Title  
Negative social comparison, academic failure and delinquency among Singaporean self-reported delinquents
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Abstract
This paper presents research findings suggesting that delinquency is a group strategy adopted for coping with negative social comparison. Participants are adolescents in Singapore schools who are identified through self-reports as delinquents and non delinquents. They are presented with a vignette of a student who has failed an examination and is thus faced with the threat of negative social comparison. Two coping strategies are given, one is a strategy of competition adopted by the individual; the other is a group strategy of derogating the more successful and hypothetical outgroup. Two other conditions are included, that of attribution of the failure to lack of effort and to lack of ability. Findings support the hypothesis. Although there is an overall preference for the individual-competitive strategy, delinquents compared to non delinquents showed relatively higher evaluation of the outgroup-derogation strategy when the attribution of failure was to lack of ability rather than lack of effort.

Social comparisons in school
The school environment is one which is rife with social comparisons (Goethals and Darley, 1987), where academic achievement is highly valued. Children who fail to perform according to expectations will have to learn to cope with the consequences of negative social comparisons. Research on the affective consequences of negative social comparison reveal that depression, helplessness, desire for social support, desire for retribution as well as anger are often the result. Also, there is evidence that one outcome of failure to attain what is desired is resentment, which is can result in violent acts (Crosby, 1976).
Social comparison researchers such as Brickman and Bulman, (1977), Plehan and Tesser (1981) and Salovey and Rodin (1984), documented various means by which people cope with negative social comparisons. These include the attribution of rivals’ success to external rather than internal factors, derogation of successful rivals, avoiding comparisons, changing relationships to reduce closeness to rivals, changing the dimension of comparisons and changing self-definitions.
However, in the social environment of the classroom, the academically weak student would not be able to change his or her self-definition as the student identity is chronically salient in the day-to-day context of the classroom and the school. The less successful student may change relationships with others to reduce closeness, change the relevance of the dimension of comparison by losing interest and motivation in studies, change the dimension of comparison itself from academic achievement to a non-academic quality such as tough behaviour, derogate the more successful others or act violently. However, though these individual strategies may result in some measure of self-enhancement, there is still the need for self-consistency, to be in keeping with the norms of one’s peers, which is left unfulfilled. For such students who perceive themselves to be of low academic ability, their only means of coping is to identify with others who have similar negative identities and adopt the group strategy that social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) terms “social creativity”. 

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Identification with a group has been shown to be dependent upon such factors as status, stability and permeability of group boundaries (Ellemers, et al. 1988, 1990, 1993). The strategy of derogating rivals or outgroup-derogation, is likely only if students perceive that individual mobility is not possible through effort. In other words, if students were to attribute failure to a lack of ability rather than effort, mobility to the higher status group would be perceived to be less likely, the lack of ability being a relatively stable characteristic. However, if failure were to be attributed to a lack of effort, the low status would be perceived as unstable, and social mobility through individual effort and competition would be a preferred choice. Hence, the preference for a coping strategy, whether group or individual, may be mediated by the attribution of failure.

Many studies have established a relationship between poor academic performance and delinquency (e.g. Tremblay, Masse, Peron and Leblanc, 1992; Zingraff, Leiter, Johnsen and Myers, 1994; Emler and Reicher, 1995). Delinquents, especially those who attribute their academic failure to a lack of ability, can be expected to favour a group rather than an individual coping strategy. Thus, the study presented in this paper makes the following prediction: that when faced with negative social comparison, delinquents would perceive that coping with an outgroup-derogation strategy rather than an individual-competitive one would be more effective, when failure is attributed to a lack of ability rather than effort.

Coping with negative social comparison in school

The study is presented to delinquent and non delinquent participants in the form of a vignette, which consists of the academic results of two hypothetical students. HL and KP, who both failed in their examinations but responded differently. One copes by adopting the individualistic and competitive strategy, whereas the other copes through outgroup-derogation.

Method

Delinquents and non delinquents are identified through self-report from a checklist of thirteen misbehaviours modified from the checklists of Emler et al. (1987) and Leung and Lau (1989). Participants are asked to rate on a scale of one to six, how often they have committed the thirteen behaviours (1 for never, and 6 for very often).

The individual and group coping strategies are presented as two vignettes. Participants receive both vignettes. The individual-competitive strategy adopted is by the target student HL and the outgroup-derogation strategy adopted by the other target student, KP. Two other possibilities of outgroup competition and individual derogation are left out because they are low in mundane realism (Aronson, Ellsworth, Carlsmith and Gonzales, 1990). These coping strategies are presented as diary accounts by the hypothetical students in the vignette. Both the target students are of the same sex as the participants. HL copes by employing an individual-competitive strategy of trying harder, and KP copes by employing the group strategy of derogation of the more successful others.

The attribution of failure, whether it is due to a lack of effort (hence, unstable) or to a lack of ability (stable), is presented in the form of the class teacher’s comments in the report book. These comments are typical of the kind of remarks made by teachers in Singapore. For half the participants, who are randomly selected, the students in the vignettes have comments from the teacher that attribute the low marks to a lack of ability, and for the other half of the participants, the students in the vignettes will have comments from the teacher that attribute the low marks to a lack of effort.

The study has a 2x2x2x2 factorial design, with behaviour (delinquent and non delinquent); attribution of failure (lack of ability and lack of effort) and gender of participants (male and female) as between-group factors, and coping strategies (individual-competition and outgroup-derogation) as a within-group factor.
133 students from two secondary schools in Singapore, ranging from ages 14 to 16, participated in this study. They were from both the Normal Academic and the Normal Technical streams.

**Findings**

Results revealed significant interactions between behaviour and attribution (F (1, 125) = 5.69, p = .019) and between behaviour and gender (F (1, 125) = 5.49, p = .021). This is illustrated in Figure 1 below. No main effects were significant.

A value of 0 represents no difference in the evaluation of the individual-competition and the outgroup-derogation strategies. A positive value indicates higher evaluation of the individual-competition strategy, and a negative value, higher evaluation of the outgroup-derogation strategy. Thus, results showed that for delinquents, the outgroup-derogation strategy is evaluated relatively more highly than the individual-competition strategy when the attribution of failure is to a lack of ability rather than a lack of effort (means = -1.15 and .15 respectively). For the non-delinquents, attribution of failure to a lack of ability or a lack of effort has no significant effect (means = .53 and .47 respectively).

**Discussion**

One of the aims of this study is to test the hypothesis that delinquents who perceive little prospect of enhancing their low academic status because of their lack of ability, would prefer to cope with negative social comparison by using the group strategy of derogation of the more successful outgroup rather than an individual strategy of competition. The results of this study support this hypothesis. When faced with negative social comparison in the form of poor academic results, there is an overall preference for the individual-competitive strategy, but delinquents, compared to non-delinquents, showed relatively higher evaluation of the outgroup-derogation strategy than of the individual-competitive one when attribution of failure was to a lack of ability rather than a lack of effort.
There is a possibility of an alternative explanation for the above findings, that participants indicated their preference as a result of matching attribution of failure to the coping strategies. The attribution of failure to a lack of effort may have suggested that participants with this attribution should prefer the coping strategy that favoured another attempt at studying for the examinations (i.e. the individual-competition strategy). Similarly, participants with the attribution of failure to a lack of ability may have perceived that they should opt for the strategy that indicated this lack of ability to study (i.e. the outgroup-derogation strategy). In other words, there is a possible confound of attribution of failure and coping strategies. However, if this had been the case, there would be a difference of evaluation for the two strategies with the non delinquent participants as well as the delinquent participants.

Results showed that non delinquent participants, who are also presented with the same vignettes, showed no difference in their evaluation of the coping strategies. Delinquent participants whose attribution of failure is to the lack of effort do not differ from the non delinquent participants in their preference of coping strategies. It is only the delinquents with the attribution of failure to a lack of ability who showed relative preference for the outgroup-derogation strategy.

It needs to be stressed that among delinquents themselves, there is evidence pointing to the fact that they do not reject the individual-competitive strategy, but in fact prefer it to the outgroup derogation strategy. However, when comparisons are made with non delinquents, delinquents in general tend to evaluate the outgroup derogation strategy more favourably. This finding lend support to Sykes and Matza's (1957) theory of delinquency that delinquents do not reject conventional norms altogether. However, findings here suggest that they subscribe less to such norms when compared to non delinquents: response to a negative identity that has its roots in negative social comparison, in particular, that which involves academic achievement.

The findings presented in this brief paper is only one part of a larger model of delinquency based on social identity and self-categorisation theories, which takes into account the fluid nature of the delinquent social identity.

References


The participants used various strategies, with this being for the attribution strategy that words, there had been delinquent delinquents from the non-delinquent non-delinquent group. This is the same pointing to refer it to the delinquents, preferably. This delinquents do not describe less to has its roots in their model of account the research in M. Suls and R.L. Miller, Social comparison processes: Theoretical and empirical perspectives. Washington D.C. Hemisphere.


