

## Peer's Influence in Albanian Adolescents' Risk Taking Activities

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### Abstract

*In order to better understand the extend to which peers' influence affects Albanian adolescents' decision making behaviours in risky situations, we engaged in conducting the following study. This examination results emphasised that Albanian adolescents were more impulsive in choosing less riskier situations while alone whereas in the presence of their peers the results changed unexpectedly toward more riskier choices. Their change in decision in the mere presence of their peers is considered as a showing off attitude which in real life scenario presented would be a tremendous life threat.*

**Keywords:** Albanian adolescents, peers' influence, adolescents response, delinquent behaviour.

*"Injuries are the product of avoidable environmental and behavioural forces that together produce an unfortunate outcome" (Peterson, Farmer and Mori 1987, p 33)*

### 1. Introduction

The Albanian adolescents of these days are prone to more risky and hazardous situations that really endanger their lives. Recent police reports highlight the fact that there is an unprecedented and unpredicted increase in the number of car accidents cause of the speed exceeded by adolescent drivers.

On the other hand statistics of Public Health institutions show that 15 % of adolescents within 15-18 years of age have experimented and suffer of drug addiction. As so there is also an evitable rise in adolescent death toll.

The experts of the above fields argue that adolescents engage in the above live threatening activities in the company or under the advice and sometimes (un)intentional pressure of their peers. Being faced with such threatening and frightening reality we tried to understand and examine Albanian adolescents' experience of peer's influence.

As so our paramount objective is to discover the importance adolescents' prejudices and thoughts have on their peers' willingness toward risk-taking activities.

At the same time we wanted parents to become familiar with such a fact. furthermore, publishing the frightening results of the study we assisted parents, teachers and school psychologists in getting together and discuss possible strategies to help this troublesome new generation to live prejudice-free and safer life.

There have been worldwide studies focusing on the impact that peers' persuasion had on all age children's behaviour mostly in children's decisions in risky situations. Much of the research in this area focuses on the persuasive techniques indication that children are more successful if they are socially competent and use friendly tactics such as requests and arguments rather than demands. More concretely, Williams and Schaller (1993) study results showed that verbal requests were the most frequently used and the most successful type of persuasive appeal, suggesting that children of all ages used similar appeals when interacting with friends and acquaintances.

Furthermore, Morrongiello and Bradley (1997) examining the influence of older siblings' persuasive appeals on younger siblings judgements about risk taking concluded that after the older siblings' appeals the younger ones significantly changed their path decisions from less risky to more risky and vice versa. In the same line studies made by Christiansen and Morrongiello 1997, Morrongiello and Bradley (1997) and Morrongiello and Dowber (2004) examined gender differences that is to say that when attempting to persuade a peer to engage in risky situations boys are more likely to base their persuasion on fun and convenience whereas girls are more likely to base their persuasion on safety. So boys are more likely to persuade using appeals for fun whereas girls use more appeals to safety.

But children responses to peers' persuasion is not a subject thoroughly examined in literature.

Miller and Brunes (1997) developed a study to examine whether children choose in higher level of risks when peers are present and to see if there were any correlation between personality factors and risk taking behaviour. Results showed that for boys in peers absent conditions greater risk taking was correlated with being more impulsive and less anxious. Whereas for boys in peers present conditions there was a considerable correlation being more self-sufficient and greater risk taking. Boys were significantly more likely to choose the very risky options when peers were present rather than when they were absent.

Morrongiello and Dowber (2004) made nearly the same study and supported the hypothesis that participants who attempted to persuade peers to less risky paths were no more likely to be successful, whereas those who attempted to persuade peers to more risky paths were successful.

Moreover in 2005 Gardner and Steinberg conducting a study on risk taking behaviours of adolescents and adults by bringing in front of adolescents a 5 point scenarios including: boys having sex without condom; riding in a car driven by someone who has been drinking; trying a new drug; driving over 90 miles per hour. This study showed that peers' presence influence adolescents to take risk at a significantly higher level.

This article aims at studying adolescents' behavior change in the company of their peers. Firstly we choose to become familiar with the above recent studies focusing on such a phenomenon and later we compiled a questionnaire made up of the following 5 scenarios highly reflecting 5 risk taking activities that Albanian adolescents might be engaged in willingly or unwillingly.

## 2. Method

**Subjects:** Subjects to our study were 150 boys of the age 15 to 18. They were recruited through the local high schools of Gjirokastra region. To the study were invited to participate all boys who expressed their interest. Except age and gender there were used no other exclusionary criteria.

**Procedure:** Administration was completed in one session lasting approximately 15-30 minutes at a time and place that was convenient to the adolescents, in most cases their high school classroom. At the beginning of the sessions we asked parents for their consent and also obtained the adolescents assent. At the beginning adolescents were asked to complete the questionnaire in peers absent conditions. Later the experimenter enters the classroom accompanied by his best friend(s) and tries to create a friendly atmosphere within both the adolescent and his friend(s). When the experimenter consider it appropriate for the adolescent to feel relaxed he begins interviewing the adolescent by presenting to him the above 5 scenarios. The adolescents' second answers were videotaped and after the experiment was completed our duty was to compare the written peer absent answers with the videotaped peer present ones.

5 scenarios questionnaire:

1. Imagine you are alone at home and you notice your father's gun. What's the first thing that comes at your mind?  
*A. Take it and just pretend police game. B. You'll take it just to polish.  
B. To call your best friend and go to the river to fire it.*
2. You come to frequent some guys you have known lately. One day they take you behind a building and begin to smoke cannabis sativa. What do you do?  
*A. Nothing, just wait till they finish. B. You go and inform their parents.  
C. You accept their invitation and try it.*
3. You take your father's car just for a ride and are ready to pass under a semaphore which has at the moment turned red. Your friends insist you go on without stopping at the red light. What do you do?  
*A. Stop and wait till it goes green. B. You ask your friends to stop joking and still wait. C. You run your car no matter the red light.*
4. One of your friends challenges you to ride a motorcycle at its highest speed at one of the city urban roads. What do you do?  
*A. Refuse the challenge. B. Accept the challenge on one condition to change the road to one at the city countryside. C. Accept the challenge on no condition.*
5. You are at party late at night. Your friends after having drunk different kinds of alcoholic drinks they decided to take the car home?  
*A. Decide not to go with them and go on foot. B. Decide to call your father and ask him to take you home.  
C. Decide to take the risk and go with your friends.*

### 3. Discussion

Taking into consideration Albanian troublesome society and our region cultural, economical, infrastructural and social constraints the above testing and experimental method was found appropriate. On the other hand we are aware that the results would have been to 100% trustful if we would have been given the possibility to present adolescents with the above scenarios in reality.

But we have witnessed that the above risk taking activities highly reflecting Albanian life threatening reality resulted in numerous adolescents' injuries and death number increase each year.

It is obvious, that 30% of the adolescents participating in the study were impulsive by nature and as so they tended to choose risk taking options at the very first phase of the examination. Their responses to the oral interview didn't change. This fact was reinforced by every adolescent's behavioral records we have previously taken by their parents, teachers and friends. Our records matched completely with the adolescents responses to the 5 scenarios questionnaire.

Whereas the other 70% of the adolescents tended to change their responses from one less risky (they gave to the written questionnaire) to another more risky (they gave to the oral interview). This change in risk taking behavior was completely related to the presence of their peers while adolescents were interviewed. So many of the alone condition scores for the scenarios measure indicated that the adolescents were less likely to participate in the risky situations. On the other hand adolescents in peers' presence condition showed willingness to participate in more risky situation (no matter their first alone condition response) which was considered as an opportunity to obtain and warranty peers' socialization benefits. In addition the change in the level of risk taking behavior while peers were present is considered as a boosting, showing-off attitude mostly mirrored in adolescence. Sometimes adolescents fear being targeted as cowards and as so they have to convince their peers that they are ready to take risk no matter the consequences.

In reality we weren't expecting Albanian adolescents to be so sensitive in meeting their peers' expectations and we weren't expecting so high levels of peers' influence on adolescents' behavior as well.

The results of this study were shared with parents and teachers in order to take the necessary precautions to control and constrain such a phenomenon and as well to help adolescents understand the risk they run into if decide to be engaged in such and others life taking activities.

It is also obvious that the study bears a number of limitations such as:

- Children were presented with hypothetical threatening situations which permit them to behave as hypothetically courageous and impulsive adolescents. It is unknown to what extent their responses would be congruent to the real world. But if their peer presence can affect their imagination it assumed that it can highly influence the way they respond to risk-taking activities.
- Our study excluded girls. The reason behind male adolescents' choice is closely related to what Morrongiello have stated "Boys engage in more risk taking activities than girls (Ginsburg and Miller (1982) and have more frequent and severe injuries than girls (Canadian Institute of Child Health (1994) and to the Morrongiello and Dowber (2004) study focusing on gender differences concerning peers persuasion.

In conclusion this study results indicated once more that adolescents worldwide are under too much of peers persuasion and pressure techniques and Albanian adolescents make no exception. It also true that for certain reasons such as boosting, showing off or socialization they sometimes endanger their lives. What we have to do is continuously informing adolescents on the risk they may run into if for a moment they impulsively decide not to lose face while in company of their peers and engage in risky activities.

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