

Sexual activity and school deviant behavior among adolescents: peer influence and homophily interactions with sex and ethnicity

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Criminologist and sociologists have since long recognized the importance of peer influence in adolescence, but only rarely are peer influence interactions studied with regard to important salient status characteristics. This study examines whether homophily status characteristics condition the influence between best friends and the individual's behaviour. The focus of the study is on school deviant behaviour as well as sexual activity. More specifically, we address the question to what extent peer influence differs for friends of the same sex or ethnicity (i.e. homophilic relationships), compared to friends who differ on sex and ethnicity (i.e. heterophilic relationships). Data from the Flemish Educational Assessment Study are used, which collected complete network data, from a representative sample of Flemish adolescents in secondary schools (N=11,837), clustered in 160 networks. Results indicate that peers best friend relationships are indeed strongly homophilic on both of these status dimensions and that homophilic friendships are significantly more influential than heterophilic ones. Further results show that native Belgian adolescents (majority teens) are significantly more influenced by homophilic relationships than adolescents belonging to a ethno-cultural minority group (minority teens). For sexual activity, girls are influenced stronger by homophilic relationships than boys, while for school deviant behavior the opposite is true. Cross-ethnic influence of majority teens on minority teens is substantially smaller than for minority teens on majority teens, especially for sexual activity. Implications of these findings for theory development and prevention programs are discussed.