

# Influences of Group Process in Juvenile Delinquency: An Interview Study with Inmates of a Reformatory Home

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# Influence of Group Process in Juvenile Delinquency: An Interview Study with Inmates of a Reformatory Home<sup>1</sup>

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Recently, group delinquency has increased in Japan. In this study, we constructed a model of group processes for delinquencies that explains social causalities involved in group delinquencies. We examined its validity by using an interview method with juveniles who were involved in group delinquencies. Most of them recognized personal antisocial traits and maladjustment, but not the psychology of adolescence. We assumed that these antisocial inclinations are amplified through the group processes, that is, the members who are antisocial become more antisocial and those who are originally not antisocial become antisocial through the group processes. Our assessment of group rewards, group identification and group orientation showed that most of the adolescents recognized group rewards, social categorization, collective self-esteem, intergroup status, intragroup status, and conformity to group norms, but not in-group favoritism. These results supported a certain level of validity of our group process model of delinquencies. We need to more directly examine the causal relationships involved in the model in a future study.

**Key words:** juvenile delinquency, group reward, group identification, group orientation

## Introduction

Recently, serious or abnormal juvenile crimes are often featured on the Japanese mass media. Most of these juvenile crimes are committed without accomplices, but actually such a type is exceptional among the juvenile crime. Rather, a distinctive characteristic of the contemporary juvenile crimes is group, that is, being committed in a group.

According to the Japanese white paper on crimes, the rate of inmates of reformatory homes who have accomplices tends to rise since 1989. It was 59% in 1989, but it was 66% in 1994 and reach 70% in 1999. Research found that juveniles involved in group offenses were not definitely aware that they were committing criminal acts, implying that group processes induce its members to engage in antisocial behaviors without a definite personal determination.

The study of group delinquency has a long history. For example, Thrasher (1927) observed that gang members were frequently engaged in delinquent acts and Shaw and McKay (1931) found the same results by a field study of gangs in Chicago, which was done from a cultural

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deviation perspective. More recently, Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte and Chard-Wierschen (1993) conducted a longitudinal research in which the authors measured the frequencies of delinquent behaviors of juvenile gang members at three different periods, that is, pre-admission in, during admission in, and after withdrawal from gang groups. Finding that delinquent behaviors increased during the admission and decreased after the withdrawal, the authors interpreted that gang membership induces juveniles to commit delinquencies. Although these studies indicated a strong association between group membership and delinquencies, they did not make clear how group processes influence juvenile delinquencies. In the present study, we attempted to approach to this issue by formulating a model of group processes of delinquencies (Figure 1).

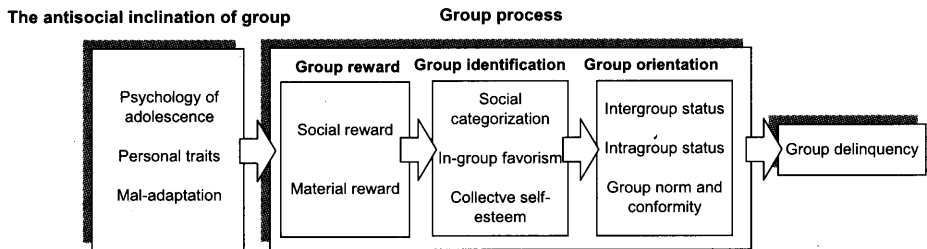


Figure 1. The group process model of delinquency

### *A Model of Group Processes for Delinquencies*

This model consists of the antisocial inclination of group and the group processes of delinquency, assuming that the interactions between these two aspects determine the occurrence of group delinquencies. The antisocial inclination of a group is a potentiality of group delinquency, and it is determined by the number of members having antisocial dispositions in the group. So, what specific dispositions of members determine the level of antisocial inclinations of the group?

The first antisocial disposition of juveniles is their social mal-adaptation, that is, mal-adaptation to school or family. Research has assured that social mal-adaptation of adolescents is strongly related to their delinquencies. Hirschi (1969) theoretically argued that juveniles are engaged in delinquent acts when their attachment with or bond to society is weakened and, conversely, those who have a strong attachment with social groups such as family or school are unlikely to be involved in delinquent acts. His theoretical postulates have been supported by empirical research in different countries including Japan. A survey research by the Department of Youth Affairs of Japan General Affairs Agency (1999) suggested that Japanese juveniles are likely to be engaged in delinquent behaviors when they have neither secure identification with, attachment with, nor trust in their parents.

The second is peculiar psychology of adolescence. At this developmental stage, a number of rapid changes occur in both mental and physical areas of adolescents. A salient mental characteristic is rebelliousness, that is, most adolescents show resistance and rebellion against authorities such as parents, teachers, or other adult persons around them (Kadowaki, 1997). At this stage, also, many adolescents become emotionally unstable and rejecting. Delinquent juveniles seem to have these negative dispositions more than non-delinquent juveniles.

The third is personal traits. Among others, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) focused on low self-control as a predictor of criminal behaviors. People who are low in self-control cannot see the situations from a long perspective, and thus, they are likely to be impulsive, immediate, and momentary. Gottfredson and Hirschi found six dimensions in this trait, that is, self-centered, physical activity, risk-seeking, anger, impulsivity, and simple task, and they established that those who are high in this trait are likely to be engaged in criminal and delinquent behaviors. Further, Oyseman and Markus (1990) found that delinquent boys reported more negative selves than non-delinquent boys.

From these discussions, we assumed that social mal-adaptation, psychology of adolescence, and low-self control of group members cause the antisocial inclination of the group, and the inclination is amplified in the group processes.

The group processes were postulated to consist of three stages. The first stage is that members receive psychological or economic rewards from a group. By participating in a group, juveniles receive both social and tangible rewards (Yamane, 2000). Social rewards include acceptance, support, or help provided by other members, and tangible rewards are monetary or material resources. Juveniles who receive such rewards may increase the commitment to the group.

The second stage is group identification and group commitment. Researchers have remarked that peer group influence over a member depends on how the member commits to the group (Tremblay, Mâsse, Vitaro, & Dobkin, 1995). An index of group commitment is group identification, which is related to three variables such as social categorization, in-group favoritism, and collective self-esteem. The social identity theory postulates that social categorization is a basic cognitive process to distinguish in-group and out-groups, defining oneself as a member of the in-group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). It is made not only using social categories such as gender, social class, or vocation, but also using other attributes such as residential area, school, preference, or physical characteristics. The theorists further postulate that the social categorization is accompanied by group pride (collective self-esteem) and in-group favoritism. Group pride is an individual's feeling that his/her group is superior and he/she is proud of a member of the valued group. In-group bias is a cognitive tendency to perceive in-group and out-group members in a biased manner, that is, an individual perceives the other in-group members as having positive attributes and the out-group members as having negative attributes.

As the third stage, the model assumes that the group identification promotes group orientation. The enhanced collective self-esteem and attachment with the group encourage members of the group to engage in the behaviors that are consistent with group norms and group goals. They engage in the group-oriented behaviors to enhance the status of their group. The group orientation is mediated by their desire for respect and approval from in-group members. The research indicated that this type of motive is strong particularly among juveniles (Agnew, 1991). We assume that there are two types of desire for in-group respect. Some juveniles try to gain approval from in-group members by engaging in pro-social acts, while the other juveniles do it by engaging in antisocial or law-breaking acts. Examining dimensions of peer approval, Carroll, Houghton, Hattie, and Durkin (1999) found that delinquent juveniles and those having high risk propensity showed a stronger need for non-conforming reputation and a weaker need for

conforming reputation than non- delinquent juveniles.

When members strongly commit to their group, group norms are often generated. The norms regulate members' behaviors in terms of group goals, thus further increasing group orientation. We assume that as a result of such group processes, group delinquency sometimes occurs if the group has antisocial dispositions.

In the present study, we attempted to examine the model of group processes by interviewing with juveniles who committed group delinquencies.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 28 male juveniles who were inmates of a reformatory home in Japan. The mean age was 17.7 and SD was 1.1. Eleven juveniles committed inflicting bodily injury, 8 traffic offense, 5 robbery, 5 threat, 5 larceny, and 3 intrusion. All these delinquencies were committed in groups.

### *Interview Items*

We constructed items for the interview based on our group process model of delinquency (Figure 1). In the assessment of antisocial inclinations of group, we constructed 7 items to measure 3 variables (distrust of adults, pessimism, and rebelliousness) of psychology of adolescence, 6 items to measure 6 variables (impulsivity, risk-seeking, violence orientation, self-centered, anger, negative selves) of low self-control, and 1 item to measure social mal-adaptation. Each participant was asked how many members of his/her group had these characteristics.

Although group rewards involves social and tangible rewards, we only assessed social rewards in the present study. We constructed 8 items to measure 5 variables (sharing of time and activities, intimacy and friendship, frame of reference, help, and social status) of social rewards. For the assessment of group identification, we constructed 7 items to measure 4 variables (pride, feeling of omnipotent, feeling of enhancement, importance) of collective self-esteem, 6 items to measure 5 variables (similarity, group name, unique language, unity of appearance, difference with out-group) of social categorization, and 6 items to measure 2 variables (in-group favor and out-group hostility) of in-group favoritism. For the assessment of group orientation, we constructed 2 items to measure concern for group status, 4 items to measure concern for one's status in a group, and 4 items to measure adherence to group norms.

### *Procedures*

The assessment was done by a structured interview method. Law technical officers of the reformatory home interviewed with the juveniles. The interviewers asked the participants to rate how definitely each of these items described the group to which they belonged when they committed the delinquencies. Specifically, the participants were asked to rate the items of social categorization on a 2-point scale consisting of "Yes" and "No"; the items of the psychology of adolescence on a 3-point scale consisting of "Most," "Some," and "Not at all"; and the items of social rewards, collective self-esteem, in-group favoritism, in-group status, inter-group status, and conformity to peer on a 5-point scale consisting of "Definitely Yes," "Moderately Yes,"

“Undecided,” “Moderately No,” and “Definitely No.” In addition, we asked them to describe group norms in an open-ended question. For group structures, we asked them to describe type of groups, group size, role assignments, and group activities in open-ended questions.

## Results

### *Group structure*

By content-analyzing responses to the open-ended questions, we classified the groups: 17 participants belonged to motorcycle gang, 2 gang, and 9 others. Most of the participants belonged to motorcycle gangs. Nine participants belonged to the groups consisting 9 or fewer members, 5 to the groups consisting of 10 through 19 members, and 8 to the groups consisting 20 or more members. It means that the delinquent groups can be divided into small ( $< 10$ ) and large ones ( $> 20$ ). Twenty-four participants answered that their groups had role hierarchies, at the top of which leaders were. As group activities, seventeen participants mentioned reckless driving, 6 meetings, 3 drug use, and 3 gathering station squares. Their answers indicated that most of the group activities were antisocial such as reckless driving or drug use.

### *Examination of the Model of Group Processes*

Because of the small sample, we did not conduct statistical analysis on the data. Instead, we inspected how the responses of the participants fitted with our model. For this analysis, we focused on “positive response (PR)” to each item. In the rating on the 2-point scale, we regarded the “Yes” response as positive; in the rating on the 3-point scale, the “Most” and “Somewhat” responses were positive; and in the rating on the 5-point scale, the “Definitely Yes” and “Moderately Yes” responses were positive. In the analysis, we regarded the number of items to which the participants positively responded as the indices of validity of the model.

Figure 2 shows mean PR rates (rates of the participants who positively responded to the items) of psychology of adolescence and social mal-adaptation. It indicated that PR rates were generally not high with the psychology of adolescence since only in 3 of the 7 items PR rates were

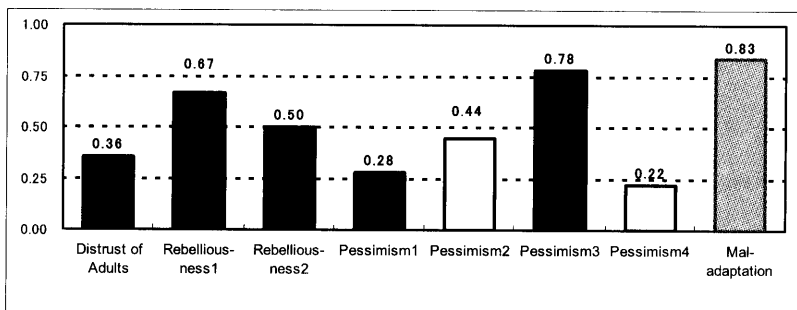


Figure 2. PR rates in psychology of adolescence and mal-adaptation

higher than .5. Among others, it was relatively high in rebelliousness and pessimism. PR rate of mal-adaptation was high. Figure 3 shows that PR rates were higher than .5 in 4 of the 8 variables of low self-control, especially high in self-centered, and anger. Almost half of the participants recognized their violence orientation.

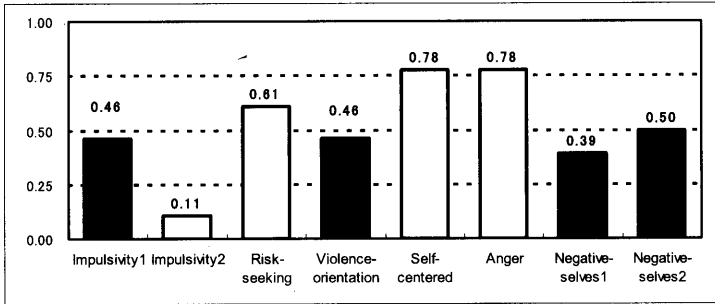


Figure 3. PR rates in personal traits

Figure 4 to 9 show PR rates of the items to measure the variables of group processes. PR rates were generally high in group rewards, that is, they were higher than .5 in 6 of the 8 items. It was .8 in intimacy and friendship1, .79 in sharing of time and activities, .72 in help, .68 in intimacy and friendship2, .67 in social status1, and .50 in social status2. PR rates were also generally high in social categorization and collective self-esteem, they were higher than .5 in 6 of the 8 items. Among the variables of in-group favoritism, PR rates were high in in-group favor, but they were generally low in out-group hostility (PR rates were higher than .5 only in 2 of the 6 items).

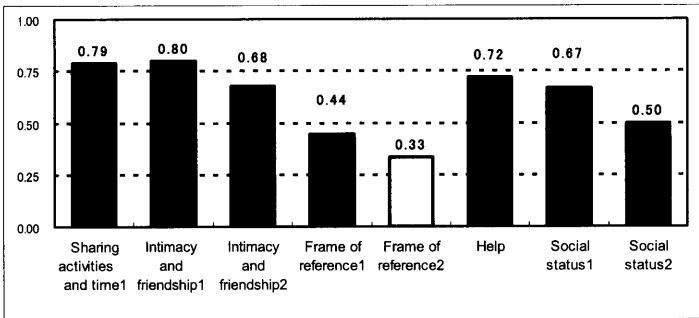


Figure 4. PR rates in rewards provided by the group

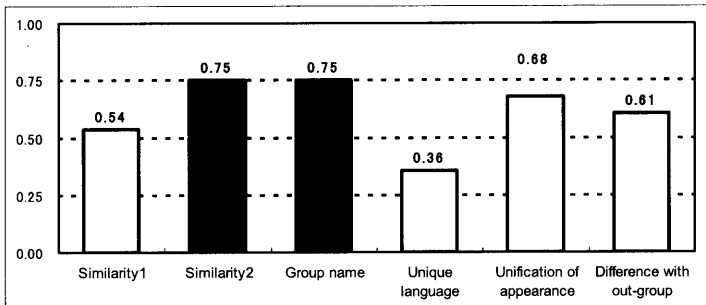


Figure 5. PR rates in social categorization

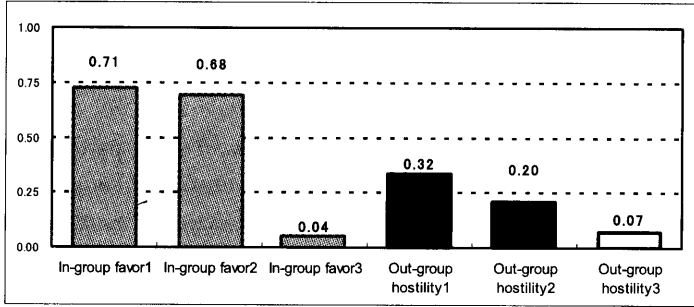


Figure 6. PR rates in in-group favoritism

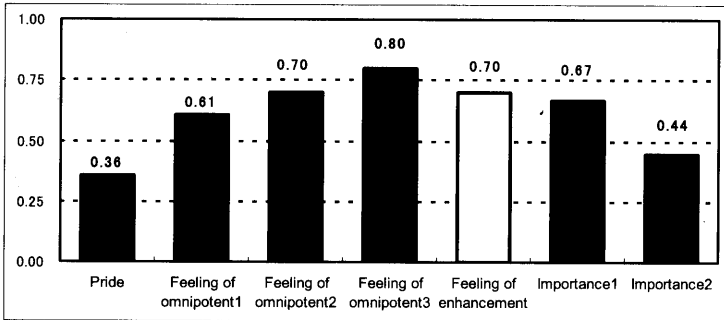


Figure 7. PR rates in collective self-esteem

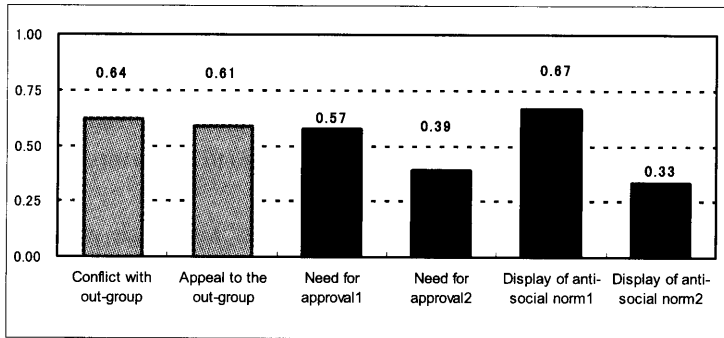


Figure 8. PR rates in inter-group and intra-group

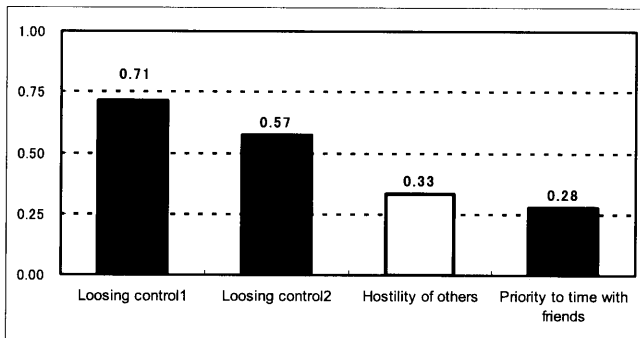


Figure 9. PR rates in conformity with the group



Both PR rates of the two items to measure inter-group status were higher than .5. In half of the items for intra-group status, PR rates were higher than .50, particularly high in approval and display of antisocial norm. Also, PR rates for conformity to group norms were higher than .5 for 2 of the 4 items, especially high for losing control.

The participants described the following group norms. Twelve participants mentioned to loyalty (“You should not betray in-group member”), 7 to revenge (“If out-group member was an injury to in-group member, we should retaliate”), 7 to prohibition of drug (“You should not use drug”), 6 to sanction against exit (“When you leave the group, you must be physically sanctioned”), 5 to uniform appearance, 3 to seniority (“You must pay respect to senior in-group members”), and 2 to prohibition of in-group conflict (“You should not fight with in-group members”). Further, some participants mentioned to group norms such as “When we get into a fight with other group, all of members must join it” or “You must possess a combat uniform (Tokko Fuku).”

## Discussion

In this study, we constructed the group process model of delinquency base on both the social identity theory and theoretical and empirical research on group delinquencies. And, we examined validity of the model analyzing the positive response to the items.

Typical characteristics of the groups described by the participants were the followings: Most of them belonged to motorcycle gangs and they engaged in antisocial activities such as reckless driving and illegal meetings. Most of them were organized, that is, they had role hierarchies and names.

We theoretically assumed a set of variables of the group processes involved in group delinquencies and analyzed responses of the 28 male juveniles to a structured interview who were inmates a reformatory home.

Among the antisocial inclinations of group, PR rates were high in personal traits and maladjustment, but low in the psychology of adolescence (Figure.10). These results indicate that the delinquent groups consisted of the boys who were not adapted to families and schools, giving a supportive evidence for our model assuming that an origin of antisocial inclinations of the delinquent groups was in personal factors of the members of the group.

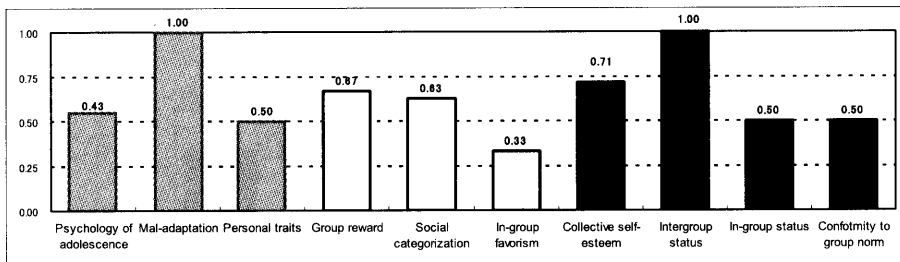


Figure 10. PR rates in the variables involved in the group process model of delinquency

We assumed that these antisocial inclinations are amplified through the group processes, that is, the members who are antisocial become more antisocial and those who are originally not antisocial become antisocial. We measured the variables of these processes mainly based on the social identity theory. PR rates were high in group identification, social categorization, and collective self-esteem (Figure.10). Most participants favorably perceived other in-group members, but they did not always negatively perceive out-group members. These findings indicate that the boys who committed group delinquencies were proud of their groups and felt group membership, and tried to enhance group coherence by using uniforms and common language. If an individual strongly commits to his/her group, he/she becomes susceptible to influences of the group. Through these processes, we assumed that the individual is motivated to enhance a status of his/her group, and it sometimes causes a competition or conflict with out-groups. Our assumption was supported since the participants positively rated all the items to measure concern for group status. Also, we assumed that group identification encourages members of a group to seek a high status and positive reputations in the in-group situations, leading to their committing violent and antisocial behaviors. This assumption was partially supported since half of the items to measure these group process variables were positively rated by the participants (Figure.10). Some of the group norms reported by the participants were antisocial and approved violence. The participants' conformity to peer groups was distinguished. These seem to facilitate group delinquency.

The present results supported a certain level of validity of our group process model of delinquencies. We assumed a number of causal relationships between the variables involved in the group process of delinquencies, but we did not examine them because of the small sample. In a future study, we must do it by increasing the sample.

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## Appendix

### Scales and Items Used in the Present Interview Study

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#### Psychology of Adolescence

##### Distrust of Adults

How many members of the group regarded adults as untrustful?

##### Rebelliousness

How many members of the group longed for an unconventional way of life? (Rebelliousness1)

How many members of the group were rebellious against adults? (Rebelliousness2)

##### Pessimism

Did you have no dream of your future? (Pessimism 1)

Did you have no expectation of your future? (Pessimism 2)

How many members of the group were desperate? (Pessimism 3)

Did you suppose that the world is full of evil persons? (Pessimism 4)

#### Personal traits

##### Impulsivity

How many members of the group did feel that it was stupid to think about their future?  
(Impulsivity 1)

Did members of the group think that it was stupid to work hard? (Impulsivity 2)

##### Risk-seeking

How many members of the group did engage in risky behaviors to seek thrills?

##### Violence orientation

Did members of the group think that violence was best to control others?

##### Self-centered

How many members of the group were egocentric?

##### Anger

How many members of the group did get mad or fly into rage?

##### Negative-selves

I often felt I was worthless. (Negative-selves 1)

I often felt that others ignored me. (Negative-selves 2)

#### Mal-adaptation

How many members of the group were not adapted to school, family, or work.

#### Social rewards

##### Sharing of activities and time

Did you spend much time with members of the group?

##### intimacy and friendship

I was happy when I was just with members of the group

Did you feel secure when you were with members of the group?

##### Frame of reference

The group did not bore me. (Frame of reference 1)

The group provided me with many things to do? (Frame of reference 2)

##### Help

I believed that members of the group would help me if necessary?

## Appendix (continued)

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### Social status

Did you feel powerful when you are with members of the group? (Social status 1)

I expected that people would admit my superiority if I joined the group? (Social status 2)

### Identification with the group

#### Group self-esteem

I was proud that I was a member of the group. (Pride)

I felt no fear when I was with members of the group. (Feeling of omnipotent1)

I did not hesitate to do wrongdoing when I did it with my fellows. (Feeling of omnipotent2)

I felt no anxiety for doing wrongdoing when I did it with my fellows. (Feeling of omnipotent3)

I forgot frustrations when I was with members of the group. (Feeling of enhancement)

Members of the group were important to me. (Importance1)

Was to be a member of the group important to you? (Importance2)

#### Social categorization

Did you feel companionship when you first met members of the group? (Similarity1)

I felt we were different from others. (Similarity2)

We named our group. (Group name)

The group used unique language. (Unique language)

We unified possessions, wears, hair style, and hair color. (Unification of appearance)

Did you and your mates intentionally take different wears and different behaviors from others?  
(Difference with out-group)

#### In-group favoritism

Members of my group were nice guys. (In-group favor 1)

We were good fellows. (In-group favor 2)

I felt that we were right. (In-group favor 3)

I felt hostility against other guys than my fellows. (Out-group hostility1)

I felt hatred against other youngsters than my group. (Out-group hostility2)

I did not play with others than my fellows. (Out-group hostility3)

### Inter-group and intra-group status

We often fought with other group members. (Conflict with out-group)

We asserted ourselves against other groups. (Appeal to the out-group)

I avoided showing weakness in front of members of my group. (Need for approval 1)

I wanted to be respected by members of my group. (Need for approval 2)

I felt pleasant to kid adults or policemen in front of members of my group.

(Display of anti-social norm 1)

I have boasted my wrongdoing to members of my group. (Display of anti-social norm 2)

### Conformity with the group norms

I hesitated to stop wrongdoing when we did it together. (Loosing control 1)

I could not reject to participate in group wrongdoings. (Loosing control 2)

Did you often feel hostility against adults and other youngsters? (Hostility of others)

I chose to play with my fellows more often than to work. (Priority to play with friends)

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