

Adolescents and their Peer Groups: a study on the significance of peers, social categorization processes and coping with developmental tasks

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the importance of peer groups in adolescence. In all, 3744 adolescents were asked to indicate whether they belonged to a peer group, which type of group it was, what activities the group performed and which group they considered most different from their own. Then they evaluated themselves, the in-group, the out-group, and the group 'drug abusers', on 21 adjectives. Finally, the importance of, and difficulty of coping with, various developmental tasks, such as personal, relational, and socio-institutional problems, was investigated. The results show that almost all the adolescents who volunteered had joined a group. Independent of the type of group, formal or informal, similar social categorization processes were observed. Those adolescents who were highly identified with their peers described themselves, the ingroup, and the outgroup members more positively than low identifiers. This result indicates that high identifiers feel more secure in their groups, and are therefore less inclined to reject peers who join another group. Moreover, highly identified adolescents reported fewer problems with developmental tasks and get more support in coping with these from their peers.

Key words: adolescence, peer group, social identity.

INTRODUCTION

In their essay on a social-psychological redefinition of adolescence, Palmonari, Carugati, Ricci Bitti and Sarchielli (1984) conclude that groups of contemporaries are formed by activities of comparison, differentiation, and identification processes in social situations. The formation of adolescent groups can be conceived on the basis of Turner's (1982) model of identification. This implies that a social-psychological approach to the study of changes in adolescence needs to consider adolescents not merely as entities defined in terms of age and sex, but as members of a given family, school class, and, above all, as members of a peer group. However, it is not simply belonging to one group rather than another which is an important variable affecting the processes of redefinition of the adolescent's self.

A recent study by Palmonari, Pombeni and Kirchler (1989) examines different types of groups an adolescent belongs to, in order to discover whether the types of groups which adolescents establish influence the development of different concepts about, and attitudes towards, social objects that are particularly significant. The study shows that evaluations of oneself, ingroup, and outgroup members, as well as the subjective importance and difficulty of developmental problems, are independent of the type of group the adolescents belong to, be it a street group, a well-formalized group committed to religious projects, or a sports group. However, the study also revealed a high variance within each type of peer group, indicating that within the groups adolescents' concepts of, and attitudes towards, social objects, as well as subjective problems, vary considerably. This result may indicate that the type of relationship an adolescent has with his or her group might offer an explanation for interindividual differences in social categorization processes. Thus, this study focuses on the influence of characteristics of the relationship between individuals and their groups, on intergroup dynamics, and on concepts about oneself and others.

Theoretically, the present investigation departs from the relationship between social identity and intergroup relationships. Tajfel (1978) emphasizes that processes of categorization are important in structuring social interaction, in establishing groups of individuals and in dynamics of differentiation between social objects. Categorization processes of the perceived social reality influence judgments of various social groupings, and attitudes towards them (for a clarification of these concepts see Doise, 1976; Hogg and Abrams, 1988).

According to Tajfel's (1978) 'minimal group paradigm', subjects tend to enhance differences between ingroup and outgroups. These differentiation processes are also observable in situations with objective characteristics allowing for distinctions being minimal. A series of already classical experimental studies (e.g. Tajfel, Billig, Bundy and Flament, 1971; Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Doise, Deschamps and Meyer, 1978, Doise and Weinberger, 1973) shows that even subjects who belong to an artificial group, with membership being based on rather vague and weak characteristics, assume behavioural strategies which allow differentiation between their (artificial) group and other (artificial) groups.

Tajfel (1978) extended Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory and formulated a more 'social' version of group processes. Social comparison theory stresses comparison processes between individuals within a group, and assumes that there are pressures towards uniformity. Group members come to an evaluation of their selves through comparisons with peers. Tajfel's view, on the other hand, centres on social identities which are conceived as being based on individuals' awareness to be members of one or more groups, and their evaluation of these memberships. A group can offer or preserve positive contributions to social identity of its members, depending on the outcome of members' comparisons of their group with other groups.

Tajfel's minimal group paradigm has undergone critical examination. Turner (1975), while arguing that it is possible to demonstrate empirically that social comparison, in certain conditions, suffices to produce intergroup discrimination; claims that there is no self-evident connection between social categorization and intergroup discrimination. Favouring one's own group over other groups is a common phenomenon observed in the laboratory, but Turner argues that this is

due to the fact that subjects belonging to one of two experimental conditions have no other reference points but the rather artificial and weak membership through which they can express their positive self-evaluations. According to Turner, social categorization processes are one, but not the only, way to establish a positive distinction between oneself and others. Also favouritism towards some members of the own group is a way to form a positive self-image based on intragroup social comparison processes. In sum, identification with one's group is a necessary condition for discriminating behaviour in favour of the group, but the intensity or consistency of identification depends on numerous factors.

Moreover, Turner points to the importance of social-cognitive processes of self-categorization and social identification rather than interpersonal attraction in the development of group membership and cohesion. Individuals form a group if they define, describe and evaluate themselves as a social category and apply their group's norms. In Turner's (1987, p. 101) words: 'The group is cognitively represented within the mind of the individual member and in this sense exists as a social identification.'

Summarizing these theoretical elaborations, identification with the peer group would seem to be an important factor in adolescence which needs empirical examination. There is also a series of studies demonstrating the usefulness of identification, operationalized as comparisons between one's self and significant social groups, such as ingroups and outgroups (e.g. Codol, 1984; Zavalloni and Louis-Guerin, 1984). Social identity and intergroup relationships need not only to be studied in terms of ingroup-outgroup comparisons, but also in terms of self-ingroup and self out-group comparisons. Consequently, the definition of social identity depends on an individual's definition of his or her self and definition of the ingroup (Hogg and Abrams, 1988).

The major aim of this study concerns intra-group and inter-group dynamics: adolescents' descriptions of themselves, the ingroup and outgroups as influenced by the type of group the adolescents belong to and the level of identification with the peers are investigated. According to Tajfel (1978), high identification with the group should lead to a more positive evaluation of the ingroup in comparison with relevant outgroups.

This study also investigates the impact of group type and identification on adolescents' developmental tasks and coping with them. Developmental tasks are conceived of as problems adolescents have, such as personal, relational and socio-institutional problems. Personal tasks concern self-esteem, accepting body changes during and after puberty, reference values, etc. Relational problems concern interactions with the intimate partner, friends and colleagues at work. Socio-institutional task include problems at school and work. Additionally, the study allows us to explore the diffusion of peer groups in the adolescent populations.

According to Sherif (1984), Cavalli and DeLillo (1988), Palmonari (in press) and Palmonari *et al.* (1989), almost all adolescents join a peer group. It is also important to explore the percentage of adolescents joining a peer group, and which types of groups adolescents join. In a previous study Palmonari *et al.* (1989), found that the majority of adolescents meet in informal groups (that is groups meeting on streets or at members' homes for no specific projects) and formal groups (that is groups meeting in defined places or localities for various projects such as religious or political activities, or sports). Finally, whether membership of a specific group

depends on the subjects' demographic, educational or occupational circumstances, and what activities the groups perform, are also important variables to consider. For a better understanding of types of peer groups, we should also examine whether students more often join formal groups than do employed adolescents, and whether females are less often together with street groups than males.

A representative sample of adolescents of the regione Emilia Romagna, Italy, was investigated. If adolescents joined a peer group, the type of group and identification with the peer group were considered as variables affecting social categorization processes. Social comparison processes were studied through subjects' descriptions of themselves, their groups and two outgroups. Additionally, the importance of, and difficulty in coping with, various developmental tasks were analyzed.

METHOD

Sample

The survey was conducted during spring and summer 1987 in the regione Emilia Romagna, Italy. Overall, 3744 adolescents participated. Their age was 16 (52.5 per cent) to 18 years (47.5 per cent); 49.9 per cent of them were males; 50.1 per cent females. Whereas 80.4 per cent of them were students, 19.6 per cent had a paid job, were searching for a first employment, or were unemployed at the time of the investigation. The sample was representative in respect of parents' education levels and socioeconomic indices.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used resembles the inventory applied in a previous study (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989). It was a semistructured questionnaire divided into three parts. In the first part structural aspects of the different groups were examined (e.g. the adolescents were asked whether they had joined a group, the group's meeting places, characteristics of the group, activities and aims of the group, relations with adults who interacted with the group, and to indicate a group which they considered completely different from their own peer group).

In the second part the subjects indicated similarities and differences, between themselves, their group (ingroup), a group perceived as completely different from their own group (outgroup 1), and juvenile drug abusers (outgroup 2). Drug abusers were selected as the second outgroup to provide information regarding adolescents' closeness to deviant behaviour and drug abuse. A list of 21 adjectives was applied for each group separately (rating scales ranging from 1 to 5). The adjective list resulted from interviews taken with adolescents in a pretest (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989) and presented in Appendix A.

The third part of the questionnaire dealt with developmental tasks. The participants were asked to evaluate the importance of 12 developmental tasks and to indicate the difficulty they experienced in coping with them. Again, the developmental tasks were obtained from a pretest and are shown in Appendix B. The subjects also rated the degree of difficulty they thought their peer-group faced when confronting the tasks (scales ranging from 1 to 5).

Finally, questions were asked to establish respondents' demographic characteristics.

Procedure

The adolescents were contacted at schools and vocational centres by one of ten research assistants. If willing to volunteer, the purpose of the study was explained in detail. The questionnaire was completed while no teacher or supervisor of the adolescents was present. On average, completing the questionnaire took 50 minutes.

RESULTS

Formal versus informal groups

First, the participants indicated the type of group they belonged to. The majority of the respondents indicated belonging to (a) informal groups (that is, groups meeting, in general, on street corners not committed to any specific projects); (b) quasi-informal groups (groups usually meeting at a peer's home without engagement in any specific projects); (c) sports groups (groups meeting at sport centres for physical training); and (d) religious groups (groups meeting in the localities provided by the parish, committed to religious programmes); (e) political groups (groups engaged in politics and in the promotion of their ideologies); or (f) other groups, such as groups engaged in art performances, etc.

It should be noted that almost all adolescents of the representative sample (98.5 per cent) were members of a peer group fairly regularly. Most of them were members of informal groups (49.2 per cent) or quasi-informal groups (23.7 per cent). Adolescents joining sports groups amounted to 10.1 per cent, and 9.5 per cent met religious groups. Almost no adolescents participated in political groups or groups engaged in art performances. Members not belonging to one of the first four groups (7.5 per cent) were excluded from further analyses, leaving an effective sample consisting of 3467 subjects.

While informal groups and sports groups included considerably more males than females, in quasi-informal groups and religious groups females predominated. The respective percentages of males in informal, quasi-informal, sports and religious groups amounted to 54, 34, 73 and 43 per cent. Percentages of females amounted to 46, 66, 27 and 57 per cent respectively.

While quasi-informal groups (85 per cent) and religious groups (90 per cent) consisted predominantly of students, one-quarter of the members of informal groups and sports groups had a paid job or were unemployed. Education levels of the adolescents themselves, and their parents, were low in informal groups and relatively high in religious groups.

Subjects were asked to indicate the type of group most different to the own group. Table 1 shows frequencies and percentages of groups defined as outgroups.

Politically engaged groups were indicated most often as outgroups. This result is in line with previous findings (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989). As compared to the other groups, informal groups considered religious groups as outgroups; sports groups and religious groups identified informal groups as outgroups; and quasi-informal

Table 1. Groups considered as outgroups by informal, quasi-informal, sport, and religious groups

Type of ingroup	Type of outgroup					
	Informal	Quasi-informal	Sport	Religious	Political	Other
Informal (<i>n</i> =1800)	7.7-	2.4	3.7	37.2	45.7	3.3
Quasi-informal (<i>n</i> =867)	15.6	1.5	3.8	26.6-	49.0+	3.5
Sport (<i>n</i> =366)	24.6+	3.6	1.9	25.7-	40.4	3.8
Religious (<i>n</i> =354)	48.3+	2.8	2.0	6.5	38.7-	1.6
No. of observations	534	80	114	1028	1497	144

The symbols '+' and '-' indicate higher or lower observed events than expected events ($p < 0.05$).

groups clearly indicated political groups as their outgroup.

In the following analyses, differences between informal (i.e. informal and quasi-informal) groups and formal (i.e. religious and sports) groups are investigated. First, activities and aims of the groups are analysed. Second, members' descriptions of themselves, the ingroup, outgroup 1 and drug abusers (outgroup 2) are assessed. Finally, success in coping with various developmental tasks is considered. In contrast to a previous study (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989), the respondents' level of identification with their groups is introduced as an independent variable. As will be shown, identification is a significant variable in adolescence while the type of group one belongs to is of minor importance.

Activities performed by informal and formal groups

Subjects were asked to indicate how important entertainment activities, talking about private matters, talking about social topics, walking and riding around, and group projects as organized tasks are (1 = unimportant, 5 = very important), and how much time they dedicated to the various activities (1 = never performing an activity, 5 = very frequently). In general, the more important an activity was, the more time the groups spent on it. The correlations between importance and time ranged between $r = 0.38$ and 0.61 ($p = 0.000$ for all correlations). Being interested in finding differences between the group types, importance scores and time estimations were included in two 2 (sex) by 4 (type of group) by 5 (activities; within-subjects factor) univariate analyses of variance. Both analyses yielded a significant three-way interaction effect (the respective F values are $F(12,13836) = 4.77$; $p = 0.000$ for importance, and $F(12,13800) = 2.07$; $p = 0.000$ for the amount of time spent on an activity). Also the two-way interaction effects for type of group by activity ($F(12,13836) = 50.97$; $p = 0.000$ for importance, and $F(12,13800) = 100.91$; $p = 0.000$ for time) and sex by activity ($F(4,13836) = 33.30$; $p = 0.000$ for importance, and $F(4,13800) = 58.92$; $p = 0.000$ for time) were highly significant. Moreover, the main effects for activities were significant ($F(4,13836) = 289.92$; $p = 0.000$ for importance, and $F(4,13800) = 331.21$; $p = 0.000$ for time).

As Table 2 shows, independent of the group, females considered talking about

Table 2. Importance of, and amount of time spent with, various activities by type of group and gender

	Type of group			
	Informal	Quasi-informal	Sport	Religious
<i>Importance of activity</i>				
Gender: male				
entertainment	3.90	3.68	3.63	3.15
private topics	3.70	3.94	3.56	3.91
social topics	3.28	3.43	3.29	3.83
walking around	3.04	2.86	3.04	2.85
organized tasks	2.94	3.29	3.41	4.14
Gender: female				
entertainment	3.74	3.68	3.28	3.24
private topics	4.35	4.40	4.14	4.38
social topics	3.77	3.82	3.88	3.91
walking around	3.03	3.14	4.06	2.85
organized tasks	3.05	3.11	3.85	4.15
<i>Time spent engaging in activities</i>				
Gender: male				
entertainment	4.36	4.11	4.02	3.27
private topics	2.71	2.93	2.50	2.81
social topics	2.37	2.59	2.44	2.94
walking around	3.29	2.96	3.12	2.75
organized tasks	2.20	2.31	2.97	3.71
Gender: female				
entertainment	4.18	4.04	3.67	3.06
private topics	3.47	3.65	3.29	3.51
social topics	2.61	2.79	2.55	2.97
walking around	3.06	2.87	2.76	2.32
organized tasks	2.11	2.11	3.20	3.88

Differences between means ≥ 0.40 are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

personal problems the most important activity. Males in informal, quasi-informal and sports groups regarded talking about their personal problems and entertainment as most important. Males in religious groups thought organized activities, such as the realization of their group goals, were most important. Both males and females in formal groups perceived organized activities as being more important than did members of informal and quasi-informal groups. These results are mirrored by the amount of time the groups spent on the activities. Females spent more time disclosing personal problems than males. Informal and quasi-informal groups, independent of the member's gender, dedicated less time to organized activities than formal groups. Moreover, despite being considered of average importance only, entertainment activities are dedicated most time by all but religious groups.

Differentiation between ingroups and outgroups

According to Tajfel (1978) and Turner (1982), enhancing the degree of identification with the ingroup and augmenting the distance to the outgroups is an important

strategy of categorial differentiation of groups. As index of group identification, similarity between the subjects' descriptions of themselves, and their peers on the 21 adjectives was considered. Similarity was measured by calculating the Euclidean distances between the descriptions of (a) oneself and the ingroup, (b) oneself and outgroup 1, and (c) oneself and outgroup 2. A three-way analysis of variance with sex, type of group, and distances between oneself and ingroup and outgroup (within factor) as independent variables revealed a significant two-way interaction effect between type of group and distances ($F(6,6490) = 5.20; p = 0.000$). As Figure 1 shows, members of religious groups perceived themselves slightly more similar to their groups than members of other groups. Adolescents in informal and quasi-informal groups perceived less distance between themselves and the outgroup 1 and outgroup 2 than did peers of formal groups. However, the differences are indeed very small. Since a previous study (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989) did not confirm these results, it may be concluded that statistical significance in part was due to the inflation of degrees of freedom here.

Palmonari *et al.* (1989) found that categorial differentiation strategies do not vary among informal and formal groups. Members of street groups, sports groups and religious groups judged their groups as equally important, perceived themselves and their peers equally distant from outgroups, and attributed to their peers almost the same positive characteristics.

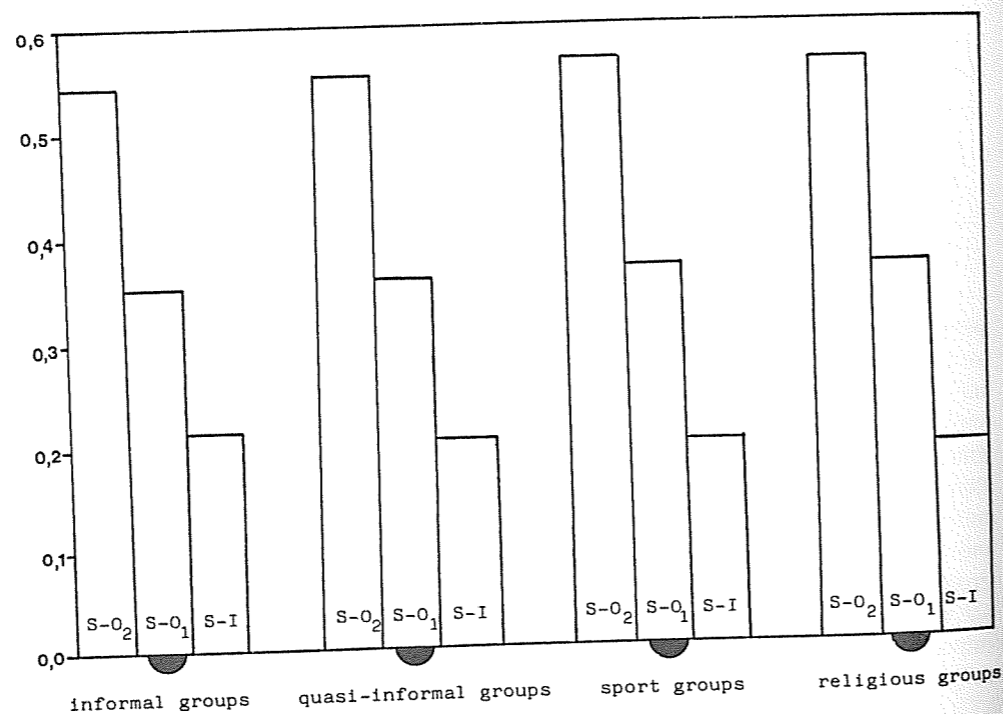


Figure 1. Euclidean distances between descriptions of oneself and ingroup (S-I), oneself and outgroup 1 (S-O1), and oneself and outgroup 2 (S-O2)

Identification with the peer group and description of ingroup and outgroups

Identification with the peer group was operationalized as closeness versus distance between oneself and the ingroup. The above-mentioned Euclidean distances between ratings of oneself and ingroup members were used to split the sample on the median into two subsamples of high and low identifiers. The impact of identification and group type on judgements on the 21 adjectives was assessed in three-way analyses of variance. According to the results of a principal-component analysis (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989), the 21 adjectives were classified into four categories, labelled 'dissatisfaction', 'openness towards the social world', 'disengagement in regard with social activities, work etc.', and 'commitment to personal and social interests' (see Appendix A).

First, self-ratings on the four factors were included in a 2 (high versus low identification) by 4 (group type) by 4 (descriptive dimensions, within-subjects factor) analysis of variance. The two-way interaction effects, identification by descriptive dimensions, ($F(43,10254) = 123.78; p = 0.000$) and group type by descriptive dimensions ($F(9,10254) = 20.89; p = 0.000$) were highly significant. Moreover, main effects of the group type ($F(3,3418) = 16.55; p = 0.000$), identification ($F(1,3418) = 13.58; p = 0.000$), and descriptive dimensions ($F(3,19254) = 50.26; p = 0.000$) were also significant.

A second analysis of variance including judgements of the ingroup yielded a significant three-way interaction effect ($F(9,10254) = 3.83; p = 0.000$). As in a previous analysis (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989), the two-way interaction effects identification by descriptive terms ($F(9,10254) = 99.42; p = 0.000$), group type by descriptive dimensions ($F(9,10254) = 56.10; p = 0.000$), and all main effects were also significant.

Next, an analysis of variance was conducted with judgements of the outgroup 1 as dependent variable. The three-way interaction effect was not significant ($F < 1$). Both two-way interaction effects were significant (identification by descriptive dimensions: $F(3,10023) = 5.81; p = 0.000$; group type by descriptive dimensions: $F(3,10023) = 20.51; p = 0.000$).

Finally, the fourth analysis of variance, including judgements of drug abusers, revealed significant two-way interaction effects (identification by descriptive dimensions; $F(3,10254) = 4.70; p = 0.003$; group type by descriptive dimensions: $F(3,10254) = 12.61; p = 0.000$). Again, the three-way interaction effect was not significant ($F < 1$).

In general, the influence of group type was due to members of religious groups, describing themselves as well as their peers as less disengaged than did members of informal groups. Members of religious groups also judged outgroups, as well as drug abusers, less favourably (less committed, open, and more dissatisfied, and disinvolved) than did members of informal groups. Although being statistically significant, the effect of group type is small as compared to the effect of identification. Figure 2 depicts the results relative to high and low identifiers. The figure shows that highly identified adolescents judged themselves, as well as their peers, as being more open towards the social world, more committed, less dissatisfied, and less disengaged than did adolescents with low identification. Highly identified adolescents also judged the first outgroup more favourably (less dissatisfied and less disengaged) but drug abusers more negative (more disengaged, dissatisfied and less open) than did low identifiers.

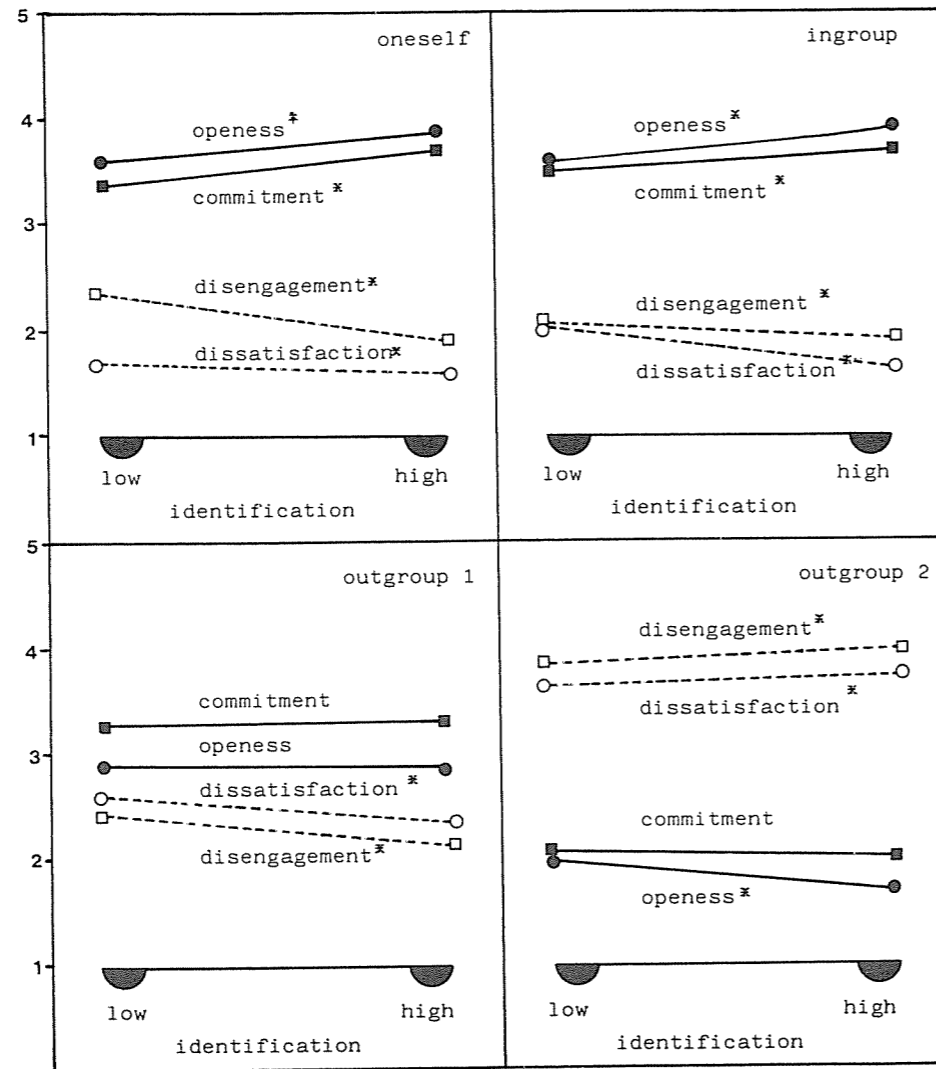


Figure 2. Description of oneself, the ingroup and the outgroups 1 and 2 by low and high identifiers. Note. Asterisks indicate significant differences between low and high identifiers on the respective evaluative dimensions

Summarizing, while the type of group was a rather unimportant factor, the degree of identification with one's group had a considerable effect on descriptions of oneself, the own group and the outgroups. In contrast to low identifiers, highly identified adolescents judged both ingroup and outgroup members more favourably and discarded drug abusers.

Importance of, and difficulty in coping with, developmental tasks

Contrary to expectations, a previous study on adolescents (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989) showed that the type of group an adolescent joins has no influence on the perceived importance of, and difficulty in coping with, developmental tasks. Peers of the group types under consideration thought that socio-institutional tasks (tasks concerning the relationship between self and institutions, such as school or place of work) were more important and more difficult to cope with than personal tasks (biological maturation, acquisition of autonomy, self-awareness), and relational tasks (friendship, close relationship). This study, again, assesses the importance and difficulty of coping with these three task types both for adolescents themselves and their peer groups. Since importance and difficulty scores were highly correlated, a single index was computed representing the product of importance and difficulty scores. Two 4 (group type) by 2 (identification with the group) by 3 (task types; within-subjects factor) analyses of variance for the importance judgements for oneself and the ingroup, revealed no significant three-way effects (for individuals' scores: $F(6,6832) = 1.26; p = 0.274$; for the groups' scoring: $F(6,6816) = 1.68; p = 0.120$). The interaction effects for identification by task type were highly significant (for individuals' scores: $F(2,6832) = 25.01; p = 0.000$; for the groups: $F(6,6816) = 14.23; p = 0.000$).

Figure 3 shows that both high and low identifiers perceived socio-institutional tasks as most important for themselves and their groups. Highly identified adolescents perceived personal and relational tasks as less important for themselves and their groups than low-identified adolescents. Low identifiers found personal and relational tasks as important problems and reported difficulties in coping with them. High identifiers reported that their groups paid more attention to socio-

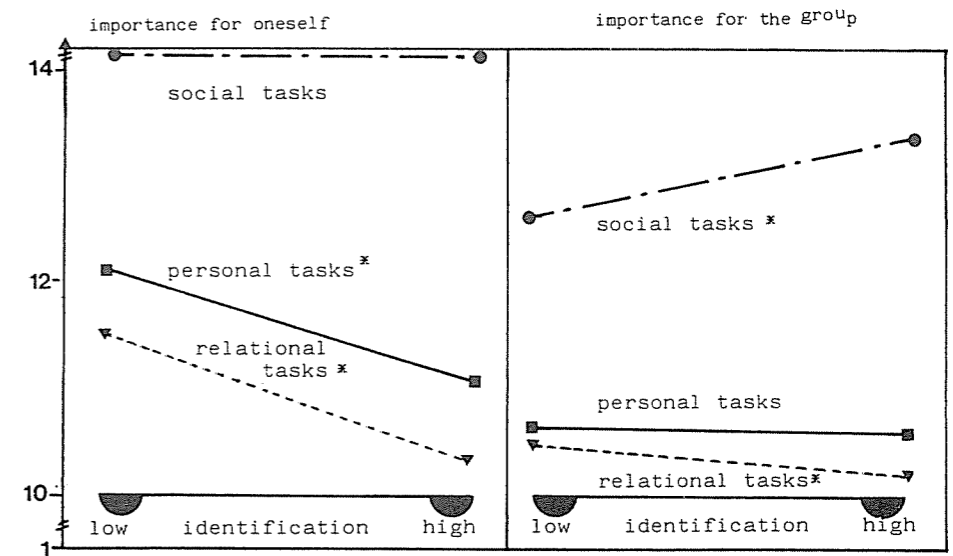


Figure 3. Importance (=importance x difficulty) of developmental tasks as perceived by low and high identifiers. Note. Asterisks indicate significant differences between low and high identifiers on the respective developmental tasks

institutional tasks than did low identifiers. In other words, highly identified adolescents reported that their group focused attention on those developmental tasks which they individually considered important and difficult, and less attention to personal and relational task which they individually considered as less difficult. This result may indicate that high identifiers get more understanding and support from their group in coping with relevant problems.

Determinants of identification with peer groups

Since identification appears to be an important variable for adolescents' life situations, it is worth considering what determines whether identification is high or low. In the present study, sex; type of group one joins; occupational status (student, blue-collar worker, white-collar worker, unemployed); mother's employment status (housewife or working outside the home); and social stratification of the family (high versus low) were considered as possible determinants. However, analyses of variance including these demographic variables as independent variables, and the degree of identification as dependent variable, revealed no significant effects.

CONCLUSIONS

As shown in a previous study on adolescents (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989), peer groups are a fairly widespread phenomenon with a clear preponderance of informal and quasi-informal groups over formal groups. Almost all adolescents, independent of social strata, sex, occupational status and other demographic characteristics, joined a group meeting fairly regularly. Group membership seems to be an experience of particular importance to all subjects despite the differences in activities carried out by each group. Doing things together is considered important, independent of whether these activities consume much time or not, and independent of the content of these activities. These results are in line with Sherif's work (1984) and confirm our assumptions about peer groups as a relevant sphere in which the personal and social world, during adolescence, articulates.

Adolescents have concrete concepts of their own groups, and are aware of groups different from their own. Consequently, comparisons between the ingroup and outgroups are made. It is interesting to note the marked differentiation between one's own group, be it a formal or informal group, and political groups. Although it is difficult to grasp the full meaning of this sharp distinction, adolescents may be reminded of the adult world when confronting political groups, and discard them for the unpleasant connotation of politics.

Adolescents belonging to formal groups, such as sports groups and religious groups (thus, groups with specific projects), tend to indicate political groups and informal groups as prototypes of groups significantly different from own group. Members of informal groups, such as street groups and groups meeting at peers' homes for no specific activities, indicated formal groups, especially religious groups, as outgroups. A considerable number of members of informal groups identified other informal groups as their outgroups. This might be due to the fact that informal groups are more heterogeneous than formal groups.

In summary, adolescents perceived themselves as being placed in an articulated social field, and compared the group they joined with a wide range of other types of groups. In terms of the content and activities of these groups, some appear especially different from the own group.

The results largely confirm the expectations on intergroup dynamics. Descriptions of self and ingroup were similar across adolescents, independent of the type of group they joined. Descriptions of the ingroup and outgroup 1 were significantly different. Even more distinct were descriptions between self and outgroup 2, juvenile drug abusers.

While the type of group proved to be rather insignificant, the subjects' degree of identification with their groups significantly affected descriptions of the self, ingroups and outgroups, as well as the evaluation of, and difficulty in coping with, developmental tasks. Highly identified adolescents described themselves, the ingroup and the first outgroup in more positive terms, and drug abusers in more negative terms than did low identifiers.

These results are in part contrary to intergroup theory, and cast doubt on the full validity of Turner's intergroup model. High identification levels do not always imply more negative judgements of outgroups. Differentiation mechanisms proved valid for the very dissimilar outgroup of drug abusers, but not for the outgroup the respondents had indicated as their outgroup. Drug abusers were perceived as being totally different to one's own group and the outgroup the subjects had chosen. Such dissimilar social entities are usually the subject of 'psychologization' processes (Papastamou, 1983).

The individually chosen outgroup was considered as a component part of one's own cognitive field. In regard to such a social entity, intergroup mechanisms seem to function free of complications inherent to extraneous entities.

The results of this study support Deschamps' (1982) intergroup model, which stated that the greater the difference between self and ingroup (that is, the lower members' identification with the group), the greater the distance between ingroup and outgroup. On the other hand, if the distance between self and ingroup is low (that is, if identification with the group is high), the distance between ingroup and outgroup should be low. Deschamps explains this effect as concomitant variation of differentiation processes between the self and groups. The present data allow us to go a little further with this purely formal explanation: adolescents who identify highly with their group seem to draw greater security and support from their identification, which leads to minor need to discard members belonging to different groups. Adolescents who draw less security from their membership, that are low identifiers, are more inclined to consider members not belonging to their peer group unfavourably (see also Van Knippenberg and Wilke, 1989; Abrams and Hogg, 1988).

Identification with the peers also affected evaluations of, and coping with, developmental tasks. High identifiers reported having fewer problems with personal and relational tasks than did low identifiers. Acquiring autonomy in regard with decisions one has to take, accepting one's body after puberty changes, developing self-awareness, finding and accepting reference values, coping with everyday life problems, establishing a relationship with friends of both sexes, etc., are tasks which high identifiers have fewer problems coping with; also, their peer groups judge these tasks as less important than socio-institutional tasks. Successful-

ly completing one's school career, finding a job, and succeeding at work and achieving economic independence, are more serious problems. Since high identifiers say that their groups pay attention to these tasks, the higher the identification the more support an adolescent may get from his/her peers. A follow-up study on adolescents' developmental problems and sources of support, recently conducted at the university of Bologna, Italy, confirms this interpretation. At the present stage of data processing the results support the assumption that high identifiers are more often offered support from peers and other persons, they accept their support more often and are consequently better able to find a solution for their various problems.

This paper's contribution to adolescent social psychology may be seen in reflections on changes of the self during adolescence, and in the discussion of the importance of belonging to a peer group. It is not the type of group one belongs to, but the level of identification with one's peers, that affects processes of changes of self. The subjects' degree of identification with their group is highly important: highly identified adolescents are not only more willing to cooperate with the peers who form the ingroup (Turner, 1987); adolescents have a reference point urgently needed in periods of self changes. High identifiers are able to perceive positive aspects both of one's own group and of other groups. Outgroups are perceived as part of the personal field of experience. However, groups belonging to fields of experiences totally different from one's own are perceived in stereotypically negative terms.

Adolescents with high identification not only form more positive judgements about themselves, and ingroup and outgroup members, but have also fewer problems with developmental tasks, and seem to get more support from their peer group.

In conclusion, this study shows the need to shift attention from group or individual characteristics to relationship aspects, such as identification with the group, to understand fully the significance of peer groups during adolescence.

APPENDIX A

Adjectives used to describe oneself, the ingroup, and the two outgroups (answers ranged from 1 = the respective characteristic is not present; to 5 = the respective characteristic is very much present)

Adjective	Factor
Altruistic Carefree Extrovert Open Optimistic Trusting	Openness towards the social world
Marginalized Rebellious Thoughtless Violent Without any ideals Without any values	Disengagement
Active Decisive Independent Responsible Sporty	Commitment
Disillusioned Dissatisfied Lonely Sad	Dissatisfaction

APPENDIX B

Developmental tasks. The questions were worded as follows: How important are the following tasks to you (your group)? How difficult are the following tasks to cope with for you (your group)? (Scales ranged from 1 = unimportant, not difficult to 5 = important, difficult)

Item	Category
Accepting one's body changes	Personal tasks
Acquiring autonomy with regard to significant decisions one has to take	
Coping successfully with various everyday life situations	
Developing self-awareness	
Finding reference values	
Overcoming restlessness	
Establishing an intimate relationship	Relational tasks
Establishing relationships with friends	
Achieving economic independence	Socio-institutional tasks
Assuming responsibility for marriage and establishing a family	
Integration into a work setting	
Successfully completing one's school career	

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