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Publisher: Taylor & Francis
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Deviant Behavior

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713394036>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2000

To cite this Article: Kim, Tia E. and Goto, Sharon G. (2000) 'peer delinquency and parental social support as predictors of Asian American adolescent delinquency', *Deviant Behavior*, 21:4, 331 - 347

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/016396200404122

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/016396200404122>

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peer delinquency and parental social support as predictors of Asian American adolescent delinquency

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This study empirically documents the factors that predict Asian American adolescent delinquency. The model incorporates traditional Asian cultural values generated from a collectivist orientation that have typically been left out of a delinquency research literature that has focused primarily on individualistic populations. Asian American collectivist values may influence both parenting and adolescent behavior. In particular, the study assessed Asian American adolescents' perceptions of social support from their parents and their role in predicting delinquency. Data was gathered on 101 Asian American high school adolescents. Contrary to expectations and previous studies, the findings indicated that Asian American adolescents did not perceive low social support from their parents and that this variable had no influence on delinquent behavior. The results suggest that peer delinquency is the strongest predictor of Asian American adolescent delinquency. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Asian American delinquency has been on the rise in recent years, due to the great influx of Asian immigrants into the

We would like to thank Terrance Devney for help with data collection, and Chong Kim for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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United States (McCord 1990). Toy (1992) stated that recent crime developments among San Francisco's Asian gangs have attracted public attention and concern. Song and Dombrink (1994) also noted that crimes by Asian gangs have generated serious concerns on the part of law enforcement authorities. Vietnamese youth gangs have committed violent crimes on both the West and East coasts for many years, yet little is known about what may contribute to these horrendous acts (Song and Dombrink 1994).

Many theoretical frameworks attempt to explain why adolescents engage in deviant behaviors such as truancy, theft, and gang involvement. However, empirical evidence and conceptual frameworks on delinquency of Asian Americans are scarce (Toy 1992). Efforts to fully understand the scope of delinquency have been hindered by challenges of language and cultural barriers (Song and Dombrink 1994). Asian American delinquent acts are often ignored by policy makers and law enforcement officials, who only address the symptoms and do not treat the causes (Toy 1995). With the rising wave of Asian American delinquents, neglecting the causes may expand the problem.

MAINSTREAM THEORETICAL MODELS

According to Moffitt's (1993) theory of adolescence-limited anti-social behavior, a maturity gap encourages adolescents to mimic antisocial behavior in ways that are normative and adjustable. The theory asserts that adolescents attempt to be self-autonomous before they are biologically able to do so. Thus, adolescents rebel and engage in delinquent or criminal behavior because of this maturity gap. Adolescents express their autonomy by engaging in delinquent behavior. Barrera and Li (1996) also suggest that adolescence is a time in which autonomy needs are more pronounced and asserted, supporting the idea that adolescence is a time of self-autonomy.

A delinquency model proposed by Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey (1989) states that chronic delinquency unfolds in a series of predictable steps, starting at a very young age. This model asserts that from early childhood, parents of delinquents practice poor parenting skills (Patterson et al. 1989). Stressors such as unemployment, marital conflict, and low income may also perpetuate inadequate parenting. Insufficient parenting can lead a (usually male) child to display conduct problems which in

turn lead to rejection by "normal" or nondelinquent peers and academic failure. Coie et al. (1995) have also found that peer rejection leads to higher externalization of problems, such as physical violence in sixth graders.

AN EMIC AND ETIC APPROACH TO DELINQUENCY

It is important to consider specific cultures and their impact on their members (Sodowsky and Johnson 1994). Thus, it is necessary to understand and be sensitive to the culture specific (*emic*) views of different cultural groups. By doing so, one can adequately address the diversity between minority groups and the mainstream. By focusing on *emic* views, one can also begin to discern the similarities between groups, displaying that there may be underlying universal (*etic*) vulnerabilities to delinquency. Concentration on *emic* beliefs allows a clearer picture of the complexity of Asian American adolescent delinquency.

In order to assess predictors of Asian American delinquency it is important to know some values of this group. In contrast to mainstream U.S. individualistic-oriented values, traditional Asian ideals are collectivist. Myers (1996) states that there are many characteristics of collectivist groups. These groups give priority to the goals and welfare of their groups, such as family. Collectivists value social solidarity. People seek to maintain harmony by showing respect and allowing others to save face (Uba 1994). Elders teach children the values of communal sensitivity and cooperation while guiding or deciding children's choices. The self is not independent, but interdependent (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Due to traditional Asian values, some aspects of Moffitt's (1993) theory may not apply to Asian American adolescents. For example, the premise of this model is that self-autonomy is an important aspect of adolescents' lives. This may not be true of all Asian Americans because self-autonomy is primarily a Western ideal (Uba 1994). In Asian American families, interdependency is stressed and thus, these adolescents may not be looking for self-autonomy (Harrison et al. 1990; Staples and Mirande 1980).

The model proposed by Patterson et al. (1989) may also operate differently for the Asian American population due to differing cultural ideals. For instance, Patterson et al. assume that

the child's home environment is maladaptive if there is poor parenting. In dysfunctional European American homes, coercive behaviors are reinforced and prosocial acts are often ignored or responded to inappropriately. European-American families with antisocial children are characterized by harsh and inconsistent discipline, little positive parental involvement with the child, and poor monitoring (Patterson et al. 1989). Asian American parents may exhibit the same type of harsh discipline as European American families. This type of discipline is executed due to cultural beliefs, such as unquestioned obedience and filial piety (Nguyen 1992). Yet, this may not be detrimental for Asian American adolescents if this behavior is acceptable given the cultural norms.

The Patterson et al. (1989) model also proposed that conduct problems lead to rejection by "normal" peers in European Americans. "Normal" peers of the majority culture may be the source of Asian American rejection due to their minority status. For example, many Asian American children are subject to discrimination because of a different culture, language, and ethnic appearance in social arenas (Sanders 1994). Discrimination may include verbal and physical abuse, which can lead Asian Americans to band together and defend themselves (Toy 1992). By banding together into gangs, Asian American youths are able to protect themselves from those who bully them and to retaliate against aggressors (Sanders 1994). Therefore, despite Patterson et al.'s notion of peer rejection leading to delinquency, for Asian American youth, rejection by one peer group may lead to closer ties with minority peer groups.

The Patterson et al. (1989) model is limited in explaining delinquency in ethnic minority youths because it proposes antecedents of delinquent behavior in a White, male sample. There may be tremendous variation between this sample and other ethnic samples. In order to address antecedents of delinquent behavior in Asian American adolescents, cultural variables may need to be incorporated into the model proposed by Patterson et al. The nature of parenting due to the effect of culture and the discrimination a child receives from being a member of a minority group are important issues to consider (Chao 1994; Toy 1992; Weisz et al. 1993). Without assessing the role of culture for ethnic minority youth, one is ignoring factors that could contribute enormously to the process of delinquency (Coll et al. 1996; Weisz et al. 1993).

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support plays a vital role in promoting mental health across the life span (Kashani et al. 1994). Children's mental health has been related to the quality of the family environment (Kashani et al.). For example, it has been demonstrated that children's perceptions of low family support are strong discriminators between those who attempt suicide and those who do not (Kashani et al.). Low family support has also been associated with behavior problems and psychological distress in children and adolescents (Barrera and Li 1996; Borduin and Schaeffer 1998; Cauce et al. 1996; Compas et al. 1986; Garnefski and Diekstra 1996; Kashani et al. 1994; Plotnik 1993). Kashani et al. assert that children need to have a sense that they are protected and supported by their family in order to avoid both internalizing the externalizing behavior problems. Thus, a family that provides high social support for an adolescent creates a buffer against stressors (Plotnik 1993). Although social support is an important component in Asian American families, it may be defined and provided differently than Western ideals of social support due to collectivist cultural values.

Since collectivists place a heavy emphasis on the familial group, Asian American adolescents should feel affection and support from parents (Uba 1994). In contrast, Asian American adolescents may feel little parental social support if the adolescents have developed Western ways of thinking and have adapted more individualistic characteristics. Their less acculturated parents may still adhere to traditional collectivist ideals. Thus, this incongruity may cause distress in the familial network, leaving Asian American adolescents without an adequate social support unit in the home.

The culture of a people provides the contextual grounding for social support to be given and received (Dilworth-Anderson and Marshall 1996). In Asian American families, children are given social support and approval from their immediate and extended family when they adhere to cultural values, such as considerations of family over individual needs and self-control (Dilworth-Anderson and Marshall 1996). Yet, these cultural values are not part of mainstream ideals and thus, the adolescent may not feel supported even though his or her parents are giving support understood in a cultural context. Lorenzo et al. (1995) found that Asian American adolescents were significantly less satisfied than

their European-American counterparts in four different areas of social support: amount of concrete assistance provided, advice, positive feedback, and availability of people to whom they can confide.

Asian American youths may not receive the kind of social support defined by the mainstream for many reasons. A child who knows he or she is loved and feels he or she is understood will not usually display dysfunctional behavior (Borduin and Schaeffer 1998; Jung 1984). Thus, if parents love and show that they care for their children, positive outcomes will occur. Yet, Asian cultures discourage the display of emotions (Chan and Leong 1994; Shon and Ja 1982). Asian parents' love for their children is shown through more subtle methods, such as working to provide them with better opportunities in life (Leung and Chew 1989; Shon and Ja). Asian children in an American context may not pick up these subtle cues or they may pick them up, but misinterpret them based on Western ideals (Shon and Ja). Asian American parents also rarely see why rewards should be bestowed upon children for doing what is expected, like doing well in school. When the anticipated level of excellence has not been met, an adolescent is burdened with the overwhelming sense of shame and guilt put on the family (Leung and Chew 1989).

Children are also bombarded with guilt and obligation from their parents because of all the sacrifices the parents have made for their children (Leung and Chew 1989). This poses a problem because adolescents may feel that they are not loved or that their parents do not care about them given the Western context. They are left with feelings of guilt, shame, and obligation (Shon and Ja 1982). This guilt stems from the idea that they are letting their parents down or not living up to their standards (Shon and Ja). Fulfilling their parents' expectations is important because filial piety is an essential cultural component of Asian families (Leung and Chew 1989). Asian American adolescents may only receive parental social support through fulfilling their parents' wishes. If these wishes go against mainstream values or expectations, an adolescent is left in distress. The caregiver does not alleviate the problem, but exacerbates it.

An Asian American adolescent in distress due to adapting to a new country or conflict between cultural values may need a caregiver to engage in discourse about the problems that he or

she is facing. Yet, many adolescents face the absence of both parents in the home. Asian American parents are usually both in the work force trying to provide for their family (Toy 1995). Thus, the lack of parental supervision may exacerbate a myriad of problems for adolescents. Prolonged separation from parents often results in a loss of intimate attachments between parent and child, and communication gaps are likely to develop (Borduin and Schaeffer 1998; Moffitt 1993). Instead of allowing their adolescent to express his or her confusion or distress, parents continually try to instill traditional values in their child failing to realize that some of these norms are not appropriate for American life, often making the adolescent's problems worse (Toy 1995).

Asian American adolescents may have a particularly difficult time receiving adequate social support due to contrasting traditional cultural beliefs of their parents' ideals and that of the mainstream culture's views of adequate overt social support. Although Asian American parents have collectivist ideals that promote strengthening the family, these traditional parenting ideals may be ineffective because their more acculturated children may misinterpret them. Asian American parents may lack social support skills due to their immigrant status. Their traditional values might not be adequate due to not having the same amount of mainstream experiences that their children have.

PEER GROUPS

Asian American adolescents have an arduous task of balancing elements from both the Western ideals that encompass them and the traditional Asian ideals that are taught at home. Perceiving limited overt social support from their parents does not abate this task. These adolescents are then left in a bind and turn to peers for social support (Mason, Cauce, and Gonzales 1997; Mason et al. 1996). Asian American peer groups often serve as substitutes for the family as well as relief from cultural conflicts (Spencer and Dornbusch 1990). Asian American peer groups offer a compromise between the drastically different cultures as well as means for reestablishing social bonds and regaining a sense of identity (Toy 1995). Peer groups may be formed to oppose majority mores and to provide adaptive social supports that reduce feelings of isolation (Spencer and Dornbusch 1990). Not only do adolescents find it hard to seek help

from their parents, they also find it hard to seek support from other institutions like school and law enforcement agencies because they feel these are European American institutions that cannot identify with their situation or problems (Toy 1995). Thus, adolescents are forced to seek support from peer groups, where they can find support that is lacking in their family. The types of peers that they associate with influence whether or not they may later associate in delinquent behavior.

Association with peers who engage in problem behavior is the single most robust and consistent predictor of problem behavior in mainstream groups (Cashwell and Vacc 1996; Mason et al. 1997). Association with deviant peer groups may increase adolescents' susceptibility to antisocial peer pressure and their participation in delinquent activities (Aseltine 1995; Elliott and Menard 1996; Fridrich and Flannery 1995; Mason et al. 1994; McCord 1990). Peer groups provide the social context for delinquent behavior (Cashwell and Vacc). Peers are believed to provide the adolescent with the attitudes, motivation, and rationalizations that support delinquent behavior, and they provide opportunities to engage in specific delinquent acts (Cashwell and Vacc). If one associates with more positive peer groups, he or she receives the support lacking at home while possibly avoiding delinquent behavior. Yet, some adolescents may look for support in deviant peer groups, often leading to participation in delinquent behavior. Participating in such behavior also can serve an adaptive function by eliciting continued peer support and acceptance (Borduin and Schaeffer 1998).

Like mainstream adolescents, Asian American adolescents may be greatly affected by negative peer influences. Peer delinquent influence may be even stronger for Asian Americans due to cultural ideals. Asian American adolescents may have a firm belief in relying on their in-group because of their collectivist background. Since their parents may provide ineffective support, the reliance on peers could be even greater. Thus, peer delinquency may be a very strong predictor for Asian American adolescents' involvement with delinquency.

HYPOTHESES

Although Asian American adolescents may experience stressors, these stressors can be alleviated if there is adequate social

support in the home (Kashani et al. 1994). One goal of this study is to measure the influence of parental and peer social support in predicting delinquent behavior in understudied Asian American adolescents. Although the type of social support may differ, the expectation is that those adolescents who perceive higher parental social support would have lower rates of delinquency. Asian American adolescents who perceive lower parental social support are hypothesized to engage in more delinquent behavior. Adolescents who perceive lower parental social support are likely to turn to peers for social support (Mason et al. 1997; Mason et al. 1996). Thus, adolescents with a high number of delinquent peers are hypothesized to engage in more delinquent behavior. Those adolescents with few delinquent peers would participate in lower rates of delinquency (Aseltine 1995; Cashwell and Vacc 1996; Elliott and Menard 1996; Fridrich and Flannery 1995; Mason et al. 1997; Mason et al. 1994; McCord 1996). In summary, low parental support and high association with deviant peers are expected to predict high delinquent behavior among Asian American adolescents.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the study were selected from a high school on the West Coast that was predominantly comprised of ethnic minority students. Only the data from participants of Asian descent were included in this study.

There were 101 participants ranging from the ages of 14–18. Forty-five were male and 56 were female. The sample included 8 Korean Americans, 21 Japanese Americans, 52 Chinese Americans, 9 biethnic persons, and 10 from other Asian backgrounds. Among the participants, 29 were first-generation Asian Americans, while 64 were second- and 4 were third-generation. Fifty-five of the participants spoke English as their primary language at home, 39 spoke an Asian language, and 7 spoke both English and another language as their primary languages at home. Twenty-nine of the participants' annual parental income were between \$0–\$30,000, 40 were between \$30,001–60,000, 17 were between \$60,001–90,000, and 5 participants' annual parental income were over \$90,000.

Materials

There were two measures given to the participants, along with a demographics sheet. The first assessed the amount of overt parental social support each participant received. This measure was a combination of items from the scales of Procidano and Heller (1983) (e.g., My parent "does not give me moral support," "does not enjoy hearing about what I think," "is there for emotional support," "is open about what I think," "is sensitive to my personal needs," "is good at helping me solve my problems") and Rohner (1980) (e.g., My parent "often hugs and kisses me," "often praises me," "does not enjoy spending time with me," "does not make me feel wanted and needed," "talks to me in a warm and affectionate way," "does not let me know he/she loves me," "tries to help me when I am worried or upset," "respects my point of view and encourages me to express it," "does not make it easy for me to confide in him/her"). The scale utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5). Each participant answered the question for each parent separately. If the participant lived with only one parent or legal guardian, the question was answered for only the respective caretaker.

The second scale was used to measure the amount of delinquent behavior the participant engaged in the last year. It also measured the amount of the participant's peer delinquent behavior. This scale was adapted from two different scales, Elliott and Huizinga (1997) and Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis (1981). Ten different items that appeared on both of these scales were used (e.g., "run away from home," "skipped classes without an excuse," "been suspended or expelled from school," "been involved in gang fights," "hit (or threatened to hit) another person," "carried a hidden weapon," "purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you," "broken into a building or vehicle (or tried to break in)," "stolen (or tried to steal) things worth between \$5 and \$50," "stolen (or tried to steal) a motor vehicle, such as a car or motorcycle"). The participant recorded how many times he or she had participated in each given behavior in the past year (e.g., "stolen (or tried to steal) things worth between \$5 to \$50"). To assess peer delinquent behavior the participant indicated how many times his or her closest friend participated in each of the listed behaviors.

Procedure

The experimenter briefly described the purpose of the survey. Due to the sensitive nature of delinquent behavior, the experimenter stressed that the participants' answers would remain confidential. Informed consent was then obtained. Then, the participants were administered the four-page survey along with instructions. All participants were debriefed verbally and given a debriefing sheet.

RESULTS

Creation of Scales

Reliability was conducted for mother social support and father social support separately. The mother social support scale reflected high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .91. There was also high reliability for the father social support scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. Thus, no items were removed from either of these scales. Since inter-item reliability was high, a sum score was created for mother social support and father social support separately. Mother and father social support were also positively correlated, $r(101) = .71, p < .05$. The mean for mother social support was 3.5 ($SD = .8$) with 5 being the highest number possible. The mean for father social support was 3.2 ($SD = .9$) (see Table 1). There were no significant differences in mother social support between males and females, $t(df = 100) = n.s.$ Males and females also showed no differences in father social support, $t(df = 100) = n.s.$ There were also no significant differences in mother social support between first- and second-generation adolescents, $t(df = 100) = n.s.$ First- and second-

TABLE 1 Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Asian American Adolescent Delinquency (N = 101)

Variable	M	SD	B	SE B	β
Mother Social Support	3.5	.8	-.48	.27	-.26
Father Social Support	3.2	.9	3.135E-02	.25	.02
Peer Delinquency	1.3	2.1	.30	.08	.42*

Note $R^2 = .27$. * $p < .05$.

generation adolescents showed no differences in father social support, $t(df = 100) = n.s.$

The delinquency and peer delinquency scales were scored by summing the different types of delinquent behavior marked.¹ For example, if the participant had said that he or she had engaged in only survey questions 1 and 2 each 10 times, this would be scored as 2. This was also done with the peer delinquent behavior. The most frequently noted delinquent behavior was "truancy" and the least noted behavior was "stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle." The most frequently noted peer delinquent behavior was also "truancy" and the least noted peer delinquent behavior was also "stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle." There were no differences in the amount of delinquent behavior between males and females, $t(df = 100) = n.s.$ Males and females also showed no difference in peer delinquent behavior, $t(df = 100) = n.s.$

Multiple Regression

A regression analysis predicting delinquent behavior was performed to determine the relative influence of mother and father social support and peer delinquency on Asian American delinquency. "Peer delinquency" was the only significant contributor to delinquent behavior such that the higher amount of peer delinquency, the higher prevalence of delinquent behavior. The model accounted for 27% of the variance. Mother and father social support had no influence on delinquent behavior (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

Although past literature (e.g., Jung 1984; Kashani et al. 1994; Lorenzo et al. 1995; Shon and Ja 1982) suggests that Asian American adolescents are prone to many difficulties with their parents due to traditional cultural values, this was not supported by the data in this study. Adolescents in this study felt that there was adequate social support from both parents. Asian

¹ Delinquent and peer delinquent behaviors were also scored by summing all behaviors marked and the pattern of results paralleled what was reported. For the purpose of this study, this method was not used because it yielded a smaller variance.

American adolescents may not be as distressed as past literature suggests, but rather have functional relationships, with their parent(s). It may be that adolescents are able to effectively compromise both mainstream and traditional culture, and therefore develop adequate relationships.

Although, their familial unit may be important for them and may lend an adequate amount of social support, peer groups may be another strong group affiliation. The strongest predictor of Asian American adolescent delinquency is high peer delinquency, suggesting that Asian American adolescents are similar to mainstream delinquents. Peer influence is one of the most stable and well-established findings in delinquency research and this is also true for the Asian American population. Universal (*etic*) presuppositions to delinquency may be similar for both mainstream and Asian American adolescents. Yet, how peer group influences affect these two different groups may be conceptually different. Specific (*emic*) values may influence Asian Americans; peer groups may be an extremely strong influence on delinquent behavior, more so than that of mainstream adolescents. Due to collectivist ties, Asian Americans may have more invested in a peer group and have closer ties to their friends, thus, suggesting Asian American adolescents may consider their peers' opinion more heavily than mainstream adolescents. Future research should focus on the influence of peers for Asian Americans and delinquency.

There are some limitations to this study. The study measured the intensity of a delinquent association not the number of delinquent peers. The closest friend may not have the same influence on an individual as an aggregate of friends in a network. Yet, short of collecting data on multiple friends, the closest friend is perhaps the best alternative. The closest friend would likely have the most positive or negative influence on an individual and the individual would probably be most acquainted with the activities of the closest friend. Differences between the intensity of a peer relationship and the number of delinquent peers on delinquent behavior should be further studied.

There are also other limitations to this study. Self report may have biased the participants' responses to the questionnaires. Gauging delinquent behavior in particular may be difficult because the participant may not trust the experimenter. Furthermore, shared method variance due to the similarity of questions

used to tap peer and one's own delinquency may have also overestimated the influence of peer delinquency.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there are wider research and clinical implications to consider from this study. Delinquent peers were the strongest predictor of problem behavior; attempting to combat this negative influence is important. Cashwell and Vacc (1996) contend that delinquent peers provide adolescents with the opportunities to engage in delinquent acts, along with the motivations and rationalizations that support this type of behavior. It is even more important to prevent Asian American adolescents from associating with negative peers because group norms and affiliations may be particularly strong for this population in light of strong family support. Programs like big sister/brother mentoring programs may be beneficial for this population because the mentors can provide role model appropriate behavior.

This study has questioned the basic assumptions in mainstream delinquency research and allows for the possibilities of different cultural emics. The model used in this study supports the notion that peer delinquent behavior is the strongest and most robust predictor of delinquency, regardless of traditional cultural values. Thus, Asian American delinquents are in some ways similar to majority group delinquents. They also have a unique orientation that may cause greater adherence to negative peer influences. Yet, they differ regarding perception of parental social support. European American delinquents feel a lack of parental social support, whereas their Asian American counterparts feel strong social support in the home. Adequately addressing these similarities and differences should be a fundamental point for researchers and clinicians.

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