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The Relationship Between Adolescent Self-esteem and Delinquent, Extracurricular, and Employment Behaviors

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This study investigated the relationship between level of self-esteem, delinquent behavior, participation in extracurricular activities, and part-time employment in adolescents. The study consisted of 157 ninth and tenth grade students who attended rural Appalachian high schools in Southwest Virginia. Adolescents with higher self-esteem were significantly less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors than adolescents with lower self-esteem. Students with higher self-esteem also participated in a greater number of extracurricular activities. Finally, self-esteem was positively correlated with the number of hours worked by male adolescents, but negatively correlated for female subjects.

The theoretical and empirical literature suggest that self-esteem is significantly correlated with a variety of pro-social and anti-social behaviors during adolescence. For example, studies have identified relationships between adolescents' self-esteem and delinquency (Kitano, 1989; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989) participation in extracurricular activities (Holland & Andre, 1987), and part-time employment (Steitz & Owen, 1992).

A number of theoretical perspectives have been developed to account for the period of change and confusion associated with adolescence.

Erikson (1963) proposed that adolescents who experience difficulty developing their self-identity will be faced with considerable confusion in deciding how to behave. Rosenberg (1965) suggested that confusion results when youths attempt to find a sense of identity in a society which offers them no established role. Others have theorized adolescence is a time when youths judge themselves primarily by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954) and through the attitudes of others toward them (Cooley, 1912; Mead, 1934).

In an attempt to explain the association

between adolescents' behavior and self-esteem, Rosenberg et al. examined two opposing theories: 1) the Self-Consistency Theory and 2) the Self-Esteem Theory. The Self-Consistency theory states that adolescents will continuously behave in accordance with their self-concept. For example, adolescents with lower self-concepts will be more likely to commit delinquent behaviors and perform worse in school than adolescents with higher self-concepts. On the other hand, according to the Self-Esteem theory, adolescents tend to choose behaviors that will increase their self-esteem. Thus, adolescents will choose involvement in pro-social or delinquent behavior depending upon their perception of which will result in greater approval from a given group. Each of these theories seems relevant to the adolescent struggle, as do a wide variety of other factors such as the child's relationship to, and contact with, their parents (Bednar, Wells, & Peterson, 1989; Clark & Barber, 1994). In order to better understand adolescents' behavior (i.e., delinquency, drug use, participation in curricular and extracurricular activities), the relationship between self-esteem and such factors must be examined.

Numerous studies (e.g., Gold & Mann,

1972; Kaplan, 1980; Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1978; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Conger, 1991) have examined the relationship between adolescent self-esteem and participation in delinquent behaviors. Deviant behavior is defined as acts that do not conform to the norms of society (Short & Strodbeck, 1965).

According to Rosenberg (1965), deviancy is common during adolescence because society does not provide youth with a firm normative structure. Several researchers (e.g., Gold & Mann, 1972) have hypothesized that many adolescents turn to delinquent groups instead of more accepted groups for support due to diminished self-esteem. Similarly, Kitano (1989) speculates that deviant behavior is the result of low self-esteem, not the cause.

Numerous studies have identified a small but statistically significant inverse relationship between self-esteem and delinquency. Researchers such as Rosenberg and colleagues (Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1978; Rosenberg et al., 1989) have sought to clarify the directionality of the relationship between these two variables by examining the extent to which self-esteem affects delinquency, and vice versa. For example, Rosenberg and colleagues (Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1978; Rosenberg et al., 1989) conducted several analyses on a set of data obtained through a panel study directed by Bachman (1974). The first phase of this project, performed in 1966, involved a sample of 2213 tenth-grade boys in 87 high schools. The second phase was conducted in 1968, with 1886 of the subjects from the first phase. Self-esteem and delinquency were measured at both phases. Rosenberg and Rosenberg's (1978) results suggested self-esteem had a more powerful effect on delinquency than delinquency had on self-esteem, particularly in the lower class. In a subsequent paper further clarifying the same data set, Rosenberg et al.'s (1989) results suggested low self-esteem may foster delinquency in higher socioeconomic (SES) adolescents more than it does in lower socioeconomic adolescents. However, the data also suggested delinquency is more effective in enhancing self-esteem of adolescents from lower SES families than from middle or higher SES families. Although these studies have yielded valuable information regarding the relationship between delinquency and self-esteem in adolescence, they are limited

by the fact that the subject sample did not include female adolescents.

Several empirical studies suggest self-esteem and participation in extra-curricular activities are positively correlated. Rosenberg and Rosenberg's (1978) theory of self-consistency may shed light on the question of why students with low self-esteem are less likely to participate in school activities. According to this theory, people will behave in a manner which is consistent with their personal judgments of themselves. Thus, students who feel that they cannot successfully interact with peers in school organizations, may avoid such situations and self-devaluing attitudes. This view is consistent with Mruk (1999), who states, "Individuals with high self-esteem appear to be more independent, self-directed, and autonomous than their counterparts" (p.87).

In a study of 1202 adolescents, Rosenberg (1965) reported that students with lower self-esteem spent less time participating in extracurricular activities than students with higher self-esteem. Fifty-two percent of students with low self-esteem participated in extracurricular activities one hour per week or less, compared to 36 percent of the students with high self-esteem. Although the results of a study by Steitz and Owen (1992) failed to find a significant relationship between participation in a wide range of school activities and self-esteem in 212 sophomore and 230 junior high school students, their data indicated that high involvement in athletics was associated with high self-esteem for both boys and girls.

Finally, studies have examined the extent to which part-time employment and self-esteem are related. Grinder (1963) suggested adolescents may engage in part-time employment in an effort to establish a role and a sense of identity and personal worth in society. Steitz and Owen (1992) studied 642 high school students and found that part-time employment was associated with lower self-esteem in females, but not in males. Greenberger and Steinberg (1986) suggested that work may reinforce a girl's sense of self, but not a boy's. They also reported that over 20 hours per week spent on part-time employment was associated with problems such as drug use, less involvement in school activities, lower achievement, and delinquent behaviors. Additionally, Steinberg and Dornbusch (1991) conducted a longitudinal study which found that

long work hours during the school year were associated with lowered school performance, increased psychological distress, somatic complaints, drug use, and delinquency. In summary, several studies in the literature have reported a negative association between part-time employment and self-esteem, particularly as the number of work hours increases. However, due to the correlational nature of these studies, it is not possible to draw cause and effect conclusions from these findings.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the extent to which self-esteem is correlated with participation in

1) delinquent behaviors, 2) extracurricular activities, and 3) part-time employment. The sample consisted of ninth and tenth grade students in four rural Appalachian high schools in Southwest Virginia. The study involved three major hypotheses. First, it was hypothesized that self-esteem would be negatively correlated with delinquent behaviors in both males and females, but that the relationship would be stronger for males. Second, it was hypothesized that adolescents with lower self-esteem would participate in fewer extracurricular activities than those with higher self-esteem. Finally, it was predicted that students involved in part-time employment would have lower self-esteem than would students who were not employed, and that this relationship would be stronger for girls than for boys.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred and fifty-seven ninth-grade ($n = 86$, 55%) and tenth-grade ($N = 71$, 45%) students from four Appalachian high schools in rural Southwest Virginia participated in this study. The sample consisted of 74 males (47%) and 83 females (53%), ranging in age from 14 to 17 ($M = 14.92$, $SD = .77$). Approximately ninety-eight percent ($N = 153$) of the students described themselves as Caucasian. The remaining participants described themselves as African American ($N = 2$), Hispanic ($N = 1$) or other ($N = 1$). Letters of consent were signed by both the students and their parents.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire This questionnaire assesses descriptive variables and social class. No reliability or validity data are available for this measure.

Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) The RSE is a widely used 10-item measure of self-esteem. Each item is scored with a 4-point likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Test-retest reliability is .80 to .95 (Steitz & Owen, 1992).

Coopersmith (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) The SEI is a widely-used, 58-item measure of evaluative attitudes toward the self in social, academic, family, and personal areas of experience. Test-retest reliability for a five week interval was .88 (Coopersmith, 1967).

Delinquency Questionnaire This is a 15-item questionnaire assessing a variety of delinquent behaviors such as running away, aggressive behavior, stealing, and using illegal substances and/or weapons. Thirteen of the items were drawn from Gold and Mann's (1972) list of delinquent behaviors. The items are scored on a scale of (1) never done, (2) just once in the past three years, and (3) more than once in the past three years. No reliability or validity data concerning this questionnaire are available.

Extracurricular Activities Check List This is a 10-item list of activities measuring participation in extracurricular activities such as athletics, band, church groups, and part-time employment. This questionnaire was designed for the present study and no reliability or validity data are available.

Procedure

The Directors of Instruction on the Board of Trustees for four schools in two counties in rural South West Virginia reviewed a full proposal of the study and granted permission to collect data in the 9th- and 10th-grades of their school districts. Individual teachers selected the date and time for data collection in their respective classes. During a ten minute informational meeting, students were given an explanation of the study and its purpose. Parental consent forms were distributed. Students were informed that in order to participate in the study, signed parental consent forms needed to be returned to the teacher within one week. The parental consent form explained the purpose and

procedures of the study. It also listed the name and telephone number of the researchers, whom parents could call if they had any questions concerning the study. Only one parent called for additional information.

The data collection session occurred one week later and lasted thirty minutes. Students who returned their parental consent forms were given a subject's consent form. It was read aloud by the experimenter and then students were given the opportunity to ask questions. Students were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary. After signing their consent form, participating students were given a packet containing five questionnaires. The directions for each questionnaire were read aloud. In order to assure confidentiality, students were instructed not to put their names on the questionnaires. Students who did not participate either sat quietly or were given work to do from their teacher. Once the questionnaires were completed, debriefing forms were distributed. As an incentive to increase participation in this study, all participants were placed in a drawing to receive one of four fifteen dollar gift certificates from a local music store.

RESULTS

Self-Esteem

In order to maintain consistency among measures of self-esteem, the scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were transformed for all analyses so that higher scores indicated higher levels of self-esteem. A significant positive correlation was obtained between the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory ($r = .8147, p < .05, N = 114$).

Delinquency

The overall correlation between delinquent behavior and self-esteem was significant for both the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($r = -.3371, p < .05, N = 148$) and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory ($r = -.4122, p < .05, N = 114$). This indicates that higher levels of self-esteem were associated with lower levels of delinquency. This finding was consistent for both male subjects (Rosenberg $r = -.3523, p < .05, N = 67$; Coopersmith $r = -.3821, p < .05, N = 48$) and female subjects (Rosenberg

$r = -.4724, p < .05, N = 81$; Coopersmith $r = -.5442, p < .05, N = 66$). A test of the difference between the correlations for men versus women using the Fisher Z test was not significant for either measure of self-esteem.

Extracurricular activities

The Activities Checklist was significantly correlated with both the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($r = .1944, p < .05, N = 152$) and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory ($r = .2418, p < .05, N = 114$). This suggested that students with lower levels of self-esteem participated in fewer extracurricular activities than students with higher levels of self-esteem. However, this finding was significant for male subjects only.

Work Hours

A t-test revealed no significant difference ($p > .05$) in level of self-esteem between subjects who had part-time employment ($N = 29$) and subjects who did not ($N = 123$). Further analyses revealed that of those subjects who did have part-time employment ($N = 29$), level of self-esteem and number of hours worked per week were significantly correlated ($p < .05$). However, the direction of the relationship was different for male and female subjects. The number of hours worked per week and self-esteem were positively correlated in males (Rosenberg $r = .6052, p < .05, N = 17$; Coopersmith $r = .6651, p < .05, N = 10$) and negatively correlated in females (Rosenberg $r = -.8822, p < .05, N = 12$; Coopersmith $r = -.7895, p < .05, N = 10$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study involving students from rural Southwest Virginia schools were generally consistent with previous literature investigating the relationship between adolescent self-esteem, delinquency, participation in extracurricular activities, and employment. As predicted in hypothesis 1 and consistent with the findings of past research, low levels of self-esteem were correlated with high levels of delinquent behavior for both males and females. Contrary to our prediction, however, the negative relationship between self-esteem and participation in delinquent behaviors was not significantly stronger for male subjects than for female subjects. According to the Self-Esteem Theory (cited in Rosenberg et al., 1989), the

inverse relationship between self-esteem and delinquency could be explained as an adolescent's attempt to increase his or her self-esteem through delinquent involvement. According to the Self-Consistency theory, on the other hand, the adolescents may have engaged in delinquent behaviors in an effort to remain consistent with their low self-esteem. Given the correlational nature of the present study, however, it is not possible to determine whether low self-esteem precedes delinquent behavior or vice versa.

Consistent with hypothesis 2 and with past research (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965), the results of this study suggest that level of self-esteem is positively correlated with level of participation in extracurricular activities. This finding is consistent with the Self-Consistency theory, which suggests that adolescents with low self-esteem may participate in few extracurricular activities because they believe they will be unsuccessful. It is unclear however, why this relationship was significant for boys only. This may be due in part to the finding that women's self-esteem seems to depend more on acceptance versus rejection, while males tend to construe their self-esteem based on success versus failure (Mruk, 1999).

Finally, no significant differences in self-esteem emerged between students who had part-time employment and students who did not. However, of the 29 students who did have part-time employment, the number of hours worked per week was significantly correlated with level of self-esteem. These findings are consistent with past research (Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991) indicating that adolescents who work more hours per week have lower self-esteem than adolescents who work fewer hours per week. However, the relationship between part-time employment and self-esteem was more complex than predicted in hypothesis 3. Consistent with the finding of Steitz and Owen (1992), the present study found a significant negative correlation between number of hours worked by females and their level of self-esteem. For boys however, a significant positive correlation between number of hours worked and level of self-esteem was revealed. This finding with rural adolescents was inconsistent with Steitz and Owen's (1992) study which failed to find a significant correlation between these factors for urban males. Although

it is not immediately clear why part-time employment would yield positive effects on male self-esteem and negative effects on female self-esteem, it is possible that rural adolescent boys are judged by peers based upon material belongings whereas female adolescents may be judged based on social interactions.

The results of this study have several important implications. First, the results suggest that commonly observed gender differences in rates of delinquent behavior may not generalize to rural high school students in the ninth and tenth grades. Second, the results indicating that part-time employment affects males and females differently suggest that factors regarding adolescent employment may be more complex than previously reported. Finally, the findings of the present study are consistent with both the Self-Esteem Theory and the Self-Consistency Theory.

Several aspects of this study limit the generalizability of the conclusions that can be drawn. First, the majority of students in the sample were Caucasian from rural Southwest Virginia and it is unclear whether adolescents from other ethnic or geographic backgrounds would respond in a similar manner. Second, the study investigated only 9th- and 10th-grade students who do not represent the major working population among students. Future studies including 11th- and 12th-grade students are needed to further investigate the association between gender, self-esteem, and part-time employment. Third, additional questionnaires with better established psychometric properties are needed to examine adolescent delinquency, extracurricular activities, and part-time employment. Fourth, future studies should include clinician-, parent-, or teacher-rated measures in addition to self-report data. Finally, given that an individual's level of self-esteem may change throughout adolescence (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973), longitudinal research is needed to examine the relationship between self-esteem and behavior across time and gender.

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