

Chapter 10

**Evolution of the Self Concept in
Adolescence and Social
Categorization Processes¹**

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ABSTRACT

In Italy, almost all adolescents join one or more peer-groups fairly regularly and are aware of the existence of different types of peer-groups. This chapter reports on several studies on adolescents and the importance of their peer-groups. It reviews investigations of social psychological aspects of adolescents and their peer-groups and, more specifically, of ecological aspects of peer-groups, dynamics of social categorization, and the effects of the relationship between the individual and the group on self-description and the perception of others. As far as social categorization processes are concerned, support was found, in part, for Turner's (1981) self-categorization theory, and in part, for Deschamp's (1982) co-variation thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a stage of life, usually conceived of as beginning at age 11 and ending at around 18, during which the individual acquires the necessary competences and requisites needed as an adult. During the process of transition into adulthood, biological, psychological, and social factors come into play. The beginning of adolescence is characterized by pubertal changes and by the sociopsychological problems deriving from them. Tension builds up as the adolescent tries to become autonomous from the family and is intensified by frequent feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty. While growing up, teenagers are oriented increasingly towards their peers; they meet with them, learn their values and find a social setting in which they may act without the control of adults. Peers allow teenagers to try out new social roles, to face new significant situations, such as intimate relationships. They represent a forum to talk about problems at school, the difficulties in finding a job, and the first experiences at work. In short, peers become an important social entity: this allows adolescents to talk about their situation and jointly to seek solutions to their worries. Interactions with peers are a means of structuring one's opinions about and attitudes towards the self, significant others, and the wider social world. Achieving a subjective picture of the social world depends on the capacity to perceive others in abstract, as well as concrete, terms. This stepwise development from concrete images, typical of children, to an abstract image is affected by the adolescent's social relationships (Coleman & Hendry, 1990).

The period of adolescence ends when the individual has succeeded in redefining his or her relationships with others. The relationship with peers becomes less intensive and the person's "career" as an adult starts. In the first phase of adulthood (see Keniston, 1971, for a discussion on youth as a stage of life), the individual is able to engage autonomously in continuing productive work, in a durable and intimate relationship, and in close friendships. The young adult makes decisions about a partner, friends, job, etc. and becomes aware that choosing one alternative leads to the rejection of other equally attractive and valuable alternatives.

Adolescence is a social condition connected to the complexity of life in general. Although adolescence may be less stormy than is generally believed, it is a period of great changes which often leads to conflicts and tension (Coleman & Hendry, 1990). Adolescence has been defined as a period of motivational dilemmas (Sherif & Sherif, 1965) or of developmental tasks (Coleman, 1980; Dreher & Dreher, 1985; Havighurst, 1951; Silbereisen, Eyferth & Rudinger, 1986) that the teenagers need to cope with. Only the appropriate resolution of developmental tasks leads to maturation and to the construction of an identity as an adult individual.

During adolescence, the individual becomes increasingly oriented towards

the extrafamilial world. It is assumed that adolescents join peers fairly regularly and most of them become members of a peer-group. Various types of peer-groups can be formed: more or less formal ones engaged in specific activities, or informal ones without any specific programs. The adolescents are presumably aware of the existence of different forms of peer-groups and of forming attitudes and performing behaviors relative to the various groups which can be described in terms of intergroup dynamics (Tajfel, 1978). Since the peer-group is assumed to be the most important laboratory for exploring adulthood, the relationship between adolescents and their group is perceived as affecting the process of transition into adulthood. The adolescent can derive support in coping with various developmental tasks from the peer-group only if the relationship with the group is close enough, that is, if there exists mutual trust, sympathy, friendly interest in the others' problems, and readiness to self-disclosure. The relationship needs to be close enough to allow for the mutual sharing of the individuals' problems and acceptance of advice from the others, but at the same time it must allow for individual responses to salient problems, rather than coercing the adolescent into accepting the solution suggested by peers. While groups meeting spontaneously for no specific reason may be too loose as aggregations to develop the spirit of a group, gangs, on the other hand, may be too close as groups to allow for individual idiosyncrasies and, thus, lead to deindividuation.

This chapter focuses on the importance of the peer-group during adolescence. It aims to review several studies conducted by Palmonari and his colleagues (Kirchler, Pombeni & Palmonari, 1991; Palmonari & Pombeni, 1989; Pombeni, Kirchler & Palmonari, 1990; Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1989; 1990) on social psychological aspects of adolescents and their peer-groups. The ecological aspects of peer-groups, the dynamics of social categorization, and the effects of the relationship between the individual and the group on self-description and the perception of others are examined in detail.

A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW OF ADOLESCENCE

Although many studies have been conducted over the last years on the importance of peer-groups in the development of the adolescent, Muzafer and Carolyn W. Sherif are the only researchers who have dealt with this subject from a clearly social psychological point of view (Sherif & Sherif, 1964). We shall discuss the main points of their studies.

Changing Interactions During Adolescence

The forming of "natural" groups among adolescents and the influence of such groups on the lives of each member have a social psychological basis, as this phenomenon is closely linked with the modification of the individual's self-system during adolescence. According to Sherif and Sherif, the self system is a constellation of categorical structures and schemata. It is shaped through interaction with the physical and social environment of the individual. Interaction with others mediates the experiences of the "me," "I," and "mine" with one's body and its parts, with one's capabilities, and one's comparison with others, with significant persons, groups, and categories (e.g. gender), and one's relationships to others as well as relevant aspects of the individuals' social environment (Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Sherif & Sherif, 1969; Sherif, 1967, 1984).

There are two universal elements which characterize adolescence: the changes that the body undergoes as it loses its childhood features while gradually acquiring those of an adult person; and the changes in the social relations which the individual has formed with his or her environment from birth to the beginning of puberty.

The physical changes are brought about by the biological maturity which each human being must undergo at a critical stage of development. The relational changes, on the contrary, are connected with the fact that the subject no longer wishes to be dependent on his or her family or on the various forms of social support which the family has provided up to that moment. The strong dependency on the family is replaced by the desire to assume the behavior which is typical of adulthood and responsibilities for it. Additionally to these changes, persons in the subject's environment perceive all the changes, be it physical, sexual, relational, or other, that the adolescent undergoes, and consequently, their attitudes, expectations, and behavior also change and the adolescent will no longer be treated as a child. These altered initiatives and responses provide further stimuli for the subject, thus prompting him or her to assume styles of conduct typical of adults.

The multiplicity of changes concerning the adolescent and his or her relations with the world does not necessarily imply that adolescence is a stormy period marked exclusively by uncertainty and anxiety. Adolescence can be a period of difficult transformations which involve the subject in demanding but also rewarding tasks. But it can also be an experience charged with emotional uncertainties, as well as the anxiety and the fear of not being able to cope with the problems confronting him or her. The nature of the experience depends on the quality of the relationship which the individual in question has established with his or her environment and on the growth process itself (Coleman, 1969, 1980).

In any case, the multiple changes undoubtedly undermine the psychological

schemata which previously regulated the individual's relations with his or her body, with other individuals or groups, with activities, objects, and social institutions. In addition, acquiring greater autonomy entails undertaking new activities and adopting different behavior, as well as new ways of relating to others. In other words, Sherif and Sherif argue that the most important problem of adolescence lies in the reshaping of the parts of the self system which prove to be discontinuous with respect to childhood experiences, so as to succeed in coping with the new experiences which must be faced.

Adolescents and Their Reference Groups

The changes which characterize adolescence shake many of the consolidated certainties within the self system. For example, the meaning of "good" boy or "good" girl is no longer clear. What is viewed as acceptable behavior for a boy may be unacceptable for a girl, and *vice versa*. Moreover, the adolescent may find it difficult to imagine his or her future and to prepare for it. The individual is thus confronted with uncertainties regarding many aspects of his or her experience, to the extent that he or she can no longer rely on the criteria used up to that moment. He or she may see some of his or her parents' suggestions as advice to preserve a state of dependence.

The subject, therefore, is driven actively to seek rules, guidelines and stable interpersonal relationships to lead him or her out of uncertainty. It is during such critical moments that the specificity of a social system enables the individual to find adequate solutions. The organization of young people's social life according to age groups, which is typical of today's society, becomes decisive. Being surrounded by so many peers who share the same problems, the adolescent can strengthen and extend his or her relations with the peer-group, since these relations have become more frequent, intense, and meaningful. In previous times, when adolescents from wealthy families were taught by private tutors in their homes, keeping a diary or day-dreaming were their only comforts.

The shift of interest towards the adolescent's peers corresponds to a decline of the relevance attributed to the authority and power of adults. Now, the peers provide many of the necessary criteria. In support of this thesis, Sherif and Sherif quote the studies on self-esteem by Rosenberg (1967) and Gecas (1972), as well as the laboratory research conducted by Prado (1958).

Rosenberg has pointed out that the adolescents whose academic performance behavior is judged negatively according to adults' criteria do not lose their self-confidence, thanks to an intergenerational agreement whereby adults' criteria are not important. Gecas (1972) reported that high school students' self-esteem was highest in contexts with best friends of the same

gender, followed by those with the opposite gender, and lastly, in family contexts. Lowest self-esteem was reported with "adults in general," and particularly with teachers in the classroom. Prado has demonstrated that youngsters, whose relationships with their families were defined in positive terms by the youngsters themselves, were more orientated towards their peers than towards their families. If compared to children between the ages of 8 and 11, adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17 tended to overestimate the performance of friends from the same age group rather than that of their fathers. Children aged 8 to 11, on the contrary, overestimated their fathers rather than their friends.

Orientation towards the peer-group, the authors add, is not exclusive to adolescence. Adults from contexts with different behavioral rules, who find themselves in situations of uncertainty, also tend to interact with individuals sharing the same experiences, and whom they trust in order to find the rules to guide their behavior. On the other hand, adults tend to distance themselves from people they do not trust. Even when faced with the difficulties of an unknown situation, adults tend to isolate themselves from others and to maintain their behavior rules even if they do not fit the situational requirements (Doise, 1976).

Sherif and Sherif call the social entity that is constituted under circumstances of uncertainty a "reference group." A reference group is a social unit to which the individual relates psychologically and to which he or she wishes to belong. For almost all adolescents in our culture there are at least two reference groups: the family and the peer-group. The literature on adolescence seldom analyzes these multiple anchorages of self in this phase of changes, and the closely correlated issues of the overlap and conflict of divided loyalties. Those who do (e.g. Larson, 1972) presume that conflict between youngsters and adults is inevitable. This conflict may be avoided, however, when the norms followed by the adult and those of the adolescent are not incompatible, in other words, when the adults' and adolescents' hierarchy of priorities regards separate and distinct activities.

Psychological orientation towards peers may occur also if there is no parent-child conflict. Orientation towards peers, and distancing oneself from adults, are found to be usually more accentuated in the adolescents who have experienced a difficult and problematic relationship with adults in the course of development. Hence, for those adolescents, the peer-group becomes the only point of reference.

Research Procedures and Findings

The systematic research program elaborated by Sherif and Sherif developed mainly through the intensive study of "natural" adolescent groups. The term "natural group" has been used to designate the origins of the group, and

carries no evaluative implication. It is used to distinguish this group type from the "artificial groups" of experimental research, particularly in the case of adolescent groups. According to the authors, it is also advisable to distinguish groups through the informal interaction of members from those instituted by adults, a board of officials, or a council. A formally instituted body may or may not become a "group" in the sense intended in the research program.

The procedure used by Sherif and Sherif in their studies on peer-groups pivoted on the observation of the life of each participating peer-group. Observation lasted generally over 6 months, and was carried out by a specially trained student. It comprised preliminary socioeconomic investigations of the urban areas where the groups lived. Moreover, the researchers conducted surveys among the age-mates of the members of the adolescent groups to single out attitudes, behavioral rules, and aspirations considered socially desirable in that particular cultural environment.

Through this procedure it was possible to show how the interaction activated within each group rapidly led to the defining of different ranks and roles for each member (a leader, influential members, less influential members etc.), even though a group formed on the basis of spontaneous choices among friends. Interaction among group members, moreover, led to the defining of normative rules of behavior. The rules specify how the members are expected to act and how they are forbidden to behave, and also the criteria that must be respected when establishing or avoiding contact with an outgroup. Thorough analyses of the data collected in natural settings as well as in the laboratory were then carried out to analyze specific aspects of group life. These analyses enabled the authors to ascertain, for example, that the performance of the subjects with the highest status was overestimated by the members of the group as compared to that of the members with lower status. In addition, influence of the leader or of a prominent member was greater than that of other members of the group. If new members joined the group, the status and the roles were generally rearranged. Moreover, some rules were confirmed (evidently viewed as essential for the life of the group), while others, which were considered arbitrary, were abolished and sometimes substituted with new ones.

In short, once a group is formed, it produces many phenomena of collective living: the name of the group, nicknames for most of its members, a specific jargon, a particular dress code, rules of conduct autonomously adopted and binding for the members, both within the group and outside it. It must be pointed out, however, that the presence of norms does not mean a "total" regulation of the life of the group members. In this connection, Sherif and Sherif use the notion of "latitude of acceptance and rejection defining individual conformity." In other words, each individual is involved in the affairs of his or her group as far as conduct and particular

objects are concerned; he or she is less involved with respect to other things, or not involved at all. Only the things that matter to the group are regulated by norms, and the leader is expected to strictly adhere to such norms, much more so than the less influential members. While the properties and processes illustrated thus far are shared by the groups examined, the particular norms they produce, the specificity, and the function of the hierarchical structure can be understood only by referring to the social and cultural differences characterizing the environment within which each group is formed.

ON THE ECOLOGY OF PEER-GROUPS

As we have seen thus far, Sherif and Sherif relate the existence of adolescent groups to the specificity of a cultural context and of a social organization. According to their thesis, natural groups of adolescents should constitute a real and indisputable phenomenon in all the countries of the West. Much field-work and several reports by social work professionals have furnished evidence which clearly confirms this assumption as regards Italian cities. In particular, thanks to two studies in which the procedure of direct observation of the groups in their settings was employed, it was possible to describe the dynamics of several groups, placing emphasis on formal and informal experiences (Amerio *et al.*, 1990; Amerio, Palmonari & Pombeni, 1987).

The groups which have been defined as "informal" are constituted exclusively on the basis of the reciprocal interest of their members, quite independent of any adult leadership. The members meet in a variety of places outside their homes, such as street corners, parks, coffee houses, etc. In a few cases the members meet in more structured places, such as in the homes of their age-mates, in school-yards or sports centers. The term "formal group," on the other hand, indicates groups which form on the basis of a clear goal to be attained under the supervision of an adult leader. The goals may be religious, sporting, political (youth clubs of political parties), as well as humanitarian (e.g. the young members of Amnesty International).

A further study conducted on a sample of adolescents by means of a questionnaire (Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1990) later confirmed the widespread presence of different types of formal and informal peer-groups as well as their structural and functional features. This study showed that the gathering of adolescents into groups is a widespread phenomenon. Overall, 94.9% of the adolescents who completed the questionnaire said that they met the same group of friends fairly regularly. Whereas 97.6% of the boys reported joining a group regularly, the respective percentage of girls amounted to 92.2%. Social condition did not determine any differences in the data.

The main reason for being in a group is to enjoy oneself (38.8% of the respondents reported that enjoyment is the main purpose for meeting their group). But the group is also seen as an opportunity for meeting friends (20.5%), sharing meaningful experiences (19.6%), and growing (13.3%). A small percentage (7.8%) considers group life as an alternative to loneliness. As far as sex differences are concerned, our results show that especially males meet their peers for amusement, whereas girls more often than boys reported that the main reason for joining their group was for having social contacts. The reasons for meeting a group did not vary between students and adolescents who already had a paid job. Table 10.1 illustrates the distribution of reasons for belonging to a group according to sex and working condition (students vs. workers) of the adolescents.

As to the type of groups, most of the adolescents belong to an informal group (75%). Informal groups, as the point of reference, represent a nucleus of companions who frequently meet outdoors, in squares, streets, courtyards, parks, coffee houses, etc. Most of the informal groups meet on the street in the cities (53.1%), whereas 25.6% meet at friends' homes. In the following, those groups meeting at the friends' homes will be called quasi-informal groups. We found no differences between formal and informal groups as concerns sex of respondents, working condition and social strata of the adolescents. In these informal groups one finds boys (44.2%) and girls (55.8%), students (80.8%), workers (12.1%), and unemployed people (7.1%), from all the social classes. In addition to spontaneous groups, more structured ones were also mentioned, such as sports or religious groups.

About 11% of the sample belong to the first type of groups, the sports group, of which the majority are boys (72.8% as opposed to 27.2% girls), and principally students (79.9% as opposed to 20.1% workers), from different social classes. About 10% of the adolescents belong to the second group, which meets in the parish facilities, in which girls represented the majority (57.1% as opposed to 42.9% boys) and in which the percentage of students was very high (90.0% as opposed to 10% workers or unemployed).

Table 10.1 Reasons for belonging to a group (in percentages), according to sex and working condition. From Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1990, with permission

Reasons	Male (<i>n</i> = 1868)	Female (<i>n</i> = 1876)	Student (<i>n</i> = 3012)	Worker (<i>n</i> = 732)
Amusement	42.6	34.8	38.4	39.7
Social contacts	16.8	24.3	20.9	19.3
Sharing experiences	20.0	19.2	19.3	21.2
Growing	11.4	15.2	13.9	10.9
Avoiding loneliness	9.2	6.5	7.5	8.9

especially from the middle and upper classes (75% as opposed to 25% from lower social classes). As regards political and expressive groups, we found few adolescents meeting in such groups regularly. Only 2.4% of the participants met with expressive groups that were mostly engaged with music. About 1.5% met groups engaged in civil or social programs, such as environmentalist groups, peace movements, etc., and less than 1% joined political groups. Table 10.2 shows the division of the groups according to the type of group, sex of the adolescents, and their working conditions.

Amusements occupy most of the time spent in all of the different group types, with the exception of religious groups which are engaged mainly in the realization of projects proposed by the adults in charge. For all of the adolescents, the group constitutes a very important experience. Calculated on the basis of a scale of importance ranging from 1 (= not important) to 5 (= very important), the mean value for the different group types is between 3.9 and 4.4. With the exception of sports groups, the girls attached greater importance to belonging to a group than boys of the same age.

These findings have allowed us to verify empirically that the phenomenon of adolescent groups is widespread in Italy at present. The adolescents who participated in our studies perceived their groups to be very important social objects in their lives.

PEER-GROUPS AND THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CATEGORIZATION

Adolescents' Awareness of Different Peer-Groups

Adolescents have concrete concepts of their own groups and are aware of groups different from their own. The awareness of belonging to a peer-group, which represents an important social category, is always related to

Table 10.2 Types of groups (in percentages), according to sex and working condition. From Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1990, with permission

Group types	Male (<i>n</i> = 1868)	Female (<i>n</i> = 1876)	Student (<i>n</i> = 3012)	Worker (<i>n</i> = 732)
Informal or quasi-informal	71.9	78.0	74.2	80.4
Formal				
Sporting	15.6	5.9	10.4	11.1
Religious	7.6	11.9	10.9	5.1
Socially committed	1.5	1.6	1.3	1.3
Expressive	2.8	2.0	2.4	2.0
Political	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.1

the awareness of the existence of other groups, which are used for social comparisons (Tajfel, 1978). Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler (1989, 1990) asked the participants in their studies to indicate the type of group they perceived as being completely different from their own. Combining both studies, the answers of 3792 adolescents are available. Table 10.3 shows that a large majority of subjects differentiated between their peer-group and political groups. This result is surprising: although most teenagers are not actively involved in political groups, these groups seem to be very much present in their minds. The lack of participation of adolescents in political groups is probably due to the age of the respondents. Young people may become more interested and more involved in political activities when they grow older. Although it is difficult to grasp the full meaning of this sharp distinction, the reason may be that adolescents are reminded of the adult world when confronting political groups and discard them because of the unpleasant connotation of politics. In Italy, adolescents were found to have negative images about politics, especially about the activities of the parties (Cavalli & De Lillo, 1988).

Despite the fact that political groups represented outgroups for a large proportion (43%) of the adolescents in all four types of groups, it was found that members of formal groups often perceived the informal groups (informal and quasi-informal groups) as their outgroups (42%). On the other hand, informal groups perceived formal groups (38%), especially religious groups (34%), as their outgroups. Moreover, members of informal groups quite often indicated other informal groups as being very different from their peer-group (13%). Members of formal groups differentiated themselves from informal groups. A considerable number of members of informal groups identified other informal groups as their outgroups. This might be

Table 10.3 Percentages of groups considered as outgroups by informal, quasi-informal, sports, and religious groups (combined results of two studies by Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1989; 1990)

Outgroups	Informal (<i>n</i> = 2021)	Peer-groups		
		Quasi-informal (<i>n</i> = 933)	Sport (<i>n</i> = 434)	Religious (<i>n</i> = 404)
Informal	9-	16	28+	49+
Quasi-informal	2	2	4	3
Sports	4	4	2	3
Religious	37+	27	24-	7-
Political	43	49+	38	38
Other	5	3	3	1

Symbols + and - indicate significantly higher or lower observed frequencies than expected frequencies ($p < 0.05$).

due to the fact that informal groups are more heterogeneous than formal groups. In other words, the results show that adolescents perceived themselves as being placed in an articulated social field, joined with a wide range of other types of groups.

Differentiation Between One's Own and Other Peer-groups

Adolescents tend to differentiate between their group and outgroups. These differentiation processes are observable even in situations when objective characteristics allow for minimal distinctions. A series of now classic experimental studies (e.g. Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Doise, Deschamps & Meyer, 1978; Doise & Weinberger, 1973; Tajfel *et al.*, 1971) shows that subjects who belong to an artificial group in which membership is based on rather vague and weak characteristics, assume behavioral strategies which allow them to differentiate between their (artificial) group and other (artificial) groups: in other words, they exhibit ethnocentrism.

It is plausible that when the group members develop their cognitive representations of the social field in which their group is located, they compare their group with other groups. They may focus especially on differences and define their group on the basis of distinguishing characteristics. Social categorization theory (Tajfel, 1972, 1978, 1981) states that the individuals' enhancement of differences between their own group and outgroups is based on cognitive processes, namely, the categorization processes that are highly functional in helping to simplify and systematize the individuals' social world. These processes exaggerate perceived differences between groups and emphasize the similarities within them.

Tajfel (1978) points out that processes of differentiation and categorization are important in structuring social interaction, in establishing groups of individuals, and in the dynamics of differentiation between social objects. Categorization processes of the perceived social reality influence the judgments of various social groupings and the attitudes towards them (for a clarification of these concepts, see Brown, 1988; Doise, 1976; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

In our studies we observed that adolescents tended to differentiate less between themselves and their peer-group than between themselves and other groups. Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler (1989, 1990) asked subjects to evaluate themselves and their peer-group (ingroup), and to evaluate a group they perceived as completely different from the own peer-group (outgroup 1), and groups of drug-using adolescents (outgroup 2). Groups of adolescents using drugs were presented by the researchers because they are socially stigmatized, judged as negative, and as threatening the development of adolescents. Thus, outgroup 2 will be perceived as highly dissimilar to one's own group. Descriptions of oneself, the ingroup, and the

two outgroups were made on 21 adjectives provided by the researchers. The list of adjectives resulted from pre-test interviews with adolescents and are presented elsewhere (Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1989).

As an index of difference between oneself and the peer-group, the Euclidean distances between the descriptions of the self, the ingroup, and both outgroups (the one identified by the subjects and the group of drug-consuming adolescents) on the 21 adjectives were calculated according to the following formula:

$$d_{sg} = \frac{1}{n} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_{si} - y_{gi})^2}$$

d_{sg} = distance between self descriptions s and descriptions of peer-group g ;

x_{si} = self descriptions on $i = 1$ to 21 items;

y_{gi} = descriptions of the peer-group g on $i = 1$ to $n = 21$ items;

n = number of items.

The same procedure was used to calculate the distances between oneself and descriptions of the two outgroups. The indexes of distance were included as dependent variables in an analysis of variance with the group comparisons (self-ingroup, self-outgroup 1, self-outgroup 2) as repeated factors, and the type of groups (informal, quasi-informal, sport and religious) as independent between-subjects factors. Table 10.4 shows that the subjects judged themselves as being closer to their peer-group than to the two outgroups. Outgroup 1 was perceived to be more similar to self than the groups of teenagers using drugs. It should be emphasized that these differentiations between self, ingroup and outgroups were observed in all groups, both formal and informal. Common sense holds that street groups are close to deviant groups, e.g. adolescents taking drugs. However, the present results show that, as far as perceptions of similarities and differences are concerned, the street groups are equally distant from drug-abusing adolescents, religious groups or adolescents engaged in physical training.

Evaluation of One's Own and Other Peer-groups

The processes of comparison and differentiation described in Tajfel's self-categorization theory are associated with those processes studied in Tajfel's (1978) and Tajfel & Turner's (1979) social identity theory, which holds that differentiation between groups is asymmetrical, i.e. positively biased towards the ingroup. Differentiation processes are often based on elaborations of negative stereotypes of the others, on the devaluation of their activities and their aims.

Starting from these findings we tried to respond to the most fundamental

Table 10.4 Combined results of Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler's (1989, 1990) studies on Euclidean distances (0 = no distance; 0.87 = large distance) between descriptions of oneself and ingroup, oneself and outgroup 1, and oneself and outgroup 2 by informal, quasi-informal, sport, and religious groups

Distances	Peer-groups			
	Informal	Quasi-informal	Sport	Religious
Oneself-ingroup	0.211	0.207	0.204	0.198
Oneself-outgroup 1	0.357	0.357	0.377	0.378
Oneself-outgroup 2	0.546	0.550	0.576	0.571

questions in our research. We were mainly interested in the effects which the type of group that adolescents join has on the evolution of their self concept. We tried to analyze the cognitive representations of teenagers in informal and formal groups, respectively. The main interest concerned the descriptions of themselves, their peers, and others. In addition, we focused our attention on developmental tasks and adolescents' coping strategies (see Kirchler, Pombeni & Palmonari, 1991; Pombeni, Kirchler & Palmonari, 1990).

As concerns the representations of self, peers, and others, we hypothesized that teenagers who join formal groups describe themselves and their peer-group in a more favorable way than do teenagers joining informal groups. This hypothesis is based on the assumptions that the peer-group provides a point of reference for the members, and formal groups are organized in a more stringent way than others. Members of formal groups accept norms and rules which are formulated explicitly: any departure from these rules is strongly disapproved of by the members. As a consequence, members of formal peer-groups should develop a group spirit which is stronger than in informal groups. Cohesion should be strong and dependency on the group considerably high. In terms of Tajfel's intergroup theory, teenagers joining formal peer-groups, such as religious groups or sports groups, should therefore describe the group more positively than members of street groups and elaborate negative stereotypes of outgroups. Moreover, we assumed that formal groups are able to provide their members with more emotional and informational support than informal groups. Adolescents joining religious groups and sports groups were, thus, assumed to have fewer problems in coping with developmental tasks than members of street groups.

To test this hypothesis, Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler (1989, 1990) analyzed the judgments of self, the ingroup and both outgroups on the 21 adjectives. A principal component analysis with varimax rotation, computed

to reduce the complexity of the adjective list, revealed four factors. On the first factor, called "dissatisfaction," the following items, expressing mainly feelings of personal uneasiness, were highly loaded: dissatisfied; sad; disappointed; lonely; depressed; anti-conformist. The second factor, "openness towards the social world," included the following items: extraverted; open towards other people; optimistic; trustful; active; and sporting. The third factor, "disengagement," included the adjectives: disengaged; violent; lacking values; and lacking ideals. On the fourth factor, "commitment," the following adjectives were highly loaded: responsible; decisive; and autonomous: i.e. adjectives indicating social and personal engagement.

Several analyses of variance were computed to study the judgments on the four adjective factors (dissatisfied; open towards other people; disengaged; committed) by peers of informal, quasi-informal, sports, and religious groups. All of the analyses yielded results showing that adolescents of all four types of groups judged themselves and their own peer-group as being extraverted and committed, but not dissatisfied and disengaged. Outgroup 1, and especially outgroup 2, were described by all four types of groups as being less open towards the social world and less committed and more dissatisfied and disengaged than self or own group. These results are in line with self-categorization theory. The type of peer-group had a statistically significant impact on evaluations, but the *F*-values were very small, given the high number of degrees of freedom. The nature of the group was, in both studies, of minor importance. Since the results of both studies are highly similar, the combined judgments are presented in Table 10.5.

Teenagers from both informal and formal groups evaluated and described themselves and their peer-groups in more positive terms than they judged the outgroups. Descriptions of the ingroup and the outgroup were significantly different. Even more distinct were descriptions of self and the outgroup presented by the researchers, namely juvenile drug consumers. Our results largely confirm the expectations on intergroup dynamics, but go against our hypothesis about the effects that the type of group was assumed to have on intergroup dynamics.

The results indicate that it is not simply belonging to one type of group rather than to another which is an important variable affecting the processes of group categorization, and consequently, processes of redefinition of the adolescent self. The studies show that evaluations of self and ingroup, and outgroup relationships are independent of the type of groups the adolescents belong to, be it a street group, a well formalized group committed to religious programs, or a sports group. However, these studies also reveal a high variance of descriptions within each type of peer-group, especially within informal groups.

Table 10.5 Combined results of Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler's (1989, 1990) studies on descriptions of oneself, the ingroup, outgroup 1, and outgroup 2 on four adjectives factors by informal, quasi-informal, sport, and religious groups (answers range from 1 = disagree to 5 = agree)

Descriptive factors	Peer-groups			
	Informal	Quasi-informal	Sport	Religious
Openness towards the social world				
Oneself	3.56	3.52	3.67	3.65
Ingroup	3.57	3.62	3.80	3.81
Outgroup 1	3.03	2.99	2.88	2.82
Outgroup 2	1.71	1.61	1.72	1.59
Commitment				
Oneself	3.60	3.58	3.58	3.47
Ingroup	3.46	3.57	3.52	3.65
Outgroup 1	3.27	3.22	3.12	3.00
Outgroup 2	1.92	1.79	1.98	1.74
Dissatisfaction				
Oneself	2.15	2.26	2.11	2.10
Ingroup	2.01	2.08	1.97	1.91
Outgroup 1	2.45	2.41	2.39	2.47
Outgroup 2	3.82	3.96	3.80	4.11
Disengagement				
Oneself	1.82	1.64	1.73	1.42
Ingroup	3.54	3.62	3.59	3.71
Outgroup 1	2.04	1.79	1.94	1.42
Outgroup 2	2.32	2.31	2.57	2.78

Identification with the Peer-group

The high variation of judgments in informal groups needs consideration. Highly deviating judgments could indicate that the peer-group is not important concerning the redefinition of self concept during adolescence; the judgments vary due to individual differences. However, this conclusion goes against findings confirming the importance of peers with regard to the growing identity of teenagers. On the other hand, a high variance could indicate that, rather than the type of group that the adolescents join, it is the relationship that adolescents establish with their peers which is important. Theoretical support for this hypothesis stems from Turner *et al.*'s (1987) self-categorization theory. They showed that the process of identification with a group, defined as the similarity between self-descriptions and descriptions of the group, is more important for the development of feelings of group membership than cohesion or other structural aspects of a group.

Identification with one's group is a necessary condition for discriminating behavior in favour of the group, but the intensity or consistency of identification depends on numerous factors. Turner points to the importance of social-cognitive processes of self-categorization and social identification rather than to 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 the words of Turner *et al.* (1987, p. 101): "The group is cognitively represented within the mind of the individual member and in this sense exists as a social identification."

Starting from Rosch's (1975) conclusions, Turner *et al.* (1987) discussed different levels of self-categorization. The first level concerns the self as a human being; the intermediate level concerns the self as a component of a specific group; and finally, the subordinate categorization level is based on differentiation of oneself as an individual from other members of the ingroup (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 45). Moreover, Turner *et al.* postulate a functional antagonism between the salience of one level of self-categorization and the other levels. He states that whenever one level becomes salient, the others become less important. Salience of the intermediate level enhances intragroup similarity and intergroup differences (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 49).

From these assumptions it follows that processes which lead to the increasing of ingroup-outgroup differentiation also tend to augment the perceived similarity and identity between oneself and one's own group. These processes lead to a depersonalized perception of oneself as individual. This is true, if perception of oneself is measured on stereotypical dimensions that define group membership as being relevant. Depersonalization refers to stereotyping of oneself. Stereotyping of oneself means perceiving oneself as representing a member of a social category that can easily be substituted by other members, rather than perceiving oneself as an individual with his or her idiosyncrasies (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 50). According to Turner *et al.*, an individual who defines himself or herself as a member of a group, perceives himself or herself as highly similar to the group. High similarity of self-descriptions and group descriptions indicates high identification of the individual with his or her group.

In our studies, thus, it could be that an important factor affecting descriptions of self, the peer-group and other groups concerns identification of the adolescents with their group. As suggested by Turner *et al.* (1987), identification can be operationalized as similarity of self-descriptions and descriptions of the peer-group. We hypothesized that the higher the identification with the group, the more favorable the descriptions of one's own group and the less favorable are judgments about other groups.

Our results contrast with the widespread view which places informal groups in an intermediate position between the positive role of formal

groups and the negative role of deviant groups, such as groups in which teenagers consume drugs. While the type of group proved to be insignificant, the subjects' degree of identification with their groups significantly affected descriptions of the self, ingroups and outgroups as well as the evaluation of developmental tasks, and the difficulty of coping with developmental tasks. Highly identified adolescents described themselves, the ingroup and outgroup 1 in more positive terms, and drug consumers (outgroup 2) in more negative terms, than did low identifiers (Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1989, 1990; Pombeni, Kirchler & Palmonari, 1990; Kirchler, Pombeni & Palmonari, 1991).

As an index of identification with the peer-group, the Euclidean distances between the descriptions of the self, the ingroup, and both outgroups on 21 adjectives were calculated. Since there was no correlation between identification and group type, the total sample was split around the median of identification into two sub-samples, one with low identification and the other with high identification. Next, judgments of self, of the ingroup and of both outgroups on the four factors, "openness towards the social world," "commitment," "dissatisfaction," and "disengagement" were included in several analyses of variance with the four types of groups and identification as independent factors.

As already reported, all analyses showed that adolescents of all four types of groups judged themselves and their own peer-group in more positive terms than the outgroups. While no important differences between the types of groups emerged, identification played a significant role. 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 (Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1990). Table 10.6 shows that highly identified adolescents also judged outgroup 1 more favorably (less dissatisfied and less disengaged) but adolescents consuming drugs (outgroup 2) more negatively (more disengaged, dissatisfied, and less open) than did low identifiers. In sum, while the type of group was a rather unimportant factor, the degree of identification with one's group considerably affected the descriptions of oneself, one's group and the outgroups. In contrast with low identifiers, highly identified adolescents judged both ingroup and outgroup members more favorably and discarded groups of drug consumers.

According to Turner *et al.*'s (1987) model, high identification levels should imply more negative judgments of outgroups. The present results, however, are not in agreement. The tendency to differentiate was shown for both types of outgroups, but especially so in the case of outgroup 2, the group of drug consumers. Drug consuming groups were perceived as being totally different from one's own group and from the outgroup the subjects had chosen. As concerns high identifiers' judgments of outgroup 2, our results

Table 10.6 Description of oneself, ingroup, and outgroups on four adjectives factors by high and low identifiers. From Palmonari, Pombeni & Kirchler, 1990, with permission.

Description of oneself, ingroup, and outgroups	Identification	
	Low	High
	Openness towards the social world	
Oneself	3.53	3.79 *
Ingroup	3.59	3.81 *
Outgroup 1	2.92	2.93
Outgroup 2	1.71	1.61 *
	Commitment	
Oneself	3.49	3.63 *
Ingroup	3.48	3.61 *
Outgroup 1	3.15	3.16
Outgroup 2	1.86	1.84
	Dissatisfaction	
Oneself	2.39	1.93 *
Ingroup	2.11	1.89 *
Outgroup 1	2.49	2.39 *
Outgroup 2	3.89	3.95 *
	Disengagement	
Oneself	1.73	1.57 *
Ingroup	1.97	1.63 *
Outgroup 1	2.58	2.42 *
Outgroup 2	3.60	3.65 *

Asterisks indicate significant differences between high and low identifiers, respectively ($p < 0.05$).

seem to support self-categorization theory. However, as far as high identifiers' judgments of outgroup 1 are concerned, our results provide support for Deschamps' (1982) view of intergroup relationships. Deschamps has shown several times that the degree of differentiation between oneself and other members of the ingroup can be positively linked to the degree of differentiation between ingroup and outgroup. His thesis also seems to explain low identifiers' judgments of their own group and both outgroups: low identifiers perceived themselves as rather distant from their group and also described the two outgroups as different from themselves. Deschamps interprets this effect as the concomitant variation of differentiation processes between ingroup and outgroups. In other words, he assumes that subjects who perceive themselves as close to their group do also perceive themselves as less distant from outgroups and, *vice versa*, those who perceive themselves

as dissimilar from the ingroup also perceive a wide distance between themselves and outgroups. In sum, our results are complex, supporting to some extent self-categorization theory, and to some extent a model which is in competition with self-categorization theory. We will try to provide some explanations in the last part of this chapter.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we attempted to delineate a social-psychological approach to the study of peer-group membership and the evolution of the self-concept in adolescence. In their studies Sherif and Sherif (1964, 1965) confirm that adolescents join peer-groups, and that peer-groups are present in almost all areas of our cities and urban areas. The authors maintain that the phenomenon of peer-groups is closely connected to the modification of the self system during adolescence. Despite the important contributions of Sherif and Sherif to the understanding of adolescence, their research only shows that adolescents constitute natural groups of which they perceive themselves as more or less important members. These groups furnish a source of support enabling adolescents to cope with motivational dilemmas between the ages of 11 and 18, a period when they try to become independent of their families and to solve their problems autonomously.

Sherif and Sherif do not study the importance of group membership on the development of the self system or self concept. They convincingly show the importance of the group as a means of establishing and maintaining the self-esteem of its members. Moreover, they demonstrate that adolescents favour the activities and achievements of their age-mates much more than those of members of their family. However, these authors do not take into consideration the fact that adolescents may feel more or less close to their group and be more or less satisfied with the group that they join. Moreover, they do not consider the effects which the type of relationship their group establishes with other peer-groups has on the single members. Sherif and Sherif are mainly interested in showing that groups of adolescents develop their own rules of behavior, be it implicitly or explicitly, and organize themselves hierarchically.

In our surveys we found evidence for the wide diffusion of adolescent peer-groups in Italy, the presence of different types of groups, and the need to differentiate themselves from other peer-groups. The groups were either formal groups, meeting for different activities and projects (religious, sporting, political, expressive, etc.), or informal groups, meeting at street corners or members' homes for the sole purpose of entertainment.

Thanks to these findings our interest shifted towards intergroup dynamics. The major theoretical input to study group dynamics came from Tajfel and

his school. With reference to social categorization theory and social identity theory, we studied the influence of group membership on the definition of the self concept. The focus was on the type of ingroup, whether formal or informal, and on the relationship with other peer-groups, on outgroups perceived as different from one's own group. The most surprising result of our research was that the type of group had no influence on the redefinition of self. Adolescents meeting with peers in formal groups perceived their social environment in much the same way as adolescents meeting with peers in informal groups.

We then re-elaborated our hypothesis referring to the self-categorization theory of Turner (1975, 1981) and Turner *et al.* (1987). Turner holds that it is the relationship between the adolescent and his or her group, rather than the characteristics of the group, which influences redefinition of the self concept, the concept of the ingroup, and the wider social field. We found, in fact, that identification with one's own peer-group was an important variable. It proved to be more important than the type of organization of the peer-groups. The results show that the definition of self, the concept of ingroup and outgroups are independent of the type of group one joins, be it a formal or informal group.

The results deriving from our investigations revealed the importance of identification with the peer-group in the process of the redefinition of the qualitative aspects of the self concept, of the ingroup and of the outgroups. However, our results are only partially in line with self-categorization theory. High identification with the ingroup does not necessarily lead to high differentiation between ingroup and outgroups. On the other hand, low identification was not related to smaller perceived distance between ingroup and outgroups.

Our results support to some extent Turner's (1981) self-categorization theory and also to some extent Deschamps' (1982) hypotheses of co-variation processes. According to Deschamps, rather than being inversely related, within-group and between-group differentiation are positively related. Thus, peers who perceive a small distance between themselves and their ingroup also perceive a rather small distance between themselves, their ingroup and outgroups. On the other hand, those who feel distant from the ingroup also perceive themselves and their group as distant from their outgroups. Co-variation seems to be true for descriptions of oneself, one's own group and outgroup 1, whereas it was not supported as far as descriptions of oneself, one's own group and outgroup 2 were concerned. At the present stage of research it is difficult to explain why in some situations Turner's theory seems to be valid, whereas in other circumstances Deschamps' thesis better explains intergroup dynamics. Doise and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1989) argue that relative status positions of different groups and comparison dimensions salient in group encounters particularly may promote specific kinds of

ingroup differentiation which are compatible with between-group discrimination. Further research which takes peer-group status positions into account may shed more light on intergroup processes.

In conclusion, our results show some evidence for the interpretive models of social categorization processes. The formulated theories, however, are not able to explain all of the results obtained in intergroup research. A more complex theory of intergroup processes which takes into account the various levels of self-categorization (Doise & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1989; Rosch, 1975; Turner *et al.*, 1987), may provide greater understanding of the social phenomena at issue.

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Current theme of research:

Development of memory and metamemory in children, Reading acquisition, Prediction of school achievement.

Most relevant publications in the field of Educational Psychology:

- Schneider, W., & Pressley, M. (1989). *Memory development 2 and 20*. New York: Springer.
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Sweet sixteen... Adolescents' Problems and The Peer Group as Source of Support

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This survey reports on the coping process of adolescents with three relational problems, two personal problems, and two socio-institutional problems. Overall, 770 Italian adolescents between 14 and 20 years took part. They responded to a questionnaire consisting of four parts: a part querying demographic data, one on the peer group, the adolescents join, the third was on life values, and in the final part seven developmental tasks were presented and aspects of the coping process were investigated.

The study shows, first, that adolescents who strongly identify with their peers also feel close to their family, their best friend, and their school mates. Thus, identification with the peers does not lead to isolation from the family. Second, the study shows that identification with social entities, in part, is due to the similarity of values the adolescent and the respective entities have. The more similar life values are the more strongly the adolescents identify with the peers, the family, the best friend, or the school mates.

Third, effective coping with developmental tasks was found to be dependent on the degree of identification with the peers. The type of group that adolescents join, be it a formal group or an informal street group, had no significant effect on the coping process. Highly identified adolescents more often relied on their family, peers, and other social entities for emotional and instrumental support, and trace more advantages out of a developmental problem for their future.

Introduction

Adolescence is a life period in which great changes are observable both within the individual and the social environment. It presents a period of developmental transition (Eichorn, Mussen, Clausen, Haan, & Hornik, 1981) that can evoke serious psychological difficulties which often persist into adulthood. However, as Olbrich (1985), Petersen (1988) and Petersen, Silbereisen and Sorensen (1989) emphasize, it is inappropriate to assume that psychological difficulties

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Sweet sixteen... Adolescents' Problems and The Peer Group as Source of Support

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This survey reports on the coping process of adolescents with three relational problems, two personal problems, and two socio-institutional problems. Overall, 770 Italian adolescents between 14 and 20 years took part. They responded to a questionnaire consisting of four parts: a part querying demographic data, one on the peer group the adolescents join, the third was on life values, and in the final part seven developmental tasks were presented and aspects of the coping process were investigated. The study shows, first, that adolescents who strongly identify with their peers also feel close to their family, their best friend, and their school mates. Thus identification with the peers does not lead to isolation from the family. Second, the study shows that identification with social entities, in part, is due to the similarity of values the adolescent and the respective entities have. The more similar life values are the more strongly the adolescents identify with the peers, the family, the best friend, or the school mates. Third, effective coping with developmental tasks was found to be dependent on the degree of identification with the peers. The type of group that adolescents join, be it a formal group or an informal street group, had no significant effect on the coping process. Highly identified adolescents more often relied on their family, peers, and other social entities for emotional and instrumental support, and trace more advantages out of a developmental problem for their future.

Introduction

Adolescence is a life period in which great changes are observable both within the individual and the social environment. It presents a period of developmental transition (Eichorn, Mussen, Clausen, Haan, & Honzik, 1981) that can evoke serious psychological difficulties which often persist into adulthood. However, as Olbrich (1985), Petersen (1988) and Petersen, Silberstein and Sorensen (1989) emphasize, it is inappropriate to assume that psychological difficulties

in adolescence are normal and something that young people grow out of. Petersen (1988) reports, for instance, a study which reveals that 57% of the young adolescents have a basically positive development during early adolescence; 32% have more intermittent and probably situational conflicts, and about 11% of the teenagers had serious chronic difficulties. Also, Offer (1983) reports that 90% of teenagers are happy with their life, 70% accept and judge positively their body-changes, almost all describe themselves as work-oriented and have no serious problems with the family and their friends. Finally, Kazdin (1990) summarizes that approximately 12% of the children suffer emotional disturbance; between 2% and 4% suffer severe disorders and the remaining 8% to 10% are in need of treatment.

Although, adolescence is not necessarily storming and troublesome for anybody, teenagers traverse it with varying degrees of difficulty. Seiffge-Krenke (1983) found that among 350 German adolescents only about 12% had serious problems. Those adolescents had problems with the family, reported frequent disagreements and almost no autonomy. As concerns the peers, they were dissatisfied for not having any friends. Moreover, they felt socially isolated, lonely, and suffered from low self-esteem. The intensity of turmoil during adolescence are assumed to depend on the availability of instrumental and emotional support from others. The more support teenagers derive from their families, peers, friends, and colleagues, or from a fictive person which can «materialize» through a diary (Seiffge-Krenke, 1985), the less troublesome their transition into adulthood might be.

Traditionally, the relationship between adolescents and the family was perceived as a conflictual rather than a supportive one. Despite the necessity of the family system to readjust to the needs and developmental changes of the adolescent and its difficulties to achieve a new «homeostasis» (Petersen, 1988), the home can be an important source of support. Connectedness with the family was found to be favorable for adolescent development of role-taking and identity development. However, the family needs to leave the adolescent also enough «space» for the development of his or her individuality. According to Cooper, Groerant and Condon (1983) and Groerant and Cooper (1985) individualization in the family context, a balance between connectedness and individuality, affects positively the transition process. Seiffge-Krenke and Olbrich (1982) show that the parents often provide significant support to adolescents in reorganizing the intra-familial relationship rather than being a source of distress. However, if parents observe changes in the teenager fearfully, if they are shaken and insecure about the needs for autonomy, or are too norm-oriented, then they affect negatively the transition process.

The interaction with the peer group may also help the teenagers on their ways to grow into adulthood. The concept of peers implies in this study a small group of similarly aged, fairly close friends, sharing the same activities. The peer group becomes more important during adolescence. Adolescents spend and enjoy more time with the peers than anybody else and are more involved in the group's activities (Coleman, 1980; Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Palmomari, Pombeni & Kirchner, 1989; 1990). Peer group relationships offer the adolescents multiple opportunities for witnessing the strategies others use to cope with similar problems, and for observing how effective they are. The peers present an area for learning to present oneself in the society and for accounting for one's actions (Weinstein, 1973). They present a reference point, a setting which allows the teenagers to explore autonomy without the control of adults and parents (Olbrich, 1985).

Brown, Eicher and Petrie (1986) asked adolescents to explain why belonging to a peer group was important to them and found seven clusters of responses. The peers were perceived as a means for helping:

- a) to define one's identity, interests, abilities, and personality;
- b) to building one's reputations;
- c) to develop a balance between individuality and conformity;
- d) to provide instrumental and emotional support;
- e) to provide a chance to build and maintain friendships. Moreover,

- f) the peer group engages in various activities to which the adolescents participate and entertain themselves.

The peer group plays an important role in the period of the adolescents' emergence from the family towards independence. However, the increased involvement with the peer group does not necessarily lead to a rejection of the family, as the traditional view holds. Recent studies rather suggest that adolescents perceive both peers and parents as competent guides in difficult conflictual areas (Coleman, 1980; Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Dreher & Dreher, 1985; Hezel & König, 1986; Larsen, 1972; Siksrud, 1988). Coleman (1980, p. 428) concludes his taught-provoking article on friendship and the peer group in adolescence stating that the peer group fills a vacuum rather than provokes a conflict between parents and teenagers.

The support deriving from the family and peers seems to vary according to the types of problems of the teenagers. Coleman and Hendry (1990), for instance, hold that parents' influence prevails in future-oriented domains, such as the school and work career, whereas the peers' influence centers around current events and activities, such as misunderstandings with the partner or conflicts with friends (see also Kandal & Lesser, 1972; Hunter, 1985). Similar results were presented by Seiffge-Krenke (1985): adolescents indicated that they talk most often to the family as a strategy to cope with problems, especially with the problems concerning school, work, and the future in general. When the problem concerned social relations, such as interactions with the family, the peers or friends, or the self, the adolescents said that they talk to both the family and the peers.

It can also be assumed that the relationship with peers favorably influences coping with developmental tasks if the teenager is able to achieve a balance of connectedness and individuality. Those adolescents who are able to establish a strong friendship with the peers and are at the same time able to keep their personal ideologies are probably better off than teenagers in loose contacts with peers or adolescents who face the risk of becoming deindividuated in the group.

As the family and peers have found to be sources of support to the adolescents, the best friend and the school mates may also provide help. At an earlier age the friend is important for common activities for the help he or she can provide, whereas at later stages of adolescence, common interests, intimacy and similarity in attitudes and values play an increasingly greater role. Coleman (1980) found that friendship is important to both males and females. However, the meaning of friendship is somewhat different for males and females. Despite controversial results, it can be concluded that boys lay stress on relationships that are action-oriented whereas girls need friends to satisfy emotional needs.

In sum, it can be hypothesized that those adolescents are better equipped to deal with stormy situations when they receive emotional and instrumental support from their families, the peers and other social entities. Establishing a friendly and supportive relationship with the peers does not necessarily imply a conflict with the parents. Adolescents who are able to establish a positive relationship with their peers are likely to maintain a positive relationship also with their family. Thus, closeness to the peers should be positively correlated with closeness to the family and to other social entities.

In previous studies (Palmomari et al., 1989; 1990; Pombeni, Palmomari, & Kirchner, submitted for publication) the relationship with the peer group was operationalized as degree of identification with the peers. It was shown that the stronger the identification of adolescents with their peers, the more likely they talk about their problems to somebody, peers, parents, a friend or an adult, the better they cope with developmental tasks, and the more positive their social representation of peer groups other than the own. In these studies, identification with the peers implies that the adolescent feels close to the group and similar to the peers but maintains his or her individuality. It is important to note that no delinquent peer groups participated in the study. Thus, the findings of a positive effect of identification with peers on the transition process hold for peer groups who are not deviant and for who have close relationships that permit individualization. If the peers commit micro-criminal acts, such as abusing drugs, or unwanted behavior, such as cigarette smoking, the closeness of the teenagers to the

group is positively correlated to the risk that they commit similar acts (Morgan & Grube, 1989).

Our previous studies showed that it is the type of relationships teenagers are able to establish with their age colleagues that plays a major role in the transition process rather than the type of group they belong to. Common sense holds that those adolescents are better off who join well formalized peer groups with a specific program of activities; such as for instance, groups engaged in sport and physical education, religious and social programs; whereas teenagers in informal groups, such as street groups, are in danger. In fact, the summary of a conference on juvenile criminality which appeared in an Italian newspaper recently (Pizzo, 1990, p. 22) displays the following description of the deviant teenager: *Juvenile gangsters come «Di famiglia sottoproletaria, cresciuti nei quartieri degradati, non hanno frequentato la scuola, sono spesso ospiti del riformatorio (di droga), sono stati educati dalla strada»*. This «mask» for identifying juvenile delinquents could suggest that those who are «educated at the streets» necessarily become deviant. Although, it may be the case that among delinquent adolescents one often finds teenagers who meet their peers in informal settings at streets and corners of the cities, this does not imply a circular conclusion such as those who meet with peers on street corners are likely to become delinquent. Since approximately three quarters of the Italian adolescents have peers meeting on the streets (Palmonari et al., 1989; 1990), it is not astonishing that the majority of the delinquent teenagers are educated on the streets.

This paper presents a survey that was conducted in two Italian cities on 770 adolescents, aiming to study, first, whether identification with the peer group is correlated positively with identification with the family. Second, the influence of type of group, formal or informal, and of identification with the peers, on coping with several developmental tasks will be studied.

Method

Subjects

In this survey, 770 adolescents from the cities of Campobasso ($n = 442$), and Vicenza ($n = 328$), Italy, took part. Most of the adolescents (77.8%) indicated that they belonged to an informal or street group, 10.3% were members of sport groups; 5.0% and 4.0% joined religious groups and scouts, respectively. Seventeen (2.5%) adolescents were members of groups engaged in artistic performances, and three (.4%) were in political groups.

Most of the participants met their groups fairly regularly (89.0%); 11.0% indicated meeting the group sometimes). The respective percentages of adolescents meeting informal groups, sport groups, religious groups, scouts, artistic groups, and political groups regularly are 99.6%, 98.6%, 100%, 100%, 94.1%, and 100%.

On the average, the participants were 16.21 (standard deviation = 1.408) years old. No age differences were observed across the groups (mean age ranges from 15.97 years in sport groups to 16.35 years in artistic groups). All participants were students, 39.2% males, 60.8% females. The distribution of males and females differed somewhat across the groups ($F(5,675) = 3.06; p = .01$). While in sport groups male adolescents predominated (57.1% males; 42.9% females), religious groups consisted mainly of females (20.6% males; 79.4% females). The respective percentages of males in informal groups, scouts, artistic, and political groups are 40.0%, 33.3%, 41.2%, and 66.7%. Most of the participants were living with their parents (92.6%); 7.4% were in single parent households), with fathers being employed (93.4%); 6.6% of the fathers were unemployed), and the mother being a housewife (56.5%); 43.5% of the mothers had a paid job). No differences between the informal and formal groups were observed in any of these demographic characteristics.

Material

On the basis of the results of a previous interview study (Pombeni et al., 1991), a

questionnaire was developed to collect information on identification with various social entities, life values, and the coping process with seven critical situations. The questionnaire focused on all relevant aspects of the coping process that were mentioned by the interviewees. Besides the demographic data, the questionnaire consisted of four parts. The subjects were asked:

- a) to indicate the peer group they join regularly and to define it, that is, to indicate whether it was a group meeting informally on street corners and places or a formal group with specific regular meeting times. Since adolescents often participate in more than one peer group, they were asked to indicate the group that is most important to them and they would not like to leave for any reasons. They were instructed to refer to the indicated group when answering the following questions.
- b) Second, Brown's identification scale for the group (Brown, 1988), and adjusted forms for their own family, the school mates, and the best friend were presented. Answers were given on five-point scales. The reliabilities for the four scales amounted to Chronbach $\alpha = .82; .88; .89; \text{ and } .82$.
- c) Then, the participants indicated how important 11 values (family, work, friends, intimate friend, leisure time, school, sport, social engagement, religious engagement, money, and political engagement) are for themselves, their peer group, their own family, their class mates, and their best friend. Answers were given on 5-point scales ranging from 1 = unimportant to 5 = important.
- d) In the last part, seven problems were presented:
 - 1) Have you ever had a conflict with your best friend with serious risks of breaking the friendship?
 - 2) Have you ever happened to reveal a secret to a good friend who then betrayed you?
 - 3) Have you ever suffered from misunderstandings in your family? Think of a concrete event which made you feel bad.
 - Two personal problems were tapped:
 - 4) Have you ever felt lonely and socially isolated?
 - 5) Have you ever felt empty, lacking life values?
 - 6) Have you ever had serious problems at school, that led you to consider giving up with school?
 - 7) Have you ever committed an illegal action such as drug abuse, act of vandalism, shop lifting etc.?

The participants had to imagine the problems as vividly as possible and then to indicate how often the problem had occurred to them (scale from 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often). If the problem had occurred sometimes or often the participants specified the following:

- how intensive the imagined problem had been (1 = not intensive, 4 = very intensive),
- what they had felt at the moment (the participants indicated one or two of the 12 emotions listed. The emotions ranged from negative and active (e.g., anger, aggression, hate) to negative and neutral (e.g., bad mood, dissatisfaction) to negative and passive (e.g., loneliness, anxiety, shame, loss of self esteem),
- with whom they had talked about the problem (peer group, best friend, parents, school mates, other adults, nobody),
- how useful the talk had been (scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = very useful),
- why the talk had been useful (because of psychological changes (i.e., lessening of bad mood or augmentation of self esteem) or situational changes (i.e., change of the problematic situation or confrontation with other points of view),

- who had found a way out of the problem (1 myself, peer group, best friend, parents, school mates, other adults, the time passed by, the problem is still present),
- how useful the experience had been for their life (1 = it helped change my mood, 2 = I changed my behavior, 3 = I matured).

Procedure

During December 1989 and January 1990 the adolescents were approached by several student researchers at various schools in the cities of Campobasso and Vicenza, Italy. After having explained the scope of the study, the adolescents were invited to participate, and the questionnaires were distributed. Complete anonymity of data handling was assured. Almost all the individuals approached agreed to participate. On the average, completing the questionnaire took 30 to 40 minutes.

Results

Overview

The scope of the present study is threefold. First, it was intended to search for determinants of identification with the peers and, second, to investigate the correlations between identification with peers and other social entities. Third, the coping process with the seven critical situations was analyzed. Each situation was analyzed separately by path analyses.

Determinants of identification

The participants had to indicate how important eleven life values were for themselves, their peers, their family, their school mates, and their best friend. The mean importance ratings for adolescents of the six types of peer groups are presented in Table 1. A Statistical analyses (eleven analyses of variance with the type of peer group as independent variable; F values range from .86 to 12.00 with 5 and 665 to 673 degrees of freedom; $p = .479$ to $p < .001$) revealed that those adolescents joining sport groups attributed sport more importance than the other adolescents did. Members of sport groups, religious groups, and scouts thought social engagement is more valuable than did those of the other groups. As expected, peers from religious groups retained that religious engagement is more important than the others and were less interested in money. Political engagement was highly important to the members of political groups. For adolescents of all groups the family, work, friends, partner, and leisure time were the most important values out of the presented value list (see Table 1).

Identification with the peer group was assumed to depend on the similarity between life values of oneself and the perceived values of the peer group. The correlation between identification and the euclidean distance between value list for oneself and the peers amounted to $r = -.13$ ($p < .001$), indicating that the higher the correspondence between the adolescents' and their peers' values the higher the identification with the group.

Several t -tests with sex, employment status of the parents, living with both or one parent only as independent variables and identification as dependent variable yielded no significant effects. An analysis of variance with the type of group as independent variable revealed an effect of $F(3,673) = 3.20$; $p < .007$. As linear contrasts showed, members of scouts ($M = 4.30$) and sport groups ($M = 4.21$) identified more with their group than members of all other groups (the respective means for informal, religious, artistic, and political groups are $M = 3.98$, 3.97 , 4.07 , and 3.33). As already found in previous studies (Palmonari et al., 1989; 1990), members of informal groups do not identify less with their peers than members of formal groups in general.

Table 1
Mean importance of eleven life values by type of peer group

Life values	Informal groups	Religious groups	Scouts groups	Sport groups	Artistic groups	Political groups
Family	4.48	4.35	4.52	4.71	4.12	3.33
Work	4.08	3.85	3.96	4.27	4.18	3.67
Friends	4.53	4.56	4.52	4.60	4.00	4.67
Partner	4.30	4.09	4.11	4.15	4.12	4.67
Leisure time	4.30	3.97	4.12	4.29	4.18	4.33
School, culture	3.83	4.06	4.04	3.90	3.94	3.33
Sport	3.70 ^b	3.65 ^b	3.82 ^b	4.66 ^a	3.77 ^b	5.00 ^{ab}
Social engagement	3.47 ^a	3.97 ^b	4.07 ^b	3.72 ^b	3.82 ^{ab}	4.67 ^{ab}
Religious engagement	4.15 ^b	4.15 ^b	3.61 ^{abc}	3.66 ^c	3.73 ^{abc}	3.00 ^{abc}
Money	3.62 ^b	2.68 ^a	2.85 ^a	3.59 ^b	3.94 ^b	4.33 ^b
Political engagement	2.09 ^a	1.97 ^a	2.48 ^a	2.30 ^a	2.31 ^a	4.00 ^b

Note. Different superscripts indicate significantly different means ($p < .01$). For instance, values followed by letter 'a' are statistically significant from values followed by letters 'b' or 'c' etc. If a value is followed by 'ab', the value is neither different from values followed by letters 'a' or 'b'.

Identification with the peers and other social entities

If adolescents identifying highly with their peers are also willing and able to establish a close relationship with their family, best-friend and school mates, and further to highly identify with them, then the correlation between the identification indices should be positive. If the assumption that identification with peers leaves no space for identifying with family, best-friend, or school mates proves true, then the correlation between various identification scores should be negative.

All correlations between identification indices are positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$). Thus, the higher the identification with peers, the more the adolescents identify with their family, school mates and best friend (Tab. 2).

Table 2
Correlations between identification indices

Identification with	Peers	Family	School mates
Peers	—		
Family	.18	—	
School mates	.24	.22	—
Best friend	.38	.19	.24

Similarly, as identification with the peers, the remaining identification indices are mainly determined by the similarity of life values. The higher the similarity between the subjects' life values and the perceived values of the family the higher the identification with the family ($r = .44$; $p < .001$). The correlations between identification with the school mates and the similarity with their values amounts to $r = .29$; $p < .001$. The respective correlation between identification with the best friend and similarity of values is $r = .19$; $p < .001$. While the

type of group adolescents join and the employment status of the parents have no impact on identification indices, sex and age were of importance. Females reported less identification with the family ($M = 4.24$) than males ($M = 4.38$; $t(728) = 2.22$; $p < .027$) and higher identification with the best-friend ($M = 4.44$) than males did ($M = 4.19$; $t(723) = 5.20$; $p < .001$). Age was significantly correlated with identification with the family and school mates: the older the subjects the lower they identified with the family ($r = -.10$; $p < .003$) and the school mates ($r = -.14$; $p < .001$).

Coping with critical situations

The next step of the analysis concerned coping processes with critical incidents. If a subject had indicated that a critical problem had never occurred in his or her life, the specific case was excluded from the analysis. The critical problems with the highest frequencies of occurrence were relational problems (71.3% for revealing of a secret by a good friend; 77.8% for misunderstandings with the family; 60.4% for a serious conflict with the best friend). Overall, 69.8% of the adolescents reported having felt lonely; 59.1% experienced lack of life values. Frustration at school as a serious problem was experienced by 56.7% of the subjects, and 20.2% of the participants reported a minor criminal act.

When these problems occurred, the participants said they either talked to their peers, best friend, family, other persons (adults, school mates), or to no one. The frequencies of talking to somebody varied from problem to problem. Table 3 shows the percentages of talks with somebody as depending on the type of problem and identification with the peers. The sample was split on the median of identification into two subgroups with high versus low identification, respectively. Table 3 shows that adolescents most often approached their best friend if they had a problem except for problems at school for which they sought help in their family. However, they were also often not able to talk to anybody. Adolescents with high identification more often sought support from their peers when relational or personal problems occurred and when they felt frustrated at school (see Table 3).

The process of coping with the seven problems was perceived as moving from the awareness of a problem and emotional reactions to the need to talk to somebody, to spontaneous outcomes of the talk, a solution of the problem and long term effects of the problem. This process was operationalized by measuring:

- a) the frequency with which the presented problem occurred in the life of the participating adolescents and the importance of the respective problem,
- b) emotional reactions (either passive, such as fear, anxiety, blame = 1; neutral, such as dissatisfaction, bad mood = 2; or active, such as aggression, anger, hate = 3),
- c) the persons approached to talk to (peers, best friend, family, school mates, other adults, nobody; dummy variable),
- d) the evaluation of the talk (scale ranging from 1 = negative to 5 = positive),
- e) immediate outcomes of the talk (psychological change = 1; or change of the objective situation = 2),
- f) source finding the solution (the adolescents himself/herself, best friend, peers, family, other adults, school mates, no solution of the problem or amelioration by the time passing by; dummy variable), and
- g) long term outcomes of the problem (1 = change of the mood state, 2 = change of behavior, 3 = maturation).

These 7 variables as well as identification with the peers, age, sex and type of group the adolescents belonged to (this variable was dichotomized with informal groups on the one hand and formal groups, i.e., religious groups, scouts, sports, artistic, political groups, on the other hand) were included in seven path analyses, one for each of the presented critical situations. The results of the analyses are presented in Figures 1 to 7.

Table 3
Percentages of adolescents talking to somebody as depending on type of problem and identification with the peer group

Talking to:	Peers	Friend	Parents	Others	Nobody
Low identification (n = 333)					
Conflict with best friend	12.1	45.9	18.8	5.8	17.4
Betrayal by a friend	12.9	49.8	10.7	8.1	18.5
Conflict with the family	8.0	42.0	11.0	11.3	27.7
Social isolation	4.3	38.3	10.6	4.2	42.6
Lack of life values	8.2	33.8	17.9	6.3	33.8
Frustration at school	6.4	27.7	36.7	15.9	13.3
Microcriminality	23.4	35.9	6.3	1.6	32.8
Total	10.8	39.1	16.0	7.5	26.6
High identification (n = 349)					
Tonflict with best friend	20.8	52.0	9.9	4.4	12.9
Betrayal by a friend	16.0	50.8	9.4	5.4	18.4
Conflict with the family	12.1	47.5	10.2	5.3	24.9
Social isolation	10.3	32.2	15.5	3.4	38.6
Lack of life values	15.2	45.7	10.7	2.9	25.5
Frustration at school	13.5	28.5	30.1	12.9	15.0
Microcriminality	24.1	26.6	3.8	6.3	39.2
Total	16.0	40.5	12.8	5.8	24.9

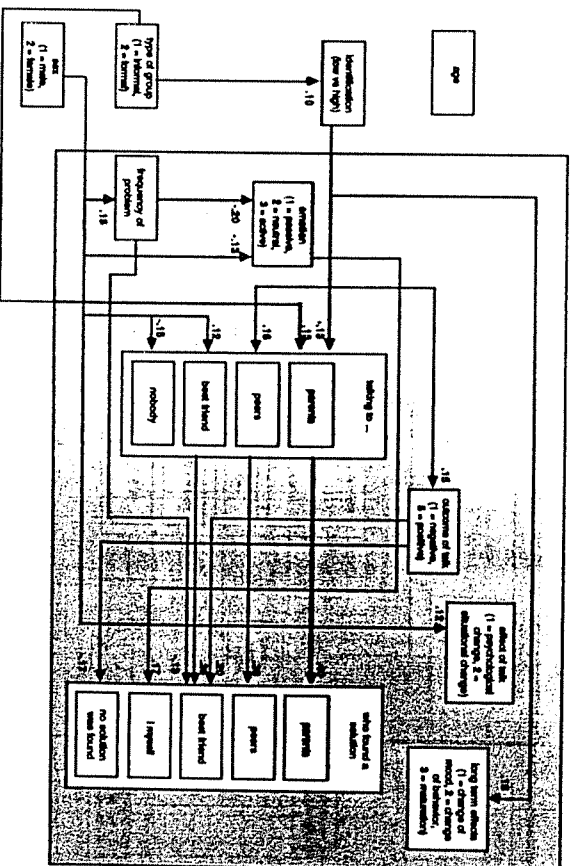


Figure 1. Coping with serious conflicts with best friend ($r = .324$)

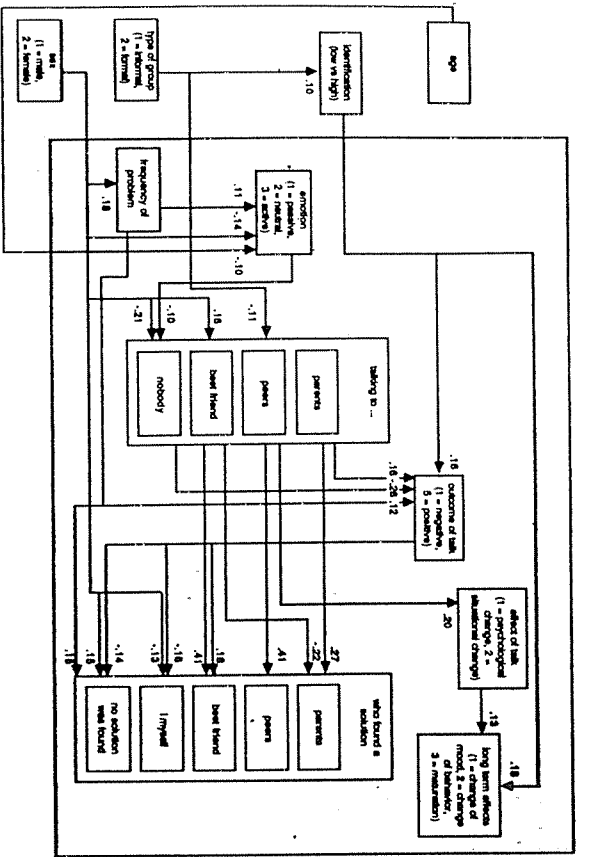


Figure 2. Coping with a betrayal by a friend (n = 362)

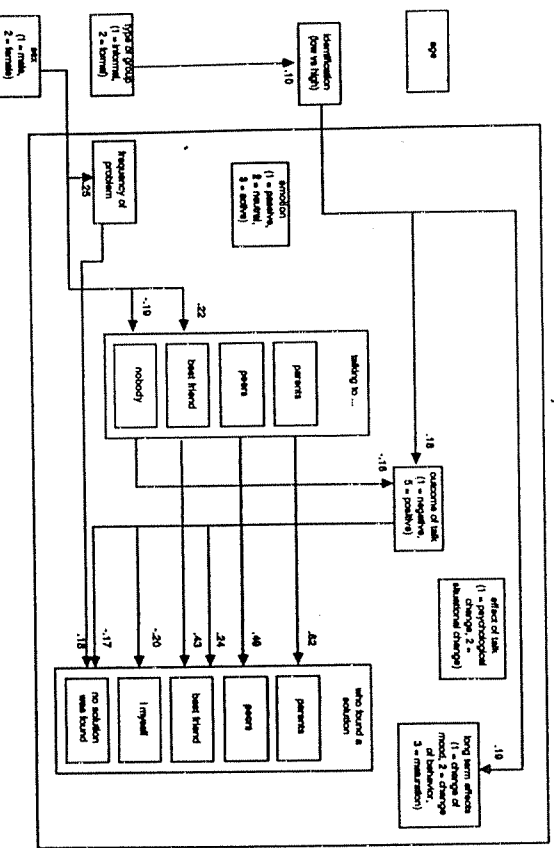


Figure 3. Coping with serious conflict with the family (n = 352)

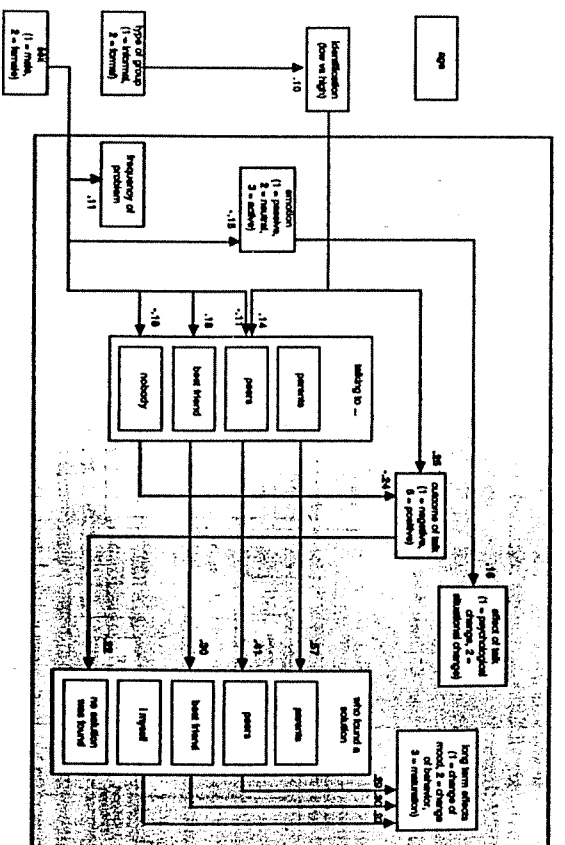


Figure 4. Coping with feelings of loneliness (n = 264)

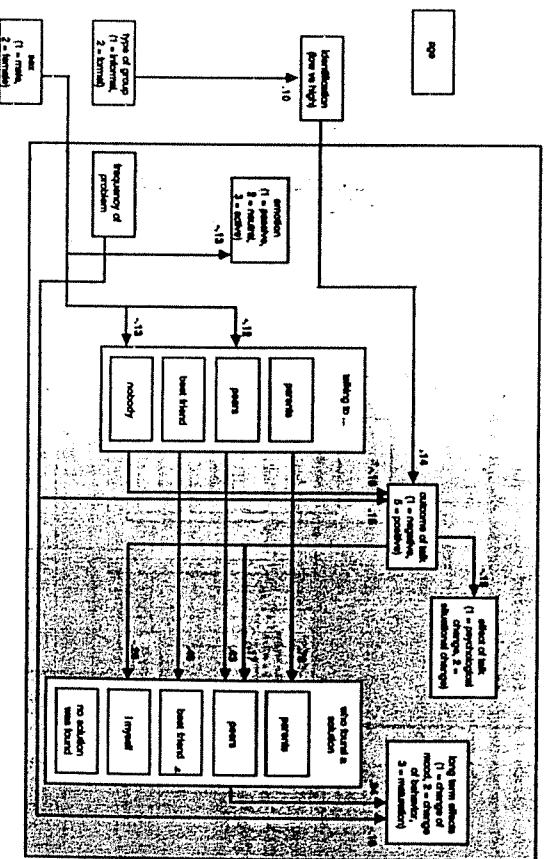
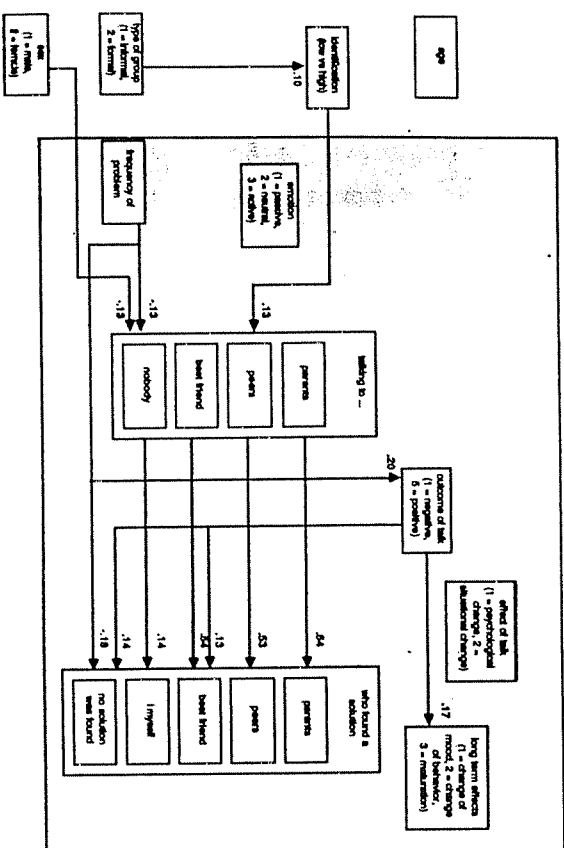
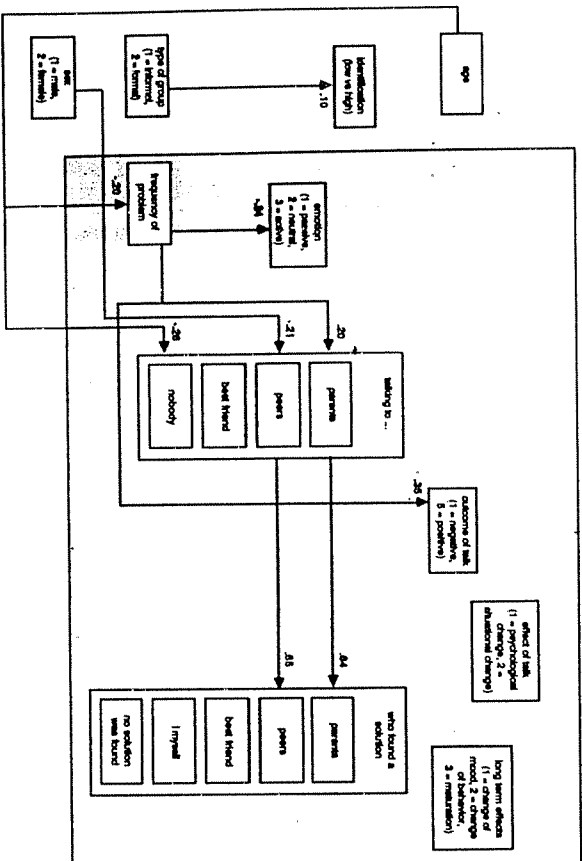


Figure 5. Coping with feelings of a psychological vacuum (n = 268)

Figure 6. Coping with frustration at school ($n = 301$)Figure 7. Coping with microcriminality ($n = 72$)

A first view of the seven figures shows that identification with the peers depends on the type of group the adolescents belong to. Although the covariation is statistically significant it can be neglected. Usually only path coefficients with $\beta > .15$ or $< .15$ are interpreted. While sex was of great importance, the age of the adolescents and group type had almost no influence on the coping process. Identification affected directly the adolescents' choice of the person to talk to about their specific problems, the outcome of the talk and, in case of a relational problem, the long term effects of the coping process.

The first problem represented a conflict with the best friend with serious risks of breaking the friendship. While the type of group and age of the adolescent had no effect upon the coping process, sex and identification proved to be significant. Females seem to face more often conflicts with their best friend and are also more shaken than males, experience more often negative and passive emotions rather than active ones, they talk more often to their best friends than males do, and are able to reach a situational change. Highly identified participants talk more often to the peers about problems with the best friend than those with low identification. They judge the talks more positively and report more often maturation as a long term effect of the problem. If adolescents had talked to somebody they usually reported that the respective persons had helped them in finding a way out of the problem. If no solution was found they often judged the experiences and outcomes of the talks as negative.

The second problem concerned a betrayal by a good friend. Also in this situation, age and group type were not significant while sex and identification play a major role in the coping process. Again, females face conflicts with their best friend more often and are also more shaken than males. They also experience negative and passive emotions more often than negatively and active emotions. Moreover, females talk more often to their best friends than males do and report less often not having revealed their problem to anybody. Identification did not affect the persons to whom the adolescents revealed their problem but the outcome of the talks in general and the long term effects. Again, if identification was high the talk was judged more positively and the process led more likely to maturation rather than a change of the mood. As in the previous case and in all following cases, the person to whom the adolescents talked were most often indicated as those who finally found a solution.

Also the third relational problem, conflicts and misunderstandings with the family, were reported more often by females than males. While females talked to their best friend about the problem, males often did not talk to anybody. As already found in the previous analyses, identification affected positively the outcome of the talk as well as long term effects. The higher the identification with the peer group the better was the talk with somebody and the more likely the critical situation led to maturation rather than a mere change in the mood state after some time.

The coping process with personal problems was also affected by sex and identification with the group but independent of age and the type of group the adolescents joined. While relational problems were more often experienced by females, personal and also socio-institutional problems were reported equally often by males and females. Again, females reacted with more negative and passive emotions to personal problems than did males. They were more likely ready to talk to somebody, especially to their best friend. Males rather talked to their peers. Highly identified participants disclosed their personal problems more often to their peers than did low identifiers and were more satisfied with the talk to somebody.

In situations of loneliness, talks to another persons were useful and often the persons approached helped finding a solution. If the peers or best friend found a solution or the adolescent himself or herself then the critical situations were perceived as leading to maturation. In situations of melancholy and feelings of lack of values, the persons to whom the adolescents had talked were attributed the capacity to find a solution. The problem was experienced as contributing to maturation especially if the peers were able to help the subject. In the case of socio-institutional conflicts, sex, age, the type of group, and identification were of minor importance.

In case of frustration at school, males more often talked to nobody than females. High

identifiers revealed their problem more often to their peers than low identifiers. Again, the capacity to find a solution was attributed to the persons to whom the adolescents had talked to. In case of a positive outcome, the participants reported that the problem had helped to mature.

As concerns microcriminality, it should be mentioned that with increasing age the frequency of the problem and subjective importance decreased; also the likelihood not to reveal to anybody the problem decreased. The more often microcriminality was experienced as a problem the more often negative and passive emotions were experienced.

Discussion

The scope of the present study was threefold: first, variables affecting identification with the peers were detected; second whether high identification with the peers covaries positively or negatively with identification with other social entities was tested. Third, most attention focused on coping with critical situations during adolescence.

Before discussing the results of the present study, it should be emphasized that the empirical data are collected by means of a questionnaire. The applied technique inherits some restrictions that are common to questionnaires, yet seldom considered carefully. The information found reflects to what extent the adolescents were cognitively able to discriminate among items or to what extent they were motivated to do it. The results need, thus, be read with caution.

Determinants of identification

Identification was found to depend significantly on the similarity of life values of the adolescent and those of the group. The more similar the importance of values such as the work, family, friends, partner, leisure time etc., the more importance was attributed to the group and the higher was the identification with the group. The effect of similarity of values on identification was also found for the relationship of the adolescent with the family (the correlation between identification with the family and similarity of values is $r = -.44$; $p < .001$), the school mates ($r = -.29$; $p < .001$), and the best friend or partner ($r = -.19$; $p < .001$). Although, being statistically significant, the correlations are small. In fact, the similarity of values explains merely 4% of the variance of identification with the peer and approximately 20% of the variance of identification with the family.

Interestingly, sex, age, employment status of the parents, and the family situation (living with one or both parents) had no effect on identification with the peers. Neither was the type of group the adolescents met of great importance. As in previous studies (Palmonari et al., 1990; Pombeni et al., submitted for publication), the mere fact of being member of an informal group did not affect identification with the peers. In this study, adolescents meeting with scouts or sport groups reported higher identification than adolescents meeting informal, religious, artistic, or political groups. When splitting the sample into adolescents joining informal and formal groups, statistical analysis reveals a significant difference on the level of identification. However, in absolute terms the difference is small: while participants of informal groups report a mean identification of $M = 3.98$ on a 5-point scale, members of the formal groups identify in the average $M = 4.13$. The correlation between identification and group type (formal versus informal) of $r = .10$ indicates that only 1% of the variance of one variable is explained by that of the other variable, thus, the effect is of minor importance.

Identification with the peers and with other social entities

With reference to identification with peers and other social entities, the present results support those obtained by Coleman (1980), Coleman and Hendry (1990), Siskerud (1988) etc. Identification with peers, family, school mates etc. is not an «either or» phenomenon. Rather

it seems that adolescents who are able and willing to attribute importance to a social entity and to identify with it are also able to identify with others. Identification with the peer group does not lead to less room for identification with the family, rather it enables the adolescent to be close to parents, brothers and sisters, school mates, and best friend or partner.

The correlations between identification indexes (Table 2) are rather low. In the average, high identification with peers explains 7% to 8% of the variance of identification with the family, school mates, or best friend. Although, positive correlations and identification indexes may be true for a majority of adolescents, there may be teenagers with serious troubles identifying with peers and family. In some cases adolescents may stick with the family and be unable to establish a close and satisfying relationship with friends, in other cases they may harshly reject the family, move closely to peers and seek for identification with them. Identifying either with peers or with family may indicate a serious problem for the adolescent and be a cause of difficulties in the transition process into adulthood. Adolescents with difficulties to accept the values of the family and frequent conflicts with family members may seek to compensate the lack of identification by identifying highly with the peers. In extreme cases, this may lead to deindividuation. The influence the peers have on the adolescents may vary with the degree of identification or closeness. In case a group of peers tends to deviant behavior, such as vandalism as can be observed in cliques, abuse of substances, etc., high identification with the group likely conducts to social marginalization. Peers influence the abuse of drugs if the adolescents are close to them, that is, if they identify with them (Kandal, 1980; Kaplan, Martin, & Robbins, 1984; Morgan & Grube, 1989). If adolescents are not able to identify with peers but stick with the family they may face problems with forming their own identity as autonomous adults. These speculative interpretations need to be investigated in upcoming studies by taking into account not only the mere fact of high or low identification with peers but the pattern of identification with social entities and its impact on coping with various critical situations.

Coping with critical situations

In a previous investigation on adolescents' coping processes with various developmental problems, based on in depth interviews (Pombeni et al., submitted for publication), the type of group adolescents met was much less important than expected. The way adolescents handled their problems was mainly affected by the identification with their peer group. Being merely a member of an informal street group or of a structured group with social engagement and religious programs was unimportant. Adolescents who identified highly with their peer group not only were more inclined to ask other people, peers as well as friends, parents, and other adults, for support, to accept their offers of support, and to talk about their problems but they also were more often able to resolve their problems in a more positive way than low identifiers, to reach more favorable long term outcomes and to derive advantage for their future. Low identifiers were rather alone with their problems, often unable to find a way out, and consequently rather often dissatisfied with the outcomes.

The importance of identification is confirmed also by the present study. Moreover, the results show that the type of group adolescents join, be it formal or informal, has little impact on their handling with critical situations. In sum, the results show that with increasing identification the likelihood of favorable outcomes of a relational conflict increases. Both the adolescents are more likely to talk to their peers about their problems, judge talks to somebody, be it parents, peers, or best friend, more positively, and perceive the critical events as finally contributing to maturation.

Since identification with peers is correlated with identification with the family, school mates, and the best friend, it can be assumed that those adolescents who consider others as important and identify with them are able to trace advantages from them and may, thus, have less serious problems on their ways to adulthood. Depending on the type of problem, they can contact different social entities for instrumental and emotional support. The family

can be consulted in case of future oriented problems, whereas the peers help in resolving relational problems. As Table 3 shows, the best friend and the peers are consulted often when relational or personal problems were at stake. As found in previous studies, the family was approached when the problem concerned the school (Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Selfige-Krenke, 1985). As already mentioned above, indexes of identification with various social entities were positively correlated, however, the correlation was low. In upcoming studies attention should be paid on the one side:

- a) to those teenagers who are able to identify highly with peers and their family,
- b) on the other side, to those unable to identify with the peers but highly identified with the family and vice versa,
- c) to those reporting high identification with the peers but low identification with the family, as well as
- d) to teenagers unable to identify with others. Also the degree of identification with peers needs to be studied in more detail.

Until now it is assumed that the higher the identification the better critical situations will be resolved. However, it can be assumed that identification ends with deindividuation so that adolescents risk to lose the capacity to distinguish between themselves and the group. In such cases identification can have deleterious effects on the individual's development. For example the family needs to leave enough «space» for adolescents to develop their own identity (Cooper et al., 1983; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985), the peers need to leave «space» for the adolescents' idiosyncrasies.

In this survey, adolescents from 15 to 18 years were included. As path analyses show, this age range is of no significant importance in adolescents' dealing with the seven problems, except for microcriminality. Young teenagers reported a minor criminal act more often than older ones and were unable to disclose the problem to others.

Sex was of importance. Females reported, in general, to experience relational problems more often than males, and disclosed their troubles to their best friends. Moreover, as stereotypes hold, females experienced more often passive negative emotions; such as shame, sadness, fear; whereas male teenagers reported experiencing emotions such as anger and hate more often. The outcome of talks and long term effects were not affected by sex. This results resemble those found in former studies with the females being more emotional and relationship oriented, and males being more active and action oriented (Coleman & Hendry, 1990).

In conclusion, this study shows that adolescents frequently experience the problems that were presented in the questionnaire (the percentage of adolescents sometimes or often experiencing a relational problem amounts to 69.8%; personal problems were experienced by 64.5% of the participants; serious problems at school were reported by 56.7%, while microcriminality was a problem to 20.2% only). The probability of a positive solution of these problems, especially of positive impacts on maturation, depends largely on the ability and possibility of the adolescents to identify with peers as well as to be close to other social entities. In general, those teenagers who reveal the problem to somebody, be it the peer group, family, or best friend, get support from the respective sources, are more often able to find a solution and to trace advantages out of the critical situation for their future.

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Capitalism and Socialism: How 7th Graders Understand and Misunderstand the Information Presented in their Geography Textbooks

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In the last few years an increasing number of researchers has started to investigate children's conceptions of the economic world. However, complex notions such as those concerning the overall functioning of an economic system, have hardly been considered. In post-elementary schools children encounter some of these notions in history, geography or social studies. An investigation on this topic should therefore consider both children's conceptions and misconceptions and the relevant information furnished at school.

The present study examines how 7th graders understand two complex economic notions: capitalism and socialism. Two groups of children (N = 40) were interviewed, one who had studied a geography textbook containing a large quantity of relevant information, the other one a more traditional book in which these notions were only touched on. The interview was about:

- a) the characteristics of capitalist and socialist systems;*
- b) how it is decided what to produce, and at what prices to sell goods in each of these systems.*

It was found that, on the whole, children's knowledge of capitalism and socialism was rather poor. Those who had studied the book containing more information showed some advantages over the other group; however, these did not appear substantial: the children mentioned the words «markets» and «plans» more often, but failed to explain what a plan is and how the market works, and their replies to the other questions were similar to those given by the second group.

Introduction

In the last few years there has been increasing recognition of the need to provide young