

Identification with peers as a strategy to muddle through the troubles of the adolescent years

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This study was designed to explore critical events during adolescence and coping processes as dependent, first, on the relationship with peers, and second, on the type of peer-groups teenagers join. In all, 75 young people, members of four street groups and two religious groups, were given a questionnaire assessing identification with their peers and demographic characteristics, and then interviewed about critical events. The results show that the nature of the group individuals join is of minor importance, whereas the relationship established with peers is crucial: highly identified subjects not only more often join their peers but seem to derive more profit from interactions with people in general, both peers, friends, and parents. The peer-group is important, not to substitute for contacts with the family or other persons, but as a social entity to fill a vacuum during adolescent years.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence as a phase of developmental transition is a period in life which is characterized by extensive changes within the individual and the social environment (Eichorn, Mussen, Clausen, Haan and Honzik, 1981). Although past research is contradictory regarding the turmoils during adolescence (for reviews see Petersen, 1988; Palmonari, in press), we believe that young people in western countries, confronted with developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1941), often experience serious discomfort. While adolescence may be a challenging life period for everyone, some people traverse it with more difficulties than others.

Adolescence is a life period which implies a reorganization of the self system and of one's relationships with the social world. The definition of

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an adult identity is based on the reorganization of almost all facets of the self, the ecological, the interpersonal, the extended, private, and conceptual selves (Neisser, 1988). While the ecological self, perceived with respect to the individual's physical environment, may be affected by transitions from school to a work setting, the interpersonal self, defined through immediate unreflective social interactions with other persons, changes dramatically. During adolescence peer-group, classmates as well as cross-sex and same-sex friends become increasingly important. Adolescents relative to children spend and enjoy more time with peers, are more involved and more intimate with them, and share thoughts and feelings (Sherif, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984; Hartup, 1983; Youniss and Smoller, 1985). The extended self, defined as images of self as it was in the past and expectations of it in the future, known on the basis of memory and anticipation, may be challenged as the individual needs to develop "adult scripts of behaviour" for interactions with various people. The private self, encompassing individuals' experiences not available to anyone else, may be affected through biological and puberty changes and through extreme feelings ranging from heavenly enthusiasm to deep depression, loneliness and abandonment. Finally, the conceptual self, drawing its meaning from a network of assumptions and theories concerning social roles, perception of one's attraction and intelligence, the soul etc., is challenged during adolescence due to necessities to assume various roles in society, insecurities relative to reference values and ideologies, or existential crises.

The reorganization of self (or selves), the establishment of social relationships, successfully completing school, and starting a work career are developmental tasks which adolescents face and need to solve on their way into adulthood. This study explores adolescents' problems and those factors allowing for or inhibiting successful resolutions. While previous research paid much attention to gender differences, demographic characteristics of individuals and their families or the age of initiation of puberty changes (see Petersen, 1988), we also regard as important the social field in which the adolescent "moves" (Lewin, 1939).

The family, intimate friends, classmates, adults in general, and peers were often identified as relevant social entities. Although the family is a source of support for adolescents, there is no doubt that young peoples interactions with the family are frequently conflictual. The difficulties of adolescents and their developmental changes may negatively affect family relationships and alienate the parents as a source of support. Also the parents midlife status and anticipation of the adolescent's leaving the home require readjustment of the family system which may result in tension, and thus, inhibit support for the adolescent (Erikson, 1958; Hall, 1904; Hill, 1980; Turner, 1980).

During adolescence the peer-group becomes increasingly important. It has been shown that peers form a sub-culture, exert influence and provide support in coping successfully with developmental tasks (Palmonari, in press). Peers have often been considered as being in conflict with parents. The simplistic notion holds that the greater the discrepancies between parents' and adolescents' values the more adolescents become committed to their peers and vice versa; an inevitable consequence of augmentation of importance of the peers is a greater gap between adolescents and parents. Coleman (1980) leaves no doubts on the shortcomings of such an assumption. There is no either/or phenomenon, he states. Adolescents rather are influenced and supported by both parents and peers. Moreover, adolescents seem to select peers whose values are congruent with those of their parents. Additionally, Coleman reports that adolescents who have a good relationship with their family do join peer-groups without seeing a need to differentiate between influences of peers and parents. Rather than provoking a conflict between parents and teenagers, Coleman (1980) perceives the role of the peer-group as to fill a vacuum.

As Palmonari, Pombeni and Kirchler (1989; 1990) showed in two surveys conducted in northern Italy, almost all adolescents, independent of sex, social stratification, educational and occupational status, belong to a peer-group which meets fairly regularly for various activities. The majority of peer-groups in Italy meet on street corners or at peers' homes, seeking to entertain themselves, and have neither an explicitly organized structure nor do they conduct any specific projects. In contrast to these informal groups, adolescents may join formalized groups, such as groups committed to religious projects; engaged in physical education and sports; or in ideological and political activities.

Commonsense holds that formal groups are a better means to accompany teenagers through the "troubled waters" of adolescence. Being engaged in religious, political, or sports programmes and supervised by adults supposedly insulates adolescents from deviant behaviour. Palmonari *et al.* (1989; 1990) unmasked these assumptions as prejudices. In their studies neither the adolescents' view of themselves, nor the description of peers and groups different from their peer-group, nor the importance of or difficulty experienced in coping with various developmental tasks was affected by the type of group adolescents joined. Surprisingly, in all groups, religious, sports, and informal groups, the same social comparison mechanisms (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1987) were observed. There was, however, a significant variation between individuals within each type of group. The significance of peer-groups largely depended on the relationship adolescents established with their group. The more the adolescents identified with their groups the more favourably they perceived themselves, their groups, and also

groups different from their own. As regards deviant groups, such as drug abusers, high identifiers held a stereotypical view which was even more negative than the images low identifiers had. Moreover, identification was positively correlated with coping with developmental tasks. High identifiers reported less problems than low identifiers with personal tasks (e.g., acquiring autonomy, developing self-awareness, finding reference values) and relational tasks (e.g., establishing relationships with friends of both sexes). Both high and low identifiers found socio-institutional tasks (e.g., successfully completing school, integration into a work setting, achieving economic independence) rather distressing. The results of the previous studies suggest, however, that high identifiers join peer-groups which also have problems with developmental tasks, and are thus able to understand the individuals' concerns. Consequently, the group often provides a source of support in coping with the most urgent socio-institutional problems; adolescents seek for and accept their support, and are, in the long run, presumably better off in coping with their developmental tasks.

The scope of this study is to examine critical situations most often encountered by teenagers and emotional reactions to them. It assesses whom adolescents ask for support, who offers support spontaneously and how interaction with other people influences the coping process. It explores whether adolescents being highly identified with their peer-group go to their group more often for support and their families less often as compared to low identifiers, or whether they go to the group for some problems and consult other people for other problems. It verifies whether there is an inverse relationship between the quality of support provided by the group and parents, that is, whether adolescents receive and accept less attention from their parents if the group proves to be a strong source of support. If so, there should be an interaction effect between identification levels and sources of support on judgements of the positivity of interactions. It also tests whether high identifiers, in contrast to low identifiers, derive more advantage when interacting with their peers than with the family. Additionally, it seeks to establish whether the type of group adolescents join affects transition processes into adulthood. Formal groups may be perceived as better able to deal with their members' developmental tasks than informal groups, which seem to be joined merely for entertainment.

Adolescents were interviewed about critical events, related to personal, relational problems or socio-institutional tasks, such as school or work, and asked to report whom they asked for support, who had offered support, to whom they talked about their problems, who found a solution, how the coping process proceeded and ended. The interview technique was chosen, to allow the adolescents more freedom to "structure" their world according to their experiences than a questionnaire would have

done. Also the interview was chosen to collect data which can be taken for the development of a questionnaire to be applied on a representative sample of Italian adolescents. A set of additional questions was presented, first, to collect demographic information, and second, to assess identification with the peer-group.

METHOD

Subjects

Six peer-groups, in total consisting of 75 members, took part. Two (22 members) were formal groups engaged in religious programmes; the remaining four were informal groups, meeting mainly for entertainment at street corners. In Italy, adolescents frequently are members of informal groups, feel committed to their group, and join it regularly. Thus, in psychological terms, informal groups have clear "boundaries" such as formal groups usually have. While one informal group consisted of ten males and one female, another group included mainly females (11 females and four males). Sex was almost evenly divided in the remaining informal and in the formal groups. In total, 44 males and 31 females participated. The group sizes varied from ten to 15 members. Social stratification varied from low ($n = 18$ adolescents), middle ($n = 43$) to high ($n = 13$). Sixty-four participants were students, nine had a paid job and two were unemployed at the time the interviews were carried out. The average age was 16.5 years, with a standard deviation of 1.095. No differences in demographic characteristics were observed between formal and informal groups.

As already observed in previous studies (Palmonari *et al.*, 1989; 1990), formal groups considered themselves as most distinct from informal groups, whereas informal groups perceived themselves as distinct from both formal groups and other informal groups.

Material

Questionnaire

Each participant individually completed a questionnaire consisting of four parts. The first part asked about demographic characteristics (sex, age, occupational status, father's profession); additionally, the subjects defined the group they belonged to and indicated the type of group they perceived as most distinct from their own.

The remaining three parts of the questionnaire were to assess identification with the peer-group. First, a graphical method was applied. The subjects were presented with a circle (radius = 5 cm) as a social field. They were asked to imagine themselves occupying the middle of this field, and to locate within the field their family, their peer-group, their classmates, and the group most distinct from their peer-group. The distance between self and ingroup relative to all other distances was taken as an index of identification with the group.

Second, we presented 12 adjectives derived from a pretesting (see Palmonari *et al.*, 1990). The items loaded on four factors: social openness (extrovert, open, optimistic), commitment (responsible for others, autonomous, decisive), dissatisfaction (rebellious, lonely, frustrated), and disengagement (disengaged, violent, lacking any values). The subjects rated themselves and their peer-group on 5-point scales. The euclidean distance between the two resulting profiles of self and peer-group was taken as the second index of identification.

Third, Brown's (1988) group identification scale, consisting of ten items, was presented (5-point rating scales). A principal components analysis derived from pretesting of the items revealed two factors with the following items loading highly on the first factor: "My group is very important to me", "I identify with my peer-group", "I have a strong relationship with my group", "I am happy to be with my group", and "I consider myself a member of my group". Since the reliability of these five items was much higher ($\alpha = 0.89$) than that of the complete sample ($\alpha = 0.52$), the average scoring of these five items was used as third index of identification.

Interview

The interview was prestructured and carried out by three researchers. Initially, the subjects were asked to imagine three critical incidents, one out of three relational, one of three personal and one of three socio-institutional, and to indicate whether they had experienced similar problems in the past. If an adolescent never had to cope with a problem the interviewer presented another critical incident out of the respective class of problems. The scope of this procedure was to obtain information from each individual on three different incidents. The incidents, presented in random order, read as follows:

Relational problems: (1) Are you going steady with a girl or boy, and if so, did you ever happen to have a serious problem with him or her?

(2) Imagine joining your best friends. Can you think of any serious problems you had with them?

(3) Imagine being together with your colleagues at work or classmates at school. Can you think of any serious problems you had with them?

Personal problems: (4) Imagine yourself in a state of depression. Did you ever happen to be depressed due to loneliness and isolation?

(5) Imagine yourself in a state of depression. Did you ever happen to be depressed because you felt you had nothing to believe in, no real values worth fighting for?

(6) Imagine yourself in a state of depression. Did you ever happen to be depressed because you wanted to take decisions, such as purchase decisions, against the wishes of others?

Socio-institutional tasks: (7) You will probably remember some moments of high tension at school. Perhaps you were frustrated with school, felt unable to fulfil the requested duties or thought of leaving the school.

(8) If you have some work experience, you will probably remember some moments of high tension at work. Did you ever happen to think you were unable to achieve the requested tasks?

(9) Can you remember situations you behaved against the law? Did you ever happen to use drugs etc.?

The critical events were presented to establish confidence between adolescents and interviewer and to start a discussion about a specific developmental problem. The subjects were asked to (a) describe precisely the situation and their behaviour, (b) to describe the emotional state they experienced, and (c) to indicate whether peers of their group had faced similar situations. Then, they were asked (d) whether they had asked somebody for support, (e) what the reaction of the other was, (f) whether somebody spontaneously had offered support, and (g) whether the adolescent accepted or rejected the offer. The interview proceeded with questions about (h) whom the adolescent talked to, (i) whether the mood was positive, indifferent, or negative during the talk, (j) whether the outcome of the talk was positive or negative, and (k) what the outcome was in terms of quality of emotions. The interview ended with questions about (l) whether the problem was finally solved and who found the solution for the problem, and (m) how, in the long run, the problem and solution process affected the adolescent's mood and behaviour.

Procedure

During winter 1988/89 the adolescents of a district of Bologna, Italy, were approached by student researchers at the centres or localities and places they usually met their peers. After having established a friendly relationship with the groups, the researchers encouraged them to volunteer in the study. Due to frequent contact before distributing the ques-

tionnaires, all the adolescents of the six peer-groups participated. The peer-groups represent a convenient sample since the student researchers contacted those groups which they already knew and had access to.

The participants were individually interviewed by the researcher who had established contact at their places when the other peers were not present. The scope of the study was fully explained and anonymity of data handling assured. Then, the questionnaires were distributed and the interviews carried out. On the average, completing the questionnaire took about 20 minutes; the interview took approximately 30 to 40 minutes per person.

RESULTS

Identification with the peer-group

First, the three identification indexes, obtained through (1) the graphical method, (2) the adjective profiles, and (3) Brown's identification scale, were compared. The correlations between indexes (1) and (2), (1) and (3), and (2) and (3) were $r = 0.21$ ($p = 0.038$), 0.35 ($p = 0.001$), and 0.41 ($p = 0.000$), respectively. Since the psychological meaning of the graphic index was rather ambiguous, and the correlation with the other two indexes small, only the latter two indexes were used for further analyses. The sample was split at the medians of the two indexes into two subsamples, one scoring high, the other scoring low on identification. In cases where the two indices gave conflicting classifications, index (3) was taken as the splitting criterion. The decision to take Brown's index seemed reasonable given its high reliability. Moreover since in previous studies index (2) was applied, the decision to take index (3) made it possible to test whether identification with the group still proved to be a significant variable if operationalized in a different way.

Critical events reported by the adolescents

The nine preprepared developmental problems (relational, personal, and socio-institutional tasks) were presented equally often to males and females, and equally often to the six peer-groups. Overall, the subjects reported 33 different problematic situations in their lives, including being ridiculed by their friends, feeling isolated and lonely, having problems with an intimate friend, feeling frustrated at school or work, acting against the law, such as using drugs or destroying public property, deciding to buy a motorcycle against their parents will, etc. The 33 situations were aggregated to seven clusters of critical events presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. *Events reported by the adolescents after presentation of critical incidents*

Critical event reported by subjects	Critical incidents presented by the interviewer			Percentage of total incidents
	Relational	Personal	Socio-institutional	
(1) close relationship (breaking the relationship, fights)	21	3	0	12.0
(2) communication (misunderstandings, secrets revealed)	30	1	0	15.5
(3) isolation (loneliness, being ridiculed by peers)	20	4	3	13.5
(4) school and work (frustration, boredom)	16	0	37	26.5
(5) lack of reference values (lacking values, lacking life prospects)	0	34	0	17.0
(6) minor criminal acts (drug abuse, vandalism, theft)	0	0	25	12.5
(7) decisions (purchase decisions against others' wishes)	0	6	0	03.0

Note: The total of reported events is greater than 75 because each subject reported on two to three events.

Overall, the 75 subjects reported on 200 critical situations. While 50 respondents had reported on three incidents, 25 subjects reported only on two incidents. As Table 1 shows, most often they talked about problems at school or work, values and life prospects, and misunderstandings in interactions with friends. Loneliness, problems with the dating partner, and with decisions against others' were reported less often. Only 25 subjects reported on minor criminal acts. This result should not be interpreted as indicating that only one-third of the subjects admitted to having committed a minor criminal act. Some subjects may not have been asked by the interviewer to report on such incidents. In the following analyses, the seven categories of critical events, reported by the subjects, will be considered rather than the nine problems presented by the researchers.

The relative frequencies of critical events which were reported by the subjects did not vary significantly between high and low identifiers, males and females, and adolescents of formal and informal groups.

Almost all subjects (88.5 per cent) indicated that their peers faced similar problems, except for lacking values and prospects in life. Only 60.6 per

cent of the adolescents thought these problems were present in their groups; 39.4 per cent were sure their peers never suffered lacking values and prospects in life.

It should be mentioned that in the following, observed frequencies were analysed by chi-square tests. Since this study is mainly exploratory in character, chi-square statistics are not always reported; however, only those results are discussed which reached significance ($p < 0.05$). It should be emphasized that classical statistical procedures were applied although the data are often not independent and, relating to chi-square tests, cell frequencies are sometimes low. Therefore, the results need to be taken as descriptive rather than inferential.

Emotional reactions to critical events

The adolescents were asked how they had reacted during the critical situations. The answers were content analysed and classified into seven categories. Table 2 shows the frequencies of various emotional reactions relative to the critical events and separately for high and low identifiers. No differences between adolescents belonging to formal and informal groups were detected.

As Table 2 shows, relationship problems, isolation, and minor criminal acts most often led to a bad mood state. Misunderstandings in communication led to bad feelings, anger and aggression. Frustration at school affected mood and self-esteem. As compared to low identifiers, highly identified adoles-

Table 2. *Frequencies of emotional reactions to critical events by high and low identifiers*

Emotional reactions	Critical events reported by the subjects													
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)		(7)	
	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
Bad mood	11	10	9	9	8	13	<u>5</u>	<u>14</u>	12	12	6	5	0	2
Aggression, anger	5	6	10	10	5	6	<u>3</u>	<u>5</u>	0	2	1	1	4	1
Loneliness	0	2	3	2	4	4	5	3	10	8	1	0	0	0
Low self-esteem	0	0	0	0	3	1	<u>18</u>	<u>14</u>	3	3	0	0	0	0
Mistrust	1	0	2	4	2	0	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	3	0	0	0	1	1
Need to talk	3	1	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>	0	1	<u>0</u>	<u>6</u>	3	2	0	0	0	0
Joyless entertaining	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	2	7	7

Note: For the labels of critical events see Table 1. The total of cell frequencies is greater than 75 because each subject reported on more than one event and more than one answer was allowed. Signs + and - indicate high and low identification with the group. Underlined observed frequencies indicate significantly higher or lower frequencies than expected frequencies (chi-square test, $p < 0.05$).

cents more often reported the need to talk to somebody or bad moods and less often a low self-esteem if they had problems at school or work. Loss of values and prospects in life led to emotional states described as feelings of loneliness and isolation and to bad mood. If the adolescents had to take decisions against others' wishes, they often felt joyless, bored and frustrated with their decision.

Again, these reactions were reported about equally often in formal and informal groups.

Asking somebody for support

In most of the cases the subjects did not ask anybody for support during the critical situations (44.3 per cent). The people they most often approached were good friends (20 per cent), parents (10 per cent), and, if identification was high, the peer-group (18 per cent for high identifiers vs. 5 per cent for low identifiers). Low identifiers, who asked the group less often for support than did high identifiers, did not approach their families more frequently (9 per cent for low identifiers and 11 per cent for high identifiers). As compared to high identifiers, adolescents with low identification reported more often asking nobody for help if the problem they had concerned their school or work place, or if they lacked prospects in life or felt isolated (Table 3). In conclusion, high identifiers who go to their group more often for support than low identifiers, do not discard their families as sources for support. The results seem to indicate that high identifiers seek social support while low identifiers are inclined to ask nobody to help them.

Table 3. *Asking for support as dependent on critical events and high and low identification*

Sources of support	Critical events reported by the subjects													
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)		(7)	
	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
Friend	8	6	7	6	2	1	4	4	3	3	1	0	1	0
Peer-group	1	2	3	3	<u>0</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>6</u>	1	4	0	0	0	0
Intimate partner	1	1	1	3	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
Father	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
Mother	1	2	0	1	<u>5</u>	<u>1</u>	0	3	1	1	0	1	0	0
Brother/sister	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	0
Adults	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	0
Nobody	2	2	8	4	5	6	<u>17</u>	<u>11</u>	10	7	9	11	4	1

Note: For the labels of critical events see Table 1. The total of cell frequencies is greater than 75 because each subject reported on more than one event and more than one answer was allowed. Signs + and - indicate high and low identification with the group. Underlined observed frequencies indicate significantly higher or lower frequencies than expected frequencies (chi-square test, $p < 0.05$).

The answers to questions about support were in general positive. An analysis of variance with identification and sources of support as independent variables and answers (1 = positive to 3 = negative) as dependent variables showed that highly identified subjects got more positive answers ($M = 1.03$) than low identifiers ($M = 1.20$; $F(1,13) = 6.565$; $p = 0.012$), independent of the type of source (F for sources $(6,13) = 1.907$; $p = 0.087$). No interaction effect between identification and sources, especially between parents and group, was found ($F(6,13) = 1.048$; $p = 0.399$). These results indicate that there is no inverse relationship between the quality of support provided by the parents and the peer group.

Offers of support

Next, the adolescents were asked whether somebody had spontaneously offered any support during their critical situations. Again, most often they denied having got any help (38.6 per cent). If somebody spontaneously intervened, then it was the parents (30 per cent), a good friend (13 per cent), or the peer-group (13 per cent). No significant differences were found between formal and informal groups or high vs. low identifiers. There was, however, a tendency for high identifiers more often to receive offers of support from their groups (17 per cent) than for low identifiers (9 per cent). As for support offered by the parents, no differences between high and low identifiers were observed (32 per cent vs. 28 per cent for low and high identifiers, respectively).

Concerning the acceptance of offers of support (1 = accepting the offer, 2 = rejecting it), a two way analysis of variance revealed that high identifiers more often accept help ($M = 1.14$) than low identifiers ($M = 1.35$; $F(1,10) = 5.801$; $p = 0.018$). Also, there was a main effect for sources ($F(5,10) = 8.613$; $p = 0.000$), indicating that adolescents were more willing to accept support offered by friends ($M = 1.04$) or the peer-group ($M = 1.00$) than support offered from the father ($M = 1.54$) or mother ($M = 1.42$). No interaction effect was found ($F < 1$). These results seem to indicate that high identifiers derive more advantages, operationalized as acceptable support, from peers than do low identifiers.

Adolescents talking about their problems

When adolescents were asked with whom they talked about their problems, in 7.6 per cent of the cases they mentioned nobody. Most often the problem was discussed with a good friend (44.8 per cent), with the peer-group (15.2 per cent) or somebody of the family (mother: 12.9 per cent,

father: 7.1 per cent, brother or sister: 4.5 per cent), if they had a intimate partner with him or her (3.4 per cent), or with another adult apart from the parents (3.4 per cent). Adolescents that highly identified with their peer-group talked more often with the group about loss of values and life perspectives (28.6 per cent) than low identifiers (4.1 per cent). No other differences due to identification and type of group emerged.

High identifiers judged the discussions with somebody, both with the peer-group or another person, more positively ($M = 1.16$; scale ranging from 1 = positive to 3 = negative) than low identifiers ($M = 1.31$; $F(1,14) = 6.750$; $p = 0.010$). Again, talks with a good friend ($M = 1.14$), the group ($M = 1.16$), a boy or girl friend ($M = 1.00$), or a brother or sister ($M = 1.10$) were experienced more positively than talks with adults (father: $M = 1.58$; mother: $M = 1.42$; other adults: $M = 1.40$. $F(7,14) = 4.427$; $p = 0.000$). No interaction effect was found ($F < 1$).

Talking to somebody also led to more positive outcomes, be it an adult, the group or a good friend, for high identifiers ($M = 1.36$) as contrasted with low identifiers ($M = 1.76$; $F(1,15) = 19.658$; $p = 0.000$). The main effect of the people one talked with ($F < 1$) and the interaction effect between people and identification ($F < 1$) were insignificant.

The interview proceeded with asking who was finally able to find a solution for the problem, the adolescent himself or herself, another person, whether the problem became less important while the time passed by, or whether no solution was found at all.

As Table 4 shows, in 6.9 per cent of the cases no way out was found. This was especially true in cases of minor criminal acts (64 per cent of the

Table 4. *People who finally found a solution for the problem by high and low identification*

Sources of solution	Low identification		High identification	
	f	(%)	f	(%)
Adolescents				
Themselves	64	46.7	57	39.6
Friend	20	14.6	27	18.8
Peer-group	7	5.1	18	12.5
Adults	11	8.0	21	14.6
Brother/sister	0	0.0	1	0.7
Intimate partner	5	3.6	2	1.4
Time passes by	15	10.9	8	6.6
No solution was found	15	10.9	10	6.9

Note: The total of cell frequencies is greater than 75 because each subject reported on more than one event and more than one answer was allowed. Underlined observed, absolute frequencies (and percentages) indicate significantly higher or lower frequencies (percentages) than expected (chi-square tests, $p < 0.05$).

cases). Most of the cases the adolescents attributed internally, saying they themselves found a solution (43.1 per cent). Highly identified subjects reported more often that they had found a solution through others (54 per cent) than low identifiers (35 per cent), who, on the other hand, reported that the problem became unimportant while the time passed by or that no solution was found (21.8 per cent for low identifiers and 12.5 per cent for high identifiers). Interestingly, high identifiers found more solutions through the support of both peers and parents and other adults than did low identifiers. A good friend was mentioned both by high and low identifiers rather frequently (16.7 per cent). High identifiers attributed the capacity to find a solution more often to their group than did low identifiers.

As to differences between high and low identifiers, it is interesting to add that the group is more often able to find a solution for its highly identified members if their reactions to the critical events result in bad mood states (18 per cent for high identifiers; 5 per cent for low identifiers), or in feelings of loneliness (19 per cent for high identifiers; 3 per cent for low identifiers). Parents and other adults were better able to help high identifiers if they suffered low self-esteem (29 per cent for high identifiers; 9 per cent for low identifiers), or needed to talk to somebody (30 per cent for high identifiers; 0 per cent for low identifiers).

Outcomes of talking with somebody

The interviewees mentioned various consequences of their talks which can be summarized as psychological effects (53.2 per cent; feeling better or augmentation of self-esteem), changes in the problem (43.1 per cent; devaluation of the problem, confrontation with other points of view, objective change of the critical situation), or as negative outcomes (3.8 per cent; feeling controlled, influenced by others).

Table 5. *Effects of talks to somebody as dependent on identification and person or group who found a solution for the problem*

Source of solution	Changes of psychological state (%)	Change of the problem (%)
Adolescents themselves		
high identification	21	36
low identification	20	25
Other people or the peer-group		
high identification	14	24
low identification	28	17
Time passed by		
high identification	3	2
low identification	9	1

When talking about negative experiences at school or work, independent of the people one talked to, high identifiers more often reported a better mood and augmentation of self esteem (60 per cent) than low identifiers (34.6 per cent). Moreover, high identifiers get more profit in periods of low self-esteem (37 per cent), anger and aggression (18 per cent) than low identifiers (17 and 4 per cent, respectively).

It should be emphasized that high identifiers seem to be better able to handle their problems alone and through others than low identifiers, who go for a better psychological state rather than objective changes of the problem or wait for a solution as the time passes by (Table 5).

Long term effects of critical problems and their solution

Subjects reported that, in the long run, coping processes led to either changes in the general mood state, to changes of behaviour, or resulted in maturation (that is both better understanding of problems and change of behaviour). These changes can be collated along a continuum ranging from superficial changes to a complete reorientation. Consequently, it is possible to attribute changes of mood the value of 1, behavioural changes = 2 and maturation = 3. Changes were processed as dependent variables in five analyses of variance, with identification as the first independent variable and either critical situations, emotional reactions, people talked with, people who solved the problem, or effects of the talks as the second independent variable. All analyses of variance revealed significant effects of identification (F values ranging from $F(1,12) = 5.34$; $p = 0.023$ to $F(1,13) = 10.622$; $p = 0.001$) but no other significant main effects (F values ranging from $F < 1$ to $F(1,13) = 1.860$; $p = 0.090$). Again, no interaction effects were found (all $F < 1$). High identifiers more often reported a complete reorientation, such as behaviour changes and maturation ($M = 2.10$) than low identifiers, who more often reported change of mood ($M = 1.79$). The relative frequencies of mood changes, changes of behaviour and maturation were, respectively 0.30, 0.30, 0.40, for high identifiers and 0.49, 0.23, 0.29 for low identifiers.

When asked to indicate whether the change was positive (= 1), indifferent (= 2) or negative (= 3), all highly identified adolescents said that maturation and behaviour changes were positive and 75 per cent judged mood changes as positive. In contrast, low identifiers said 91, 89 and 46 per cent of the cases of maturation, behaviour change, and change of mood, respectively, were positive for them.

As already observed in the previous analyses, the type of group had no effect on the answers nor were any important sex differences found. It can,

thus, be concluded that formal groups are not better able to deal with their members developmental problems than informal groups.

CONCLUSION

This study was designed to explore developmental problems and coping processes during adolescence. Moreover, it focused on the impact of type of peer-group adolescents belonged to (formal vs. informal) and on identification with the group. As already shown in previous studies, the type of group is much less important in adolescence than commonsense holds, whereas identification with the peer-group plays a crucial role both in the development of a social identity, in social categorization and intergroup processes as well as in handling developmental problems (Palmonari, in press). In short, adolescents who highly identified with their peer-group, not only are more inclined to ask other people, peers as well as friends, parents and other adults, for support, to accept their offers of support, and talk about their problems but they do also seem to be more often able to resolve their problems than low identifiers, to reach more favourable outcomes and to derive advantage for their future. Low identifiers are rather alone with their problems, often unable to find a way out, and consequently rather often dissatisfied with the outcomes.

In this study, developmental tasks are conceived as critical experiences which adolescents face and need to cope with. These problems are sometimes resolved without extreme effort but can also lead to severe tension and difficulties (Palmonari, in press). The critical incidents presented by the researchers as stimuli to initiate the discussion with the respondents, required the adolescents to report mainly on six clusters of problems: concerning social relationships the problems are conflicts with an intimate partner or misunderstandings in interactions with friends and colleagues. The personal sphere encompasses feelings of loneliness or social isolation and loss of values or experiences of an existential vacuum and loss of orientation. The remaining two problems, concerning school and work or minor criminal acts, are problems with the society and law or institutions. The family as a critical sphere during adolescence was not referred to. Although the small sample and the necessity of recalling past experiences rather than reporting on actual problems may lessen the validity of the results, relational, personal, and socio-institutional problems seem to be the critical situations most often encountered by adolescents (see also Palmonari *et al.*, 1989; 1990). Problems concerning social relationships mainly cause a bad mood state or feelings of anger and aggression. Problems concerning the private sphere are associated with feelings of discomfort and lone-

liness. Problems classified as socio-institutional tasks despite causing feelings of comfort may often cause low self-esteem.

Adolescents often neither search for support nor do they spontaneously receive offers of support. Also, if they talk to somebody, they have to resolve their problems by themselves. Despite the fact that young people face a marked upheaval in physical development as well as considerable reorganization with the social and emotional spheres of life (circumstances which according to Coleman (1980) result in greatly increased dependence of support from others), the adolescents of this sample felt rather alone with their developmental tasks. If they decided to disclose a problem to others then they often talked to a good friend, the peer-group, or a family member. References to classmates or work colleagues were never made. Also the importance of the intimate partner was low. However, this may be due to the fact that few adolescents have a steady partner at that age.

The most important findings concern individuals relationships with their peers and the nature of the peer-group. Informal street groups proved to be as influential and supporting as well-formalized groups engaged in religious projects. This result supports previous findings on the influence of the group type and social categorization processes (Palmonari *et al.*, 1990). It should be emphasized that street groups, although commonly perceived as often close to deviant groups, such as drug abusers or delinquent cliques, provide an equally important and helpful juvenile sub-culture as formal groups committed to sports, religious programmes or politics. The crucial factor is getting involved with peers, sharing thoughts and feelings with the group rather than the nature of the group itself. The more young people identify with the group (that is, the more important they consider the peer-group, the more they consider themselves as members of the group, and the more similar their descriptions of themselves and the group) the more profit they take from interactions with it. Identification with peers does not at all lessen the involvement with other social reference points such as the family or a good friend. The results show a positive covariation between frequency and quality of interactions with peers and parents. These results are in line with Coleman's (1980), Larsen's (1972), and Brittain's (1968) statements about adolescents involvement with peers: the more significant the peer-group the more adolescents perceive them and others, such as the parents, as competent guides in coping with different difficulties during teenage years. Peers as well as parents and good friends are important and seem to provide support for difficult tasks.

High identifiers more often ask the peer-group for support in situations of loneliness, loss of values and if they have problems at school or work, and do also talk to their peers often, especially if they feel kind of an existential vacuum or lack of life prospects in general. Reactions to questions for

support, acceptance of offers of support and the effects of talks to others are more positive for high identifiers than for low identifiers. This difference was not only observed in respect to the peer-group but is valid for social interactions with other persons as well. High identifiers judge the interaction with peers, parents, friends, and other adults more positively than low identifiers. Consequently, it is not surprising that high identifiers are better able to cope with their problems. They more often report increased self-esteem and a better mood after talks to others and think that, in the long run, peers as well as others are valuable sources of support that contribute to maturation processes.

In conclusion, it should be re-emphasized that the present study is descriptive rather than hypotheses testing. An investigation on a nationwide sample should allow stronger conclusions to be drawn. If identification with the peer-group consistently proves to play a crucial role during adolescent years, further research on adolescents should focus on determinants of identification and the problems which hinder young people in establishing a strong relationship with their peers.

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