeria youths through this means learn the act of crime. According to him, observation indicates that most violent crimes in Nigeria, are committed by youths. When children are unable to gain acceptance in their peer groups, they often experience a lifelong pattern of social rejection and failure (Schaeffer and Lamm, 1995). Also revealed is the fact that as children get to their middle teens, the peer group becomes highly and possibly the most important influence on attitudes, goals and conduct norms' (Youniess, 1980). In other words, from peer evaluations, the individual's image of himself/herself is being continuously formed and reformed. Bond (2003), Henslin (2008) and Gravira and Raphael, (2009) indicated that peer groups are so powerful that members are willing to deviate from the norms of the society in order to protect the interest, values, norms and expectations of their group thus members are under pressure to conform to peer subculture because the group consists of friends and people that they value highly and depend on for getting along in life.

Also peer group encourage conformity by thinking alike. That is through regular patterns of interaction, they begin to think alike and as a result, believe in only the 'group view point which also becomes the focal point for action (Janis, 1972). On the basis of this, any suggestions or actions contradicting the group view point is considered as a sell out or indicators of disloyalty and such cases or peers are negatively sanctioned (punished). Thus, members of a peer group are often under pressure to deviate. Such pressure may operate within formal peer networks (for example, gangs) or informal peer networks (for example, friends).

Social scientists such as Mccord and Kevin, 2001, and Savnecki, 2004, identify a co-relate between peer influence and the development of anti-social behaviour. Others, such as Patterson, 1982, Landel and Edward, 1992 and Piquere, David and Al Blumstein 2003, suggest that peer influence in the form of 'deviancy training' may actually be relevant to the early development of anti-social behaviour. On his part, McCord et al (2001) did not only observe that the presence of anti-social peers is a major determinant of criminal behaviour among children of 12-14 years old but also pointed out that among factors that have been found to be associated with adolescent deviant behaviour are peer delinquent behaviour involving peer approval of delinquent behaviour, attachment or allegiance to peers, association with peers pressure for deviance. Concerning peer group influence and age and gender, studies (Patterson, 1982, Nagin, 2001 and Savnecki, 2004) have shown that older adolescents and young male peer groups are more influenced than young females.

V. How Peer Pressure Operates

Peer pressure is the power or influence a social group exerts on an individual or individuals. It may be found in children that are toddlers (that is age 2-3). Children of this age can mimic adults or if asked to do so take part in their actions. This type of influence can eventually affect the behaviour of such children in future. Again with the common practice of pre-schooling in most Nigerian homes and families today, children between 3 and 4 years would sometimes not do what parents have taught them to do but would instead do things to please their friends just because they like them. Due to their exposure to schooling so early, they become aware of manners of doing things and rules that are different from those of their parents or families. Then they may actually begin to demand to do some of the things parents had not allowed them to do. They may begin to cut boundaries or limits parents had set for them (Lapiere, 1954, Akers and Lee 1996). Their peer group becomes more important to them as models.

Peer pressure becomes a disturbing and worrisome social problem as growing children take on their peer group as their role models. This is because they begin to act and develop the copycat syndrome (what Igbinovia 2003, identified as one of the causes of crime in Nigeria). As a result of this syndrome, a child would desire the same kind of toys, wear the same kind of clothes, eat the same kind of food, share eating habits, share favourite television programmes share likes and dislikes, and even share bed times with peers. At this point, the parents start having difficulties exercising social control on the child because the values and opinions of their peers (age or friendship cliques) as far as he/she is concerned supercedes those of the parents. Also because they want to look and act like the others. Imitation and experimentation have been identified as ways by which teens and adolescents learn anti-social and criminal behaviour (Powel, Tauras and Ross, 2003, Ogbekor, 2012).

As children grow into teens, the symptoms of peer pressure becomes more problematic especially, where parental bonding is emotionally or otherwise lacking, or weak. Moreso, when there are difficulties and challenges at home and teenagers desire to fit with their peers and be accepted by them. Depending on the strength of this desire, 'teenagers' right thinking may be beclouded or dislodged' (Ahigren, Noren, Hochauer and Garvin, 1982). In view of these traits, a teenager who is a part of a group that is involved in cultism, thieving, stealing, lying, drugs, examination malpractice or any of the vice of society, is most likely to participate in them. According to Horton and Hunt, 1984, "all authorities agree that an individual's need for acceptance within intimate groups is a most powerful lever for the use of group pressure towards group norms".

Lapierre, 1954 and Powell, Taurus and Ross, 2003, agree that peer pressure may begin in early childhood, and increase until it reaches its peak in the pre-teen and teen years. They see social control as a primary process growing from the individual's need for group acceptance and argue that virtually all adolescents in middle and high school deal with peer pressure often on a daily basis. Lapierre points out that in this way, children and teens learn how to get along with others of their own age group and in the process they learn to become more independent adults. Also, Schachter, 1951 had experimentally demonstrated how members who sharply deviate from group norms in opinion are rejected by the group. In addition, an experiment by Ditties and Kelly, 1955 reveal that those who conform most rigidly to group norms are those persons who feel least accepted in a group.

Figure 1 below indicates a developmental progression for Anti social behavior in a delinquent child.

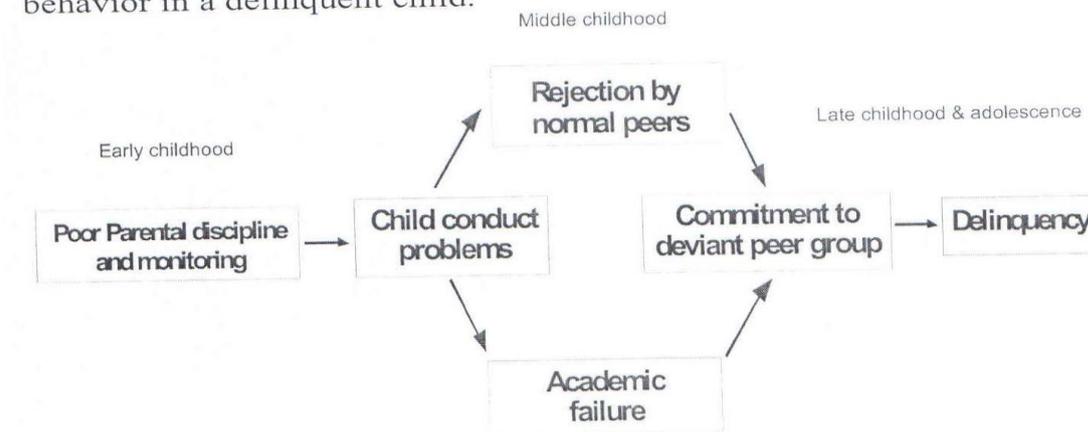


Fig.1: Developmental Progression for Anti-social Behavior in a Delinquent Child. (Source: Patterson, DeBaryshe, Ramsey, 1989)

The concepts of acceptance and rejection therefore become most important and relevant in explaining and understanding how peer pressure operates and lead to criminal behaviour. While rigid conformity becomes a tool for gaining acceptance and status within the group, rejection becomes the cost of non-conformity to its norms and values. Those who violate and reject group norms are ridiculed, mocked or ostracized from the group. Such sanctions which can also include mayhem or assaults (especially in the case of drug use and university cult groups) may be institutionalized. Krauth, 2005 and Clark and Locheac, 2005 observed that the consumption of tobacco, alcohol and marijuana are correlates of lagged peer behaviour.

VI. Factors That Can Militate Against Negative Peer Pressure

Although all adolescents may experience peer pressure, not all of them may succumb to negative peer pressure. This is due to the fact that backgrounds such as the family, social, academic and neighbourhood or environmental, as well as other influences may differ. For example, the attitude of parents may enhance, escalate, reduce or prevent peer pressure. Some factors that can prevent the influence of negative peer pressure on children and adolescents are as follows:

- The avoidance by parents of overaction and then threats when dealing with issues of association of children: Parents should not explode in such situations or circumstances; rather they should investigate thoroughly and wisely with care and patience correct in love.
- The readiness of parents and their ability to give gratification. Lack of gratification or insufficiency of gratification may give the child an emotional and psychological leverage to give in to negative peer pressure. (Crosswhite and Kerpleman, 2005).
- The ability of parents to apply the techniques of effective discipline and monitoring: Adolescents and teens are characterized by excessive energy that needs to be exerted, which if not guarded, is channeled into negative tendencies. However, punishments must be moderate and not too harsh or excessive. When punishment or social control is excessively applied or too harsh (especially on girls), rather than stop non-conforming behaviour it may increase the child's nonchalant behaviour towards the punishment and parents expectation and desire. This situation may result in increasing social distance between the parents and the child. This is because, the child feels unloved and unwanted, and withdraws into his/her 'shell' physically, emotionally, socially and psychologically. As a result communication is reduced, sometimes to the barest minimum. Then instead of a strong bonding to parents there is a detachment from parents as well as from

the family norms and values they represent. Carlen, 1988, Knoester and Hayne, 2005 and Crosswhite and Kerpelman 2005, argue that because the child sees the punishment as overly harsh unjust and unfair, or has need for gratification, he/she may begin to participate in criminal behaviour.

- A strong parental or family bonding: When children experience strong parental attachments of affection, spending time together, sympathy, understanding and rewards of 'pro-social' behaviour instead of conflicts, bickering, harassments, continuous absence of parents from home, the tendency is for children to conform more to family and societal norms (Hollist, Lorine and Lornie, 2009). Children, especially adolescents make their parents their models. They value and honour their parents' opinion above those of their peers. Through strong bonding with children, parents get to know who are the friends of their children, those they visit often or hang out with, where they go, and parents and children can freely share ideas together. Therefore, because the children grow to value and esteem their parents, they would not like to do anything that would hurt the parents' feelings or make them angry. Usually, they would rather reciprocate the love and trust of their parents with the desired conforming behaviour.
- Stable marriages and homes: Marriages where there is strong bonding between husband and wife will usually produce peaceful homes and conforming children (Carlson, 2010). The behaviour of the spouses towards one another will project images of love/affection, care, trust, friendship, respect and homeliness. This will engender in their children the desire for these traits and the desire to be a part of the parents' bonding. 'Home' will be to them like a haven and which they will always want to be in and belong to. Such parents will more easily gain the confidence of their children than parents that are fighting or in conflict. They become their children's primary confidant while peer group becomes 'secondary confidant'. Children of homes that are experiencing peace are more emotionally, mentally and psychologically stable. Learning of virtues such as hard work, trust, transparency, honesty and accountability for children, as well as social processes of monitoring and supervision on the part of the parents become easy tasks. Children of such homes will develop high self-esteem and are not likely to give in to negative peer pressure. They are most likely instead, to be rigid conformists to family and societal norms 'who will grow into conformist adults' (Ogege and Muoboghare, 2013).

Cowden (1966) in his study on predicting institutional Adjustment and Recidivism in Delinquent Boys', measured home environment through ratings made on a seven point scale. One of his findings was that boys that rated high on the scale came from relatively stable homes with adequate parental controls while those who rated low on the scale typically came from home and families that were traumatic with predominant features of hatred and rejection. In relation to sexually anti-social behaviours, Schachter, 1995 and Kayode et al, 2005 assert that children who are brought up by both parents under one roof receive adequate care and attention and are likely to be more sexually restrained than other children who are victims of broken homes or marriages (separated or divorced parentage). Also, Baride, 2013 identified that children of separate criminality are emotionally excessive, unstable and engage in deviant behaviour and criminality at home and in the school.

VII. Theory

This paper adopts the social learning theory (Sutherland, 1949 and Akers, R. and Lee, G. 1996) and the social control theory of Hirschi, 1961. The social learning theory posits that criminal behaviour is learned in the process of interaction within primary groups, in particular, peer groups'. They argue that the learning involves learning or imbibing criminal codes and habits. In the process, if more of criminal codes than conforming codes are learnt, then such individuals are most likely to deviate from the approved social norms or laws of the society. They will eventually adopt criminal behaviour as the normative conduct. In their association with non-conformist peers they have heard and learnt more definitions favourable to deviant behaviour rather than unfavourable definitions. Such interactions produce shared understanding, norms, values and beliefs on the basis of which in most cases, individuals act contrary to the values and expectations of the larger society. In addition, members of non-conforming peer groups do not only learn criminal codes but also learn the techniques of committing crime some of which are sometimes very complicated and sometimes simple.

The social control theory argues that it is the attachment or bonding of people with conventional people such as friends, family members or loved ones, institutions, activities and beliefs that makes people conform to society's norms. While, they explain that it is the absence or weakness of such bonds that makes people to be involved in criminal behaviour such as drug use (Hirschi, 1969, Osgood W.D. and Anderson A.L. 2004). In other words, because children and adolescents would not want to do things that will hurt their parents or reduce the strong affection they are already enjoying from their parents, they are most likely to stay away from criminal 'types' or criminal behaviour. In other words, bonding is a social control mechanism in the area of teen or adolescent criminal tendencies.

VIII. Conclusion And Recommendation

The paper concludes that since peer pressure and its influence exists in all adolescents and it is a strong denominator among the determinants of juvenile delinquency and adulthood crime, it is obvious that it is a cardinal problematic phenomenon for society. The youths of any society determine it's futuristic and enduring structural and institutional developmental state. Therefore if serious focal discourse, research, planning and proper execution is not put in place to address the problem of the influence of negative peer pressure on teens and adolescents there is great danger to the continued existence of peaceful, orderly and progressive societies. The paper suggests that solution to the problem can be approached through the grass root approach. That is by identifying and registering household units towards effective and timely execution of good and adequate policies arising from continuous research and proper planning.

IX. Summary

Peer rejection in childhood or adolescence is a major determinant of juvenile delinquency (crime committed by adolescents or young persons). Peer pressure may produce in adolescents positive or negative results. When it produces negative results it implies that it is pressure not to conform to the norms of society but to conform and be involved in criminal activity. This gives rise to non-conforming or criminally oriented individuals in society. Peer pressure becomes the strongest influence on adolescents in terms of drug use, alcohol use, cigarette smoking, prostitution, involvement in cultist examination malpractice, violence and other criminal activities in secondary and tertiary institutions.

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