

4. Peer influence on positive development in emerging adulthood

Aim: To examine the extent to which young adults select and influence each other in positive outcomes.

Theoretical background:

Most young adults have the talent to catalyze positive change. They are willing to take risks for a good cause and helped by a growth in skills to handle complex tasks. Positive risk-taking (e.g., asking someone on a date, traveling someplace new, standing up for what you believe is right) creates opportunities for young adults to develop a sense of purpose and identity. Young people who take positive risks are influenced by peers who take similar positive risks. Peers serve also as a positive influence on other aspects of positive adjustments (O'Connor et al., 2011), such as positive attitudes (e.g., trust, tolerance) and positive engagement (e.g., civic action, volunteering, and pro-environmental behaviors).

This project examines which peer influence processes (i.e., contagion, coercive peer pressure, reward peer pressure, imitation) are most effective in the adoption of positive risk-taking, attitudes, and engagement (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2022). Some peer influence takes the form of contagion, with behaviors spreading from those with relatively higher levels of behavior to those with relatively lower levels. Peer influence also comes in the form of peer pressure—active attempts to change another's behavior. Coercive peer pressure may take the form of teasing, taunting, threats, or physical abuse, whereas reward peer pressure may appear as praise, encouragement, and tangible inducements. People also imitate behaviors modeled by affiliates, particularly if they are socially rewarded. Thus, this project aims to examine the mechanisms underlying selection and influence related to positive outcomes among young adults. The insights generated by this project will not only advance theory but will also be essential in optimizing the potential of peer-led interventions to generate positive behavioral and attitudinal changes in young people.

Research Design:

This project is part of GUTS, an NWO Gravitation project: growinguptogetherinsociety.com. In a team with other GUTS researchers (based in Leiden and Amsterdam), prospective longitudinal network data, survey data, and neuroimaging data will be collected among young adults (e.g., a cohort of students at an applied university). The longitudinal network data will be the basis for the dissertation. Disentangling selection from influence requires stochastic actor-oriented modeling, implemented in SIENA, a program that models changes in the peer network (selection: similar individuals choosing each other to hang out with) and behavior (influence: connected individuals becoming increasingly similar) between time points. The first paper will be based on other data (e.g., the Swiss Student Life Survey).

Literature:

- Veenstra, R., & Laninga-Wijnen, L. (2022). Peer network studies and interventions in adolescence. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 44, 157-163.
- O'Connor, M. et al. (2011). Predictors of positive development in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40, 860-874.

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