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Being in “Bad” Company: Power Dependence and Status in Adolescent Susceptibility to Peer Influence

Robert Vargas

Abstract

Theories of susceptibility to peer influence have centered on the idea that lower status adolescents are likely to adopt the behaviors of high status adolescents. While status is important, social exchange theorists have shown the value of analyzing exchange relations between actors to understand differences in power. To build on status-based theories of peer influence, this study analyzes power dependence relations in three adolescent friendship groups. Analyzing adolescent interaction as social exchange showed how being in a group with balanced power relations insulated adolescents from peer influence, even when some peers were delinquent or low academic achievers. In contrast, adolescents in groups with unbalanced power relations were particularly susceptible to peer influence. This study presents an additional way to analyze the peer influence process and illustrates the importance of applying social psychological theory to cases of micro inequality, particularly in the context of small groups.

Keywords
peer effects, power dependence, small groups, youth

One of the most consistent findings in social science has been the correlation between the behaviors of adolescents and their peers. Classic research such as Asch’s (1951) laboratory studies of conformity and Coleman’s (1966) research on school composition sparked a vast literature on adolescent peer effects. While this literature established the importance of peers for adolescent socialization, less is known about the peer influence process. Although scholars have identified factors rendering adolescents susceptible to the influence of peers, explanations for what makes adolescents more or less susceptible almost exclusively rely on status differences between adolescents. By status, I am referring to one’s standing in a social hierarchy as determined by respect or deference (Ridgeway and Walker 1995). Scholars have argued that

1Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Robert Vargas, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, 1810 Chicago Ave, Evanston, IL 60208
Email: rvargas7@u.northwestern.edu
emulation of peer behavior is highly dependent upon an adolescent's standing in the social hierarchy of his or her peers, with lower status individuals more likely to adopt the behaviors of higher status individuals (Cohen and Prinstein 2006; Gerrard et al. 2008).

While status-based approaches have yielded important insights, research has shown that adolescent groups can be diverse and may not map easily into groups with easily distinguishable status hierarchies. Adolescent friendship groups can be comprised of a mix of high/low academic achieving, high/low socially skilled, and delinquent/nondelinquent youth. Research by Haynie (2001) emphasized the importance of accounting for this diversity in peer groups as 61 percent of adolescents report friendships with delinquent peers. These complications illustrate the need for additional perspectives on peer effect susceptibility that can account for being in diverse friendship groups.

In this article, I build on the literature on susceptibility to peer effects through an ethnographic analysis of power dependence relations in three adolescent friendship groups. While status-based approaches focus on the characteristics of individuals, a power dependence approach focuses on characteristics of social relations between individuals. In this study, I use power dependence theory to analyze adolescent peer interaction as social exchange, focusing on how adolescents were dependent upon one another for valued resources.

In short, power dependence theory refers to the idea that actors are dependent upon one another for valued resources and that power resides within relations of dependence, not the characteristics of individuals (Emerson 1962). Instead of analyzing higher or lower status individuals, the unit of analysis was characteristics of social relations between adolescents, paying great attention to whether group members had exclusive access to a resource important to other group members and whether group members were engaged in social exchange. Data showed that adolescents in groups with balanced power relations were less susceptible to peer effect mechanisms than adolescents in groups with unbalanced power relations.

Adolescents in groups with balanced power relations were insulated from peer pressure to use drugs or change educational behaviors largely because of the shared power among group members. In contrast, the group with unbalanced power relations had members that were powerless, or completely dependent upon the group for a valued resource. In this particular group, two adolescents were dependent upon the group for having friends because neighborhood violence greatly constrained their friendship choices. Instead of staying at home alone, these adolescents chose to spend time with the only group of non–gang affiliated friends near home and, as a result, participated in the activities of the group that consisted largely of drug use. This study suggests that power dependence relations and factors constraining access to alternative friends are important for understanding susceptibility to peer effects.

This study also illustrates the usefulness of social psychological theory for the study of micro-level inequalities. Specifically, power dependence theory can be a useful framework for studying the peer effects process, as it revealed that adolescents’ place in the power structure of their friendship group alters susceptibility to different peer effect mechanisms. In the study of adolescent problem behavior, social psychological theory can be a useful tool to complement and complicate cultural explanations that emphasize the importance of distinct class-based or oppositional cultures (Fordham and Ogbu
While the subcultural perspective has been useful, it leaves little room for understanding adolescent behavior in diverse groups that do not have distinct class or oppositional group cultures (although for an exception, see Harding 2010). I hope to illustrate the usefulness of social exchange and power dependence theory in social psychology for understanding complex forms of micro inequality at the small group level.

To begin, I review the general literature on peer effects, paying great attention to theories of the peer effects process and peer effects mechanisms. I then describe my theoretical perspective in understanding susceptibility to peer effects and conclude by urging policymakers to consider interventions aimed at targeting not just the norms and values of adolescents, but also wider social problems that may leave adolescents in compromised positions of power among peers.

**ADOLESCENT PEER EFFECTS AND MECHANISMS**

Research shows that young people become increasingly involved with their peers as they age (Brown and Theobald 1999; Savin-Williams and Berndt 1990), such that they are seen as an important socialization context alongside families, schools, and neighborhoods (Blumenfeld 1992; Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele 1998; Kindermann 1993). While some researchers have cautioned against using descriptive studies as evidence of peer effects because of selection bias, or the notion that adolescents self-select into peer groups (Cohen 1977; Kandel 1978; Newcomb, Huba, and Bentler 1986), psychologists have shown strong causal evidence for peer effects through random assignment in youth intervention programs, showing the effect of deviant peers on mental health (Dodge and Sherrill 2006), and juvenile justice (Lipsey 2006). While sociological studies have been unable to disentangle selection from socialization, the association of peers and adolescent outcomes has been established in a number of domains: having delinquent friends increases individual offending (Aseltine 1995; Haynie 2001; Matsueda and Anderson 1998); having friends who smoke or drink increases one’s cigarette smoking and alcohol use (Urberg, Degirmencioğlu, and Pilgrim 1997); and having friends with poorer mental health leads to more individual depression (Prinstein 2007; Sameroff and Peck 1998).

While the literature has shown the importance of peers, studies rarely identify the mechanisms behind their effects. By mechanisms, I refer to modes of influence, or ways by which peer influence is likely to manifest during interactions. In their recent review, Brown et al. (2008) identified four peer effect mechanisms. The first was *peer pressure*, defined as direct attempts to affect certain attitudes or behaviors in another person or group. The second was *behavioral display* (or modeling), which occurred when someone displayed an attitude or behaved in a way desired by other people (Dunphy 1963; Zine 2001). Third was *antagonistic behavior*, teasing or ridicule that maintained group status hierarchies (Adler and Adler 1995; Eder and Nenga 2003; Fine 1987). The fourth mechanism was *structuring opportunities*, or instances where an adolescent was invited to a situation that facilitated a behavior without imposing it (Brown et al. 2008). For example, when a peer invites a teen to a party, he or she may be more likely to experiment with drugs or alcohol.

These four mechanisms were not a complete list, but rather an overview of the mechanisms analyzed in this study. Next, I turn to the central concern of this
article, theories of adolescent susceptibility to peer effects.

**Status and Models of Susceptibility**

Most theoretical models of susceptibility to peer effects focus on status differences between adolescents. For example, the prototype willingness model (Gibbons et al. 2008) argued that adolescent susceptibility was based on rewards associated with emulating peer behavior, suggesting that motivations to engage in risky behavior were high when they were associated with higher status or popular groups (Gerrard et al. 2002; Gibbons and Gerrard 1997). In addition, the deviancy regulation model argued that desire for positive self-image dictated decisions to conform, especially when the reference group was perceived as higher status (Blanton, Stuart, and Van den Eijnden 2001).

To include factors beyond status differences, I utilize Brown et al.’s (2008) conceptual model for two reasons. First, it is the most comprehensive because it includes multiple factors influencing susceptibility. Second, it views peer influence as dependent on contextual and individual factors, which allows room for analysis of how status or group power structure changes as adolescents interact across multiple settings. Brown et al.’s (2008) conceptual model (Figure 1) breaks down susceptibility into three major factors: (1) openness to influence, (2) the status of those exerting influence, and (3) relationship dynamics. Studies have paid most attention to status differences between adolescents as a key factor, with very little attention to relationship dynamics.

Literature on openness to influence has focused on differences in relation to status characteristics such as age (Warr 1993, 2002) and gender (Thornberry and Krohn 1997), as well as on family structure or attributes of parents (Berndt 1979; Brown, Clasen, and Eicher 1986; Brown et al. 1993; Mounts and Steinberg 1995; Steinberg 1987). Status has also been at the forefront of susceptibility studies looking at relationship dynamics.
Ethnographies of adolescent groups have shown patterns of influence in groups with clear status hierarchies (Adler and Adler 1995; Dimitriadis 2003; MacLeod 1995). Others have studied the strength of relationships between adolescents, showing that adolescents may be more easily persuaded to smoke (Lightfoot 1997) or enroll in math courses (Frank et al. 2008) by weak as opposed to strong ties.

In summary, approaches to adolescent susceptibility to peer effects focus on status differences. In this article, I argue that peer influence is also based on the power structure of adolescent friendship groups. In addition to having high status, adolescents in groups with unequal power structures wielded power over members by having exclusive access to resources important to the group. Analyzing power structures in adolescent friendship groups can help create a clearer understanding regarding when higher or lower status is likely to make adolescents more or less susceptible to particular peer effect mechanisms.

Overlooking group power structures may blind researchers from additional factors. Within a status framework, protecting one’s self from peer influence appears limited to attaining higher status within the group or changing the values of the group such that particular behaviors (e.g., smoking or drug use) are no longer seen as higher status. An important and unanswered question in this framework is: why does the lower status adolescent not leave the group or seek alternative friendship groups? If one is in a lower status position, why not leave that position and join a group in which you can be higher status? Homans (1961) pointed to this question in his earlier formulations of social exchange theory, and Emerson (1972a, 1972b) subsequently developed the notion of power dependence. In the following section, I discuss my theoretical perspective.

**A POWER DEPENDENCE APPROACH**

This study contributes to the peer effects process literature by utilizing power dependence theory from social psychology to analyze the interactions of three adolescent friendship groups. From a micro-sociological perspective, the peer influence process is a case of micro-level inequality, with Adolescent A having direct or indirect power over Adolescent B. Research on susceptibility to peer effects has focused on status inequality between adolescents as an important factor in the peer influence process. Incorporating power dependence into our understanding of micro inequality between adolescents would present an additional perspective illuminating additional factors (e.g., constraints on adolescent friendship choices) to take into consideration when designing interventions.

Generally, Emerson’s (1972a, 1972b) theory argued that actors were dependent on one another for valued resources, were motivated to obtain more of the resources valued and controlled by others, and engaged in recurring exchanges in which benefits were contingent on benefits provided. For Emerson (1962:32), “power is a property of the social relation; [and] not an attribute of the actor.” Thus, I do not analyze individual characteristics, but rather the social relations between specific group members, such that the unit of analysis is the social relation between individual members within three groups.

Through a combination of ethnographic observation and follow-up interviews with group members, I consider power dependence in the social relations of group members by focusing on whether or not a group member had exclusive access to a resource important to other group members. This strategy helped identify characteristics of power dependence relations between adolescents, specifically whether or not power
relations were balanced or unbalanced. In two of the three groups in this study, adolescents were engaged in reciprocal exchange, which helped insulate them from the influence of their peers as each member had equal power within the group.

In contrast, imbalanced power relations meant relations where one adolescent is more dependent on another than vice versa for a valued resource. According to Emerson (1962), the actor in the disadvantaged position has numerous strategies to balance the unequal power relationship. These included reducing their own motivational investment in the relationship, seeking alternative partners, increasing their exchange partner’s motivational investment in the relationship, or withdrawing from the relationship altogether. In this study, access to alternative friends for the disadvantaged adolescent was particularly important for understanding peer influence.

To analyze status, I focused on ascribed status characteristics of group members such as gender, educational achievement, and age. I also focused on status systems emerging from social contexts, such as ability to perform particular tasks. As Emerson (1962) stressed, power relations change as contexts change; thus, paying attention to both status and power dependence relations helped describe peer influence processes in each friendship group.

At this point, it is important to clarify that I apply power dependence theory differently than ways used in the social psychological literature. While I follow social exchange theory’s foundation that power is a structurally determined phenomena resulting in differential exchange outcomes (Thye 2000), social exchange researchers typically conduct laboratory experiments with social networks as the object of analysis (Cook and Rice 2006), not ethnographic observations of friendship groups. In ongoing relationships within groups, it is difficult to discern whether scope conditions of power dependence theory are met. Nonetheless, the theory provides a useful framework for understanding cases of micro-level inequality in other subfields of sociology, especially those involving small groups.

Although social psychological theories such as social exchange are often limited to the scope of particular situations or task-oriented groups, insight from these theories should be applied to adolescent friendship groups, as the dynamic task and non-task orientations of such groups pose an interesting challenge to social psychologists. While adolescent friendship groups may not be exclusively task oriented, as illustrated by the work of Adler and Adler (1995), they are sites where status hierarchies and power dependence relations intersect. Recent research on the intersection of status characteristics theory and social exchange theories (Thye 2000; Thye, Willer, and Markovsky 2006) shows the benefits of applying theories slightly outside of their scope.

METHOD

Data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of three friendship groups in “Puebla,” a Chicago neighborhood. Participants were second-generation Mexican American adolescents. Initial observations occurred at a local community organization youth group and subsequently included additional sites as I became acquainted with the adolescents. As a volunteer in the youth group, I befriended these adolescents by chaperoning field trips, teaching a mini sociology course, and frequently attending youth group meetings. Soon after joining the youth group, cliques became noticeable, and after gaining the trust of key informants in each group, I accessed the social circles of these adolescents.
Field sites ranged from the community organization and local gym to back alleys, vacant lots, and abandoned bridges where group members spent their leisure time. The fieldwork is based on a year’s worth of observations (approximately 250 hours in total). Months after the initial observations, interviews took place to ask group members specific questions about field observations: in total, I interviewed 23 adolescents, including each adolescent in the three friendship groups, with some members interviewed two or three times. My ethnic background and close proximity to the age of my participants helped in accessing these social circles. Gender, however, was a barrier in accessing female friendship groups; males were more open and easy to observe than the all-female adolescent groups I encountered in Puebla. As a result, these findings may be limited to male and mixed gender adolescent groups and not to groups of females or dyadic relations (romantic ties or best friends). In addition, the specific findings from this study, particularly those in relation to neighborhood violence, should be carefully generalized. As Stolte, Fine, and Cook (2001) argue, microsociologists aim at generalizing to situations, not populations. Thus, findings from this study suggest that researchers and policymakers should focus on situations placing adolescents in disadvantaged positions of power (be it as a result of neighborhood violence, within romantic relationships, or as a result of pledging in sororities or fraternities).

I define a friendship group as three or more adolescents who voluntarily spent time with one another both within and outside school and work, or groups that hung out to have fun. Most quantitative studies rely on adolescent self-reports to measure friendship groups, which raise validity issues as friendship can mean different things to different adolescents. The qualitative nature of this project allowed me to base my identification of friendship groups on observation, allowing me to confirm identification of a group with all members and specifically pay attention to whom group leaders invited when planning group activities. The three friendship groups in this study are described in tables in the Appendix.

To measure power dependence, I paid close attention to exchange relationships between group members, particularly who made suggestions, led, and received compliance from group members, as well as whether favors or gifts between members were reciprocated. By observing group relations in the field, my data provide an alternative means to view status and power dynamics than those typical of laboratory studies. As adolescents in this study ranged from 16 to 18 (juniors and seniors in high school), they may have been less susceptible to peer effects because of their older stage in adolescence (Giordano 2003).

Finally, it is important to mention the role of parents in the study. With the exception of Ron and Al in the 12th Street Group, most parents had a hands-off approach to monitoring their kids. In interviews with parents, very few knew their child’s close friends; largely because these parents worked multiple jobs and long hours to support the family. The few girls in the study were free to participate in social outings near their homes and would often sneak out of the house to accompany their friends to parties. On the other hand, boys were often allowed to come in and out of the home as they pleased. The results of this study were not meant to contest the importance of parenting, but rather highlight mechanisms, in addition to parenting, that may explain variation in peer effect susceptibility.

THE 12TH STREET GROUP

The 12th Street Group consisted of Ron, Sergio, and Al, boys who were similar on
most status characteristics (gender, race, age) but different in educational achievement and social skills (see Appendix, Table 1). Ron and Al were both honor roll students at a private high school outside Puebla while Sergio failed a grade in elementary school and struggled to avoid dropping out. One might suspect that the high achievers would affect the behavior (and perhaps school performance) of the low achiever, or vice versa. Observations, however, revealed no peer influence for educational behaviors. In the 12th Street Group, this can be attributed to balanced power relations, as each member had access to a resource valuable to group members and engaged in exchange.

This was first noticeable at the local youth center, where the group task was publishing a monthly newsletter and where status was based on academic skills. This was evident when adolescents edited each other’s articles.

As Rosa read Sergio’s article, she exclaimed in front of the group “No! You spelled this wrong . . . you need to elaborate on this, you didn’t put the organization’s name, or where this took place.” Sergio responded “yeah yeah.” Rosa continued, “You capitalize LIF because it’s an acronym.” Sergio disputed her claim. Rosa continued correcting Sergio “it’s spelled ‘start,’ not “starf,”” the group laughed, Rosa responded, “Oh my god you guys really are dumb.” Sergio responded “what!” Rosa turned to the youth group coordinator, and asked if it was ok for Sergio to rewrite his entire article.

In the youth center, status was based on writing, reading, and speaking (or academic) skills. The division of labor at the youth center revealed that Ron and Al were high status in this context. The youth group coordinator’s assignment of tasks to particular adolescents made clear who was trusted with the more prestigious and complicated tasks.

On a busy summer day a group of documentary filmmakers came to visit the group, asking to interview some youth. With a large number of office duties to complete, the coordinator had to choose carefully whom to assign to which task. As the coordinator went around the table, Sergio was assigned to make copies, others were assigned to draw posters, while Ron and Al were assigned to go with the documentary film crew for the interview.

As Ron and Al performed well in both school and the youth group, expectations formed within the group, with Ron and Al having higher status in relation to educational performance. Conversely, Sergio was lower status, as Ron and Al joined others in ridiculing Sergio. Ridicule in this context exemplified the antagonistic behaviors peer effect mechanism (Brown et al. 2008), where playful teasing maintained the group hierarchy. While Sergio’s role within the group’s status hierarchy is maintained through this mechanism, he made no effort to emulate the educational behaviors of others, nor did he leave the group. In fact, he resisted peer pressure to change his attitude toward schooling. During an introduction to sociology session, I asked the group how they felt about their prospects for college. While a number of youth discussed high aspirations, Sergio responded in front of the group of 10 youth and myself:

“It’s not like I wake up and say I’m a day closer to my success. I just let life live itself, and luckily I know when to do something good or bad. Honestly, I can’t tell you that I’m going to come out good, but the odds are I’ll end up living in the community
or somewhere else, but not like in a good situation.” Ron responded, “Don’t talk like that man.”

This exemplified one of many efforts by Ron and Al to change Sergio’s attitude toward schooling, which ranged from inviting Sergio to study groups and offering to help with homework. Despite these efforts, Sergio’s behaviors and attitudes toward school did not change. This scenario illustrated the limitations of Cohen and Prinstein’s (2006) finding that lower status group members were likely to accede to the opinions of higher status peers. Shadowing the group in contexts outside the youth group revealed (1) how Sergio eluded this pressure and (2) why Sergio did not opt out of the group.

Conversing in Al’s backyard, Ron described how Sergio was the “ladies man” of the group. As they all looked up profiles of girls on a social Web site, Ron and Al praised Sergio while browsing profiles of girls he dated. At times, Ron and Al teased Sergio by calling him a “man-whore,” but these interactions brought about resistance from Sergio, who ridiculed Ron and Al for their lack of “success” with girls. This contrasted Sergio’s acceptance of ridicule at the youth group. Sergio’s higher social skills placed him in the role of broker between Ron, Al, and the girls they courted.

While on break from a youth group meeting, the group walked to a corner grocery store to buy a drink. Upon entering the grocery store, Ron’s eyes were immediately focused on the young girl behind the cash register. After calling us over, Ron said to the group, “check out those tig ol bitties” [telling the group to focus on the young girl’s breasts]. Ron urged Sergio to flirt with the girl and introduce him to her.

This interaction illustrated Ron’s dependence on Sergio for romantic relationships. While Ron and Al’s higher status granted them privileges at the youth group, it served no use in contexts where the group interacted with girls. These observations illustrated the balanced power relations within the group, as each member had an important resource valued by the group. Another example occurred when the 12th Street Group played basketball.

Only four other people were in the gym so we played a four on four full court game. Al, Sergio, Ron, and I played against four others. Prior to the game, Sergio and Al observed our opposing team warming up and evaluated their talent based on how they shot the ball. When the game started, Sergio directed Ron to guard the least talented player on the opposing team, and Ron obliged. During the game, Ron declined numerous scoring opportunities, passing to Sergio or Al. When Ron was open for a scoring opportunity, Sergio would refrain from passing him the ball. Ron made no complaints about our style of play.

Ron’s deference to Al and Sergio illustrated another status hierarchy within the group. By passing up opportunities and listening to the commands of Sergio, Ron deferred to higher status members in this specific context. Unlike the youth group context where Sergio was lower status, the hierarchy was reversed, with Sergio being higher status and Ron being lower status. In the following section, I discuss how these social relations had implications for susceptibility to peer effects.

Peer Pressure and Educational Behaviors in the 12th Street Group

Interviews showed how balanced power relations insulated group members from
adopting each other’s academic behaviors. Ron spoke of his frustration with Sergio’s school performance:

Ron: I know Sergio is smart, he’s just lazy . . . we were just talking about it the other day, it was me, Sergio and Al. I know I can get into most of the colleges I want, but with Sergio, he’s not on the same level as me. His GPA is not as high, and I was worried because I know he’s not going to get accepted to the same colleges as I get accepted to.

Robert: Do you try to encourage him to do better?
Ron: Yeah, I get on his case all the time, but nothing ever seems to come out of it.

When Ron mentioned “getting on Sergio’s case,” he meant teasing Sergio for his academic shortcomings. Sergio explained why he put up with Ron’s ridicule, explaining “it doesn’t bother me, he’ll say I’m slow, but I’m like, whatever man.” When asked about why he accepted teasing from Ron and Al, Sergio responded:

Because it’s funny, we sit around a lot and get bored, so we just say stupid shit ’cause we ain’t got nothing else to do. If it weren’t for these guys, I’d probably be in a gang or something.

As Puebla was plagued by gang violence, finding safe places was difficult for adolescents. Being in the 12th Street Group granted Sergio the ability to socialize and spend leisure time in a safer environment; thus, power relations between group members were balanced. Sergio depended on the group to provide social opportunities that did not involve deviant activities. Conversely, Ron and Al depended on Sergio for romantic relationships and a competitive advantage while playing basketball at the local gym.

Summary

The 12th Street Group showed that balanced power relations were important insulators from peer pressure and behavioral display mechanisms. Throughout data collection, I did not observe a member conforming to direct peer pressure of others to change academic behaviors. Members did not emulate each other’s academic aspirations or behavior toward girls. Group members were insulated from each other’s influence because of their balanced power relations, exemplified by each member having a resource important to group members and the reciprocated exchange between group members.

For power dependence relations to insulate adolescents, the group must engage in interactions across multiple contexts that do not reinforce the same status hierarchy. For example, had the group only interacted in settings where academic skills were highly valued, Sergio would have no power in the group because he would not be able to help Ron and Al with courting girls. This suggested that while status characteristics may form the basis of power and influence in a specific context (e.g., in basketball), the exercise of power in an adolescent friendship group depended on whether status was similar across all contexts of interaction.

THE BELL PARK GROUP

The Bell Park Group revealed that power dependence relations and higher status insulated adolescents from different peer effect mechanisms. This group was mixed on the basis of gender, class, educational achievement, and risk-taking activities (see Appendix, Table 2). Some were at the top of their high school class with parents who had college degrees from Mexico; others were below average students from working families. Brought together by geography (living near Bell
Park), the group served a social function. Antonio described the group’s formation:

Antonio: It was just whoever we hung out with, when we started hanging out with new people, and if we liked them, he kept hanging out with us. Robert: What do you think you guys liked about new members? Antonio: I don’t know . . . they are just like us . . . like Ben . . . he’s just like me and everybody else . . . it’s just . . . you have to know what you’re doing. Like the one thing about it is that everybody has their own mindset. Like if everything goes as planned, everyone will be fine. Basically you feel comfortable with them, we’ve actually kicked people out of the group, well not actually kicked them out, but not called them. We’re the kids that party but still maintain their grades.

Antonio’s comments showed how a mix of similar senses of humor and achievement orientations brought the group together. Group interactions took place at school, the youth group, abandoned railroad tracks, and house parties. Tomas was a low-achieving student (2.3 GPA) whom group members described as the leader. Most attributed Tomas’s leadership to his outspoken personality, often displayed when the group planned and organized activities. The following example illustrated Tomas’s status as leader of the group:

Every time we go out, they’re like “Tomas, what are we doing? How are we getting there?” That’s always me. Lately I haven’t done anything because . . . because they were like, this movie sucks, well I’m like, you know what, fuck you guys. If you want to go, you decide. I’m tagging along.

One evening, Tomas refrained from his role as event planner and allowed the group to decide. In the absence of Tomas’s leadership, the group became disorganized. One member would offer an idea only to be rejected by others, resulting in the group driving around all night and doing nothing else. In the context of planning activities, the group was dependent on Tomas.

Despite his power in the group, Tomas (a low-achieving student) did not pressure group members to conform to his academic indifference; in fact, the opposite occurred. As the group sat at their lunch table, the following conversation ensued.

Tomas and Yesenia (the member with the highest GPA) were conversing about their future plans in front of the group. Yesenia got on Tomas’s case, “Dude, you should go to college, you’re smart.” Tomas responded, “Nah, I don’t want to put up with all the bullshit, I don’t want to leave the city.” Yesenia replied, “I’ve been in Puebla all my life, I want to get out.” Tomas asked “Are you ready to go to a big school?” Yesenia replied “I don’t know, but that doesn’t matter, you should be staying after school with us [to get extra math homework in preparation for college].”

At school, Yesenia had higher status, as she was one of the group’s high achievers. Her status, however, did little to influence Tomas’s behavior or attitudes toward schooling. When I began shadowing the group, Tomas’s GPA had been 2.9, and one semester after taking a full-time job, his GPA dropped to 2.3. Tomas’s parents (both working-class immigrants) respected his aspirations, whether that was to work or stay in school, but his peers did not share the sentiment. The group pressured Tomas to work fewer hours or quit his job altogether, yet Tomas refrained from doing so. Despite failing to conform to the group, Tomas was not isolated or excluded. Power dependence relations
within the group helped explain why this was the case.

Not only was the group dependent on Tomas for leadership, but also for fulfilling a graduation requirement, as graduation from Chicago Public Schools required performing 40 hours of community service. Group members attended the local youth group to fulfill their hours. Through his past involvement with the youth group, Tomas occupied a leadership position that left him responsible for recording student service hours. As the group depended on Tomas for leadership and documenting their service hours, they accepted his academic behaviors. Like Sergio in the 12th Street Group, Tomas illustrated how power dependence can insulate youth from peer pressure or behavioral display when the group was involved in multiple tasks.

Low-status Member: Antonio

While Yesenia received high status for her academic achievement, Antonio, the lone male high achiever in the group, did not; in fact, Antonio was lower status across all contexts of interaction. Regardless of group activities or context, Antonio was the target of jokes and ridicule.

Tomas: Antonio is seen as a little . . . how do you say it . . . feminine. We’ve had times where he’s like, why does that have to be gay or what’s not cool about sushi? [laughing] We always make fun of him. The kid says the dumbest things. We’ll argue about something and he’ll know it’s wrong, and there’s evidence proving he’s wrong, but he tries to force his opinion on everyone. We always make fun of him for that.

Yesenia confirmed Tomas’s observations, “Antonio can be imposing at times, which annoys some of us, but when someone makes fun of him for it, it’s hilarious!”

Tomas continued, “When he doesn’t get what he wants he throws a fit. He’s such a drama queen. He’ll say things like I hate my life, I hate my parents, blah blah blah, he’s got a whiny attitude.” Despite the teasing, the group was careful not to alienate Antonio because they heavily depended on him for transportation to social events (Antonio was the only group member with a car). On the other hand, Antonio was dependent on the group for instrumental purposes.

Antonio: I don’t really like a lot of people. I only associate with people who are doing things with their lives. If I don’t see a benefit in talking to you, I won’t talk to you. With [the Bell Park Group], we, for the most part, are people who are doing things with our lives in our own different ways. Plus, we’re all funny, so that’s why I hang out with the group.

Within the group, Antonio was closest to Yesenia. These two were the highest achieving students in the group, with GPAs above 3.5. Antonio’s explanation showed he was dependent on the group to be friends with similarly academic oriented students while maintaining a social life. In his interview, Antonio described why he refrained from hanging out with other academically oriented students: “Those kids don’t have a life, all they do is study.” In Puebla, it was difficult for students like Antonio to be involved in friendship groups composed solely of high-achieving students, as many high-achieving students in Puebla were not allowed to leave home by their parents because of gang violence. For Antonio, his friendship with Yesenia (whom Antonio’s parents knew well) persuaded his parents to allow him to attend social activities. In addition, Antonio’s car allowed the group to attend social activities (movie theaters, parks, lakefront) outside the resource-deprived neighborhood.
In contrast to Sergio in the 12th Street Group, Antonio did not have higher status in any context, even when it came to school and academic achievement. While the group admired and respected Yesenia’s achievement, Antonio’s was seen as illegitimate because of the school he attended. Although all group members attended Puebla High School, the school was actually broken into two separate campuses, one for Arts and the other for Science. Yesenia had been enrolled in the Science school, while Antonio attended the Arts school. In the group, Yesenia’s achievement was given more credit because the Science campus was perceived as the more difficult of the two. As a result, group members perceived Antonio’s achievement as second-rate.

Thus far, data on Antonio revealed evidence for how balanced power dependence relations insulated him against group peer pressure or behavioral display mechanisms. Despite being lower status in all contexts, Antonio’s powerful position in the group (by having a car) protected him from peer pressure to change his academic behaviors. After eight months of fieldwork, however, Antonio’s status within the group dramatically changed, revealing that balanced power relations may only insulate from specific forms of peer influence.

**Limits of Balanced Power Relations**

In his initial interview, Antonio downplayed teasing from friends, saying, “The person who gets made fun of most varied from time to time depending on what’s going on.” Weeks later, group dynamics changed dramatically as Antonio received acceptances to two prestigious universities. News of Antonio’s accomplishment coincided with an annual fundraiser by the local youth group, and to celebrate Antonio’s accomplishment, the group attended the fundraiser. Antonio and Tomas were the first group members to arrive, and many local community organizers walked over to Antonio, congratulating him on his accomplishment and asking questions about which school he would choose.

As the remaining group members arrived shortly after, the fundraiser revealed a number of interesting conversations between low academic achieving members of the group and organizers who congratulated Antonio. Specifically, Tomas, who in previous interviews and observations expressed little confidence in his ability to attend a four-year college, started speaking of attending four-year universities and majoring in business. In speaking to the youth group coordinator, Tomas said, “Yeah, I can get into Southwestern University if I wanted, I have a friend who works on the admissions committee, but I’m counting on getting into Stewart University instead.”

These interactions yielded important insight into the limitations of balanced power relations as an insulator of peer influence. First, Tomas’s change in attitude toward college showed that balanced power dependence relations cannot insulate adolescents from emulating (or what Brown et al. 2008 call the behavioral display mechanism) the aspirations of peers during episodes of impression management (Goffman 1959, 1967). At the youth group, Tomas’s emulation of Antonio’s educational aspirations helped him avoid the embarrassment of being a low academic achiever in a setting where academic achievements were being honored. Tomas’s behavior after the event confirmed this as the organizational fundraiser was the only instance throughout the entire data collection process where he expressed high academic aspirations. This highlighted the importance of differentiating between the emulation of behaviors (like studying) and the emulation of aspirations for peer effects. The Bell
Park Group showed that while balanced power dependence relations may not insulate adolescents from expressing the similar aspirations of their peers in particular settings, it did insulate group members from emulating the behaviors of peers in relation to improving academic achievement.

Second, Antonio’s accomplishment granted him higher status, which insulated him from teasing (or the antagonistic behavior mechanism). Prior to this, Antonio’s academic achievement was seen as illegitimate, and his acceptance into prestigious schools legitimated his academic skill. As a result, teasing of Antonio decreased significantly as the group admired Antonio for his accomplishment. After this change, Ben, the lowest achieving student in the group, with a 1.9 GPA, who regularly skipped school, became the target of jokes. As the group hung out at a local restaurant, Tomas and Carla teased Ben for his risky behaviors. Ben shared how he was arrested for driving his parents’ car without a license, to which group members responded “You’re a dumb-ass! You’re an idiot!” When asked why they teased Ben, Carla responded “we all make fun of him [Ben] because he asks for it, because he’s just real ignorant sometimes. He’s lazy because he skips [school] a lot, but he’s still [cool].” After this change in the group’s status hierarchy, Antonio described the function of teasing and ridicule in the group:

The teasing we do kind of sets a ranking system within the group, but it depends on the situation. Some people may lead others, and some may not. Like, Carla knew someone who was throwing a party and a place where she could get in for free, and she is normally someone who would not plan anything. Andres is the lazy one, they try to get him to do well in school. Tomas is the athletic one, Yesenia and me are the smart ones.

We make fun of each other because it’s funny, and it’s also a way of putting people in their place.

Antonio’s quote illustrated how higher status insulated adolescents from teasing. Although recipients of teasing changed in the Bell Park Group irrespective of balanced power relations, the academic behaviors of group members did not change. This was also the case for Sergio in the 12th Street Group, where teasing and ridicule did not result in behavior change. This suggested that balanced power dependence relations and status serve as insulators from different types of peer influence mechanisms.

Summary

Data from the Bell Park Group indicated that status processes and balanced power dependence relations insulated adolescents from different types of peer effect mechanisms. Balanced power dependence relations insulated group members from peer pressure to change academic behaviors, but it did not insulate adolescents from emulating the aspirations of peers in certain contexts. Nevertheless, emulation of academic aspirations within the group did not produce behavioral changes among group members with respect to academic achievement. While the Bell Park Group illustrated limitations of balanced power relations, showing that it did not protect against emulation of aspirations, emulation of aspirations was not enough to produce behavior changes. Although data presented do not provide a strong enough test to rule out the importance of emulation of aspirations for peer effects on academic achievement, the Bell Park Group (and the Thomas Group in the following section) illustrated the importance of delineating the role of status and power dependence in the peer influence process.
THE THOMAS GROUP

The Thomas Group provided a counterexample illustrating how unbalanced power dependence relations made particular group members susceptible to peer pressure, structuring opportunities, and behavioral display mechanisms. Named after a local street, the Thomas Group was comprised of seven adolescents, three female and four males. This group was mixed in relation to class and educational achievement (see Appendix, Table 3). In this analysis I focus on the experiences of Joe and Hector, who consumed drugs and alcohol largely as a result of the indirect influence of their peers.

David as Higher Status in the Thomas Group

David’s interactions with the group illustrated he was leader and higher status in the group. David’s status was legitimated largely by his close friendship with the girls in the group and his high GPA. Whenever David wanted to go somewhere or do something, the girls quickly agreed, and the three other males followed along. Hector and Joe rarely had a say in the process, while Esteban went along with whatever his girlfriend (one of the female members of the Thomas Group) wished. For example, after a youth group meeting, Joe wanted the group to go to Hector’s house, but his suggestion was met with no response from group members. After a few minutes David suggested they walk to Thomas Street, the girls (and Esteban) agreed and followed David, while Joe and Hector followed moments later.

Observations at the youth group and Rosewood High School illustrated how David was higher status in the group. At school and the youth group, academic tasks were markers of higher status. At Rosewood High School, where the Thomas Group attended school, the student with the highest GPA was awarded a new laptop computer. With a 3.7 GPA, David won the computer, earning the reputation as one of the smartest students. At the youth group, David was also higher status, as the coordinator would often share David’s success story to the group, urging them to follow his example.

Susceptibility in the Thomas Group

Hector and Joe revealed how unbalanced power dependence relations created greater susceptibility to particular peer effect mechanisms. As lower status members, Hector and Joe were often targets of harsh jokes and had little say in planning group activities. On some occasions, the group attended parties outside Puebla and left Hector and Joe to plan their own way of getting to and from group outings. One might argue that the group was dependent on Hector and Joe for entertainment because they were constantly teased and ridiculed. This was not the case, however, because on many occasions the group left Hector and Joe with no transportation to the event. If the group were dependent on Hector and Joe, they would have at least made efforts to ensure they could attend group outings.

Although Joe participated in the group, he was not content with his status. In an interview, he questioned David’s higher status, “He’s not smart because he doesn’t really use it. He has a good GPA but he doesn’t really care about school.”

Robert: How do you respond to David making fun of you?
Joe: It’s bullshit you know . . . I should talk back; say “fuck you!”
Robert: But you don’t?
Joe: I know. Because I don’t . . . I mean, I do care, but I don’t want to go through the problems. What can I do? I’ll be like “shut up you little bitch, you fucking faggot!”
Robert: What would you want to do?
Joe: I would of fucking punched him in the head, I’ll be like “shut the fuck up!” But I can’t.
Robert: You feel powerless when your friends make fun of you?
Joe: Yeah, because I really couldn’t do anything about it, I can’t change it, so I’m like . . . whatever.

Joe’s view of David’s status as illegitimate illustrated that Joe’s conformity to the group’s teasing had little to do with status inequality and more to do with unbalanced power dependence relations (as expressed by his feelings of powerlessness). In a comprised position, Joe had nothing to bargain with to the group and the group was not dependent on Joe. Thus, Joe was faced with deciding between conforming to the group or possibly being excluded. He begrudgingly chose the former.

Robert: Why do you hang out with David and the group?
Joe: Well . . . (pause). If it wasn’t for the other people in the group, I wouldn’t really hang out with David.
Robert: Why don’t you bring up your dislike of David to the group?
Joe: Are you kidding? They’ll be like, “Oh, you don’t like David? Why’s that?” Blah Blah Blah.

Joe illustrated his concern about exclusion from the group. While he was dependent on the group to hang out with Esteban, no group member was dependent on Joe, and as a result, he had no power to contest the group’s power structure. Specifically, Joe was afraid of starting a conflict he thought he could not win. Joe did not possess resources (economic or social) needed by the group. In the following examples, data show how unbalanced power dependence relations can make the disadvantaged group member more susceptible to peer influence.

Peer Influence in the Thomas Group

Joe’s disadvantaged position in the imbalanced power dependence relation contributed to his conformity to all peer effects mechanisms. For example, on numerous occasions Joe expressed his dislike of techno music and tried to persuade group members to listen to reggae, but his efforts were consistently rebuffed. One day while the group was hanging out at a storefront, Joe was listening to reggae on his headphones. As we heard the music from Joe’s headphones, David walked over and yelled “turn that shitty music off!” Joe gave David a dirty look, but then turned off the music. In this example, Joe gave in to David’s direct peer pressure to turn off his music. Later that evening, the group attended a neighborhood house party that was playing loud techno music. Despite his expressed dislike for this style of music, Joe joined the group in dancing to this music, emulating the group’s musical tastes. In this example, Joe’s conformity has taken the form of the behavioral display of peer effects mechanism (imitating the behaviors or attitudes of others).

The most dramatic example of conformity came in relation to smoking marijuana. Prior to joining the group, Joe had experimented with marijuana in grade school. Yet after hanging out with the Thomas Group, Joe confessed that he smokes marijuana far more often now.

Joe: Before I would smoke every once in a while with friends, but these guys [the Thomas Group], they smoke all the time. That’s all they do, go out to Thomas Street and light up.
Robert: And you join them?
Joe: Yeah.
Robert: How come?
Joe: I don’t know, well . . . It’s like, if I’m around it more and like . . . my friends are doing it, I’ll do it. It’s just that when I’m with Esteban and
everybody, that's what we do. I'd rather do other stuff, but when we're broke, we just all pitch in what we got to buy a blunt.

In this example, Joe's conformity operated through the mechanism of structuring opportunities, or the creation of a situation that facilitates a certain behavior (Brown et al. 2008). Joe's disadvantaged position in the group's unbalanced power relations made him more susceptible to the influence of his peers, but it was unclear whether this was the result of his lower status or lack of power.

Joe's explanation for why he conformed to the group instead of hanging out with other friends revealed the importance of external factors, which in this case was neighborhood violence. In Puebla, Joe would have to travel through violent streets to see his other friends. As Joe explains, “I got other friends I went to school with on the other side of the neighborhood, but I ain't gonna cross 20th Street and the Dragons [local street gang] territory to get there. I ain't getting shot.” While Joe’s lower status contributed to his susceptibility, his inability to access alternative friendship groups made him dependent on the Thomas Group to have a social life.

Hector provided additional support for the importance of power dependence relations. Known as “the stupid one” by group members, Hector explained his involvement in the group to me at a neighborhood block party. Throughout the night, Hector drank alcohol by himself and the group only interacted with him to tease him. I asked Hector why he chose to hang out with a group that referred to him as the “stupid one.” He paused and replied, “I don’t really know why, it’s just that they’re always planning shit, they’re always giving me something to do.” Like Joe, Hector revealed that he was dependent on the Thomas Group to participate in social activities. Rather than being at home, Hector conformed to the group, taking on his role as a target of jokes. When asked what he preferred to do, Hector mentioned playing sports or video games with friends. With no power to negotiate activities with the group, Hector was put into the compromised position of having to choose between conformity or exclusion.

Hector’s compromised position contributed to his consumption of alcohol. In interviews, Hector explained his strong distaste for beer, but in the presence of the group at parties, Hector drank beer without hesitation. When asked why he drank beer with the group, he bashfully responded, “I don’t know. . . . If they [the group] do it I think I should do it. It’s a way for me to be like, cool with them. If I didn’t they’d think I’d be judging them or think I’m trying to be better than them or something.” This example illustrated how being in a disadvantaged position in a group with imbalanced power dependence relations can leave an adolescent vulnerable to the structuring opportunities mechanism. As Hector lacked opportunities to socialize, he was in a compromised position of choosing between socializing with the Thomas Group or remaining at home.

Joe and Hector’s behavior illustrated the importance of context, particularly for accessing alternative friendship groups. Although their disadvantaged position in the group forced them to choose between conforming or leaving the group, their lack of access to alternatives contributed to them adopting the behaviors of their peers. Specifically, their access to alternative friendship groups was constrained by neighborhood violence and lack of resources (not having a car). While Hector and Joe had friends outside the Thomas Group, it was difficult for
them to hang out with these friends due to contextual factors associated with neighborhood poverty.

**Summary**

Data from the Thomas Group suggested that disadvantaged adolescents in a group with imbalanced power relations were more susceptible to peer pressure, behavioral display, and structuring opportunities mechanisms than adolescents in groups with balanced power relations. The increased susceptibility manifested when adolescents were faced with the compromised position of choosing between conforming or leaving the group. For example, in the Bell Park Group, Antonio cannot pressure Tomas to conform to his positive academic behaviors because Antonio was dependent on Tomas for fulfilling his community service requirement. Similarly, Ron and Al in the 12th Street Group could not change Sergio’s academic behaviors because they relied on him to court girls. In the case of the Thomas Group, members did not depend on Hector and Joe for anything. Combined with their limited access to alternative friends (stemming from neighborhood violence), Hector and Joe were powerless to contest the group power structure.

Interactions in the Thomas Group also illustrated that specific peer effect mechanisms result from status inequality among group members. Lower status explained why Hector and Joe were consistently teased; however, it provided little evidence in relation to why they adopted peer behavior. Hector and Joe’s disadvantaged position in the group’s power relations and their lack of access to alternative friendship groups greatly influenced their decision to consume drugs and alcohol. This finding speaks to the importance of the characteristics of power relations between adolescents and contextual features in the peer influence process.

**CONCLUSION**

Data from three friendship groups showed that status and power dependence relations insulated adolescents from particular mechanisms of peer influence. Being in a group with balanced power dependence relations insulated adolescents from peer pressure and structuring opportunities mechanisms. For members of the 12th Street and Bell Park groups, having an independent source of power in the group (through having access to a resource important to the group) shielded members from having to conform to peer behaviors. For example, Sergio in the 12th Street Group did not conform to the pressure of his peers to change his educational behaviors because his peers relied on him for romantic relationships. These interactions highlighted a missing factor in the peer effects literature, power dependence relations, as it mediated peer influence in these groups. Future studies should incorporate characteristics of the social relationships of adolescents as an additional factor in the peer effects process.

These findings also fill some gaps in the literature on susceptibility and peer effect mechanisms. Data illustrated several limitations with a status-centered approach to studying the peer effects process. Future studies of adolescent peer effects in laboratory settings would benefit by including measures of power dependence or creating multiple situations reflecting the multicontextual nature of adolescent relationships.

Status remained a powerful factor, particularly for patterns of teasing and ridicule; however, the effects seemed limited to specific contexts. For example, in the Bell Park Group, Antonio’s newly gained status influenced Tomas to emulate his behavior. This influence, however, was minimal as Tomas did not emulate Antonio’s behavior outside of the
community organization context. If status was a context-specific factor in the peer effects process, future research should pay attention to features of adolescent environments that modify the salience of status. This study suggests that contexts where higher status group members receive praise from outsiders may be likely to produce emulation from lower status group members.

This study illustrated the potential contributions of social psychological theory to studies of micro inequality, particularly within group contexts. In the study of adolescence, social psychological theories can complement subcultural explanations of problem behavior, particularly within the inner city. Findings of this study point to the importance of focusing on small group interaction for better understanding the impact of macro-level factors. In this study, observing groups illustrated the importance of structural factors such as neighborhood violence and poverty in the peer influence process. If sociologists are interested in more clearly understanding social problems, whether it be adolescent peer influence, inequality, or culture, the small group is a context ripe for further exploration.

Finally, this study has a number of policy implications. An exclusive focus on status in the peer effects process leads some scholars, such as Allen and Antonishak (2008), to argue that the best way to modify peer influence effects may be to change the values that adolescents communicate with one another. My examples of Antonio and Tomas in the Bell Park Group shed light on the potential usefulness of this approach as the values of community organizers contributed to Tomas’s expression of higher educational aspirations than he had previously expressed. Yet, it remains unclear whether the values put forth by a community organization, educational intervention, or classroom would transfer to the additional contexts in which adolescents interact.

Bringing power dependence relations into the peer influence process focuses the attention of policy makers to addressing instances where adolescents may be put into compromised positions of power that may lead to problem behavior. For example, neighborhood violence contributed to Hector and Joe’s conformity, as they were placed into the compromised position of choosing between conforming to the group or being socially isolated. Hector and Joe’s drug and alcohol consumption may have been different if they could access alternative friends. In addition to neighborhood violence, policy makers can also pay attention to other factors that may put adolescents into compromised positions of power, such as romantic relationships, hazing, or pledging processes for fraternities and sororities. Policy makers may also focus on issues of power to promote positive behavior. For example, a school could require 40 hours of service at a community organization for students to graduate. By making the student dependent on a community organization to graduate, it is possible that the relationship developed can lead to an increased interest in civic activities or the development of relationships with positive role models.
**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**REFERENCES**


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**APPENDIX**

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the 12th Street Group

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<th>Family structure</th>
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BIO

Robert Vargas is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University and Fellow of the Multidisciplinary Program in Educational Sciences. His interests are in urban sociology, sociology of organizations, social psychology, and education. His dissertation research examines the influence of neighborhood organizations on social order and the spatial concentration of neighborhood violence.