

Social Learning Factors: Exploring the Dimension of Peer Relation in the Development of Human Behavior

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Abstract: The development of human behavior is a complex on going process and is governed by many interrelating factors which stems from both human and non-human element. Debates in Malaysia regarding this issue have centered on how, first, media is the most dominant contributing factor and it plays a significant role in the development of human behavior and second, on the fact that its influence are mostly negative leading to the increase of ill-mannered young individuals in the country which is judged by the statistics of crime rates and social problems. However, studies from various sources state that the most influential factor in behavior development is actually peer relation. This research note affirms the claim by enlightening readers about the fundamentals of social learning factors with greater emphasis on peer influence. The dimension of peer relation was depicted in great details to better understand its immense power and how it can influence the development of human behavior. Case studies from previous researches were used as the main instrument in this research note while trend observations and review of past literatures were done to support statements and to draw conclusions. Evidence exists that negative emotions and anxiety play a role in peer influence, particularly feelings of inadequacy and isolation. As the case-studies reveal, the relationship between peer pressure and human behavior development is complex. The dimension of peer relation was explored in this study.

Key words: Peer relation, human behavior, development, social learning, factor

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is striving for development and advancement in order to realize its vision to become a developed nation by the year 2020. However, such progress have also brought about many problems in society due to the increase of crimes and social problems such as murder, robbery, rape, domestic violence and drug addiction. There were 123 studies conducted in Malaysia between the year 2001 and 2005 on social problems and most of these studies cited peer influence as the main contributing factor to negative behavior. These have caused grave concern regarding security among members of society, requiring thinkers to seek ways to address the issue. The issue in this context here is finding the source of problems which is the development of human behavior. Problems can be effectively addressed if the root of the issue is tackled; therefore studies have been conducted to explore the structure behind the process of building human behavior.

Human behavior in Islam is also known in Arabic as Akhlaq, referring to the practice of virtue, morality and

manners in Islamic theology and philosophy. The Qur'an has stated clearly in great details about how humans are to behave to one another, about the immense reward waiting the virtuous and about the eternal sanctions to befall those who fail to conform. The development of human behavior is a complex on-going process which happens throughout the entire life of a person and is governed by many interrelating factors. It is exhibited by humans and persuaded by learning experience and surrounding influence from parents, peers, community and media. The study of human behavior has been done for centuries by philosophers and academicians around the world. Among the earliest work is a book entitled *al-Muqaddimah* by Ibn Khaldun, a well-known Muslim sociologist, *Tahdhib al-Akhlak* by Ibn Miskawayh and *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* by al-Ghazali. These books cover a vast area of knowledge and one of the messages conveyed by these writers is about the power of experience in developing behavior.

Experience is one of the sources of learning and development and it started since, a child was born. According to Kolb (1984), knowledge is continuously

derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner. A person is usually in a conscious state when experience happens, allowing us to learn and make changes to the situation we are familiar with. William James in his studies on the nature of human consciousness said that consciousness is continuous. Quoted by Kolb (1984), the principal of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after. All these showed that continuity of experience was a powerful truth of human existence and is the central to the theory of learning.

Exposure from media is also considered as a form of experience because we humans are capable of absorbing the message conveyed by media just as good as though we are experiencing it on the own. This causes dispute among worried parents when they realized how influential media could be on the development of their children's behavior. Media today have gone over the board by exposing children to negative elements such as sex and violence every where. What more worrying is the fact that media portrays those negative elements as though they are acceptable by society, giving children the wrong impression on crimes and ill-behavior.

However, studies show that what parents should be more worried about are the people their children befriended with because peer relation is more influential than media and other external factors as suggested by various researches. This was supported by a survey conducted in the US in which 40% of 13-17 years old cited peer influence when asked why they thought the Columbine High School shooting happened showing that even adolescents themselves acknowledge the powerful influence of peers (Lashbrook, 2000). Nevertheless, despite the many blames on peer relation which is undeniably highly-influential in character development, people should be aware that everything goes back to the core of a person's belief and self-regulation because the development of human behavior is complex and it does not rely dominantly on one factor, therefore other social learning factors should also be studied.

SOCIAL LEARNING FACTORS

Other than learning experience the development of human behavior can also be influenced by external factors in which a person undergoes his daily life. External factors here are referring to human elements such as influence by parents, teachers, peers and the community or non-human element from media. The earliest exposure to

external factors received by a person is undeniably from parents and this is in line with the Prophet's saying as delivered by Imam Muslim which means:

Each and every child is born pure and innocent (free from sins), therefore it is the parents who would convert the child to Judaism, Christianity or Magainism

It shows that it is the duty of the parents to raise and shape a child to be anything the child could be. A study by Heyman *et al.* (2009) shows that parents who lie encourages children to lie although sometimes parents did not intend to cause harm by lying (e.g., lie to promote appropriate behavior or to hide private matters of the family). Therefore, it is important that parents think of the consequences of their actions because intention or mission clearly does not allow the means of doing it.

Berne (1964) states that a person's behavior, thinking and feeling can never be free from external influence, especially from hopes and fears of the people he is close to such as peers, family and older people in the community. Such influence undeniably can affect a person in decision-making process. However, these should not restrict people from making own decision because humans are blessed with capabilities to understand the options they have and they are fully capable of changing their minds when they discover better alternative. Unfortunately in most cases, people fail to realize that they have a choice because they did not see that the main purpose of pursuing something is actually to achieve goals. This opinion was seconded by Tolman (1932) in which he said, every action has a definite mission. In the effort of realizing the mission, people should utilize any tools or sign which they think are useful, leaving them with experience which is beneficial in developing a cognitive map in the mind of a person. Such experience could help reduce the impact of external influence in decision-making process.

Environment also played an important role in shaping a person's identity and this has been mentioned by Bandura (1997) social learning theory. According to the theory, it is the community and the environment which defines the role and responsibility of a person because people develop their opinion and feelings through observation. Children who faced rejection in primary school learnt from their previous environment and they usually make changes when they enter a whole new environment like new school for instance. Changes in this sense mean upgrading their attitudes and style to gain peer acceptance at a new place. Some tend to duplicate the identity of popular friends they know in their previous environment but this attempt would usually fail.

Bandura (1997) also states that children and teenagers learned mostly by imitating others. Teenagers behaved according to what they are being exposed to as a child, therefore they tend to follow what is being told by their parents and the society. Children raised in a community of successful people are most likely to become ambitious because they feel that success is beyond reach while children raised in troubled community have low expectations of themselves. Negative behavior on the other hand, stems from childcare failure and flawed socialization process. Because youth tend to imitate the behavior of others, they have a tendency to be associated with social problems and negative influence such as smoking and drugs because they are fed with different perception of the word fun. Realizing this, parents should be aware of the kind of environment they raised their child up because external factors undeniably contributed quite a great deal in learning process and in the development of behavior.

ANXIETY, COMPLIANCE AND PEER PRESSURE

Research on the development of friendships and relationships suggest that children have a sophisticated culture that is distinct from that of the adult world, consisting of its own rules and social conventions (Troyna *et al.*, 1992; Cullingford and Morrison, 1997). Successful negotiation with others within this culture requires substantial social competence and other criteria which often causes anxiety to children. Reason behind this probably has something to do with belonging. Children usually find it uncomfortable when their expectations, attitudes or observation are at odds with other people in the immediate group. The false norm effect may be explainable in terms of social reinforcement of wanting to be a part of the normal majority and not being isolated. Reason for wanting to be accepted is nature. But reasons for rejection are often associated with other factors. Among those individuals who stick to their own views and ways of doing things, a possible common feature may involve some history of poor or rejecting parenting, lack of socialization and inexperience of social reinforcement.

Using a sample of boys, Dishion (1990) demonstrated by means of behavioral checklists and by observations of behavior at home that boys who are not accepted in peer groups were those who experienced poorer parental management styles (Connor, 1994). It was argued that parental handling was indirectly linked to peer-rejection through antisocial behavior. The implication is that in the absence of positive family support, children may depend more upon peers for support and may run the greater risk

of identifying with negative behavior but this does not mean that parents should support children's conformity to peer just so that their child is accepted in school even when the group has a tendency to bring more negative influence. The keyword here and in everything is balance. Although, to a certain extent, compliance is useful and beneficial, parents should still monitor their children's activities and whereabouts because a group of children interacting together can come up with possible lists of unexpected things beyond the ability of their own.

The concept of compliance brings to mind the series of experiment carried out by Asch (1956) using adult subjects. In the experiment, subjects were asked to make some judgments and confederates of the experimenter would make a judgment that was incorrect to confuse the experimenter. What was investigated was whether or not the subjects would back their own judgment or appear to accept the false norm. Asch found that only a minority of individuals was able to resist yielding in this way and the majority needs as much as 3:1 to gain this effect.

During the 1930s, a similar experiment was carried out by Sherif. Subjects were asked to judge the extent to which a stimulus light moved (when it actually remained still) with help from friends. From here it is concluded that when faced a dilemma individuals will tend to follow others and adopt cue from them subconsciously about the action to take. Theory has it that the extent to which conformity in attitudes or behavior improves the balance of rewards and costs in any relationship will be matched by pressure to maintain that conformity. However, if the situation cannot be changed, parents could help by trying to change the child's view on how he sees the situation because if subjects are given confidence in their own abilities to perform a task correctly, they are less likely to admit defeat. This shows that self-confidence and self-esteem provide a positive defense against peer pressure and anxiety.

PEER RELATION

The general public and researchers alike have long recognized the importance of youths' peer relations. In Lashbrook (2000), studies of peer influence have found it to be an important factor in a variety of adolescent outcomes including educational performance and aspirations (Coleman, 1961; Hallinan and Williams, 1990), sexual attitudes and behavior (Shah and Zelnik, 1981), delinquency (Warr and Stafford, 1991; Aseltine, 1995) as well as tobacco, drug and alcohol use (Stacy *et al.*, 1992). The need for acceptance in a person is as strong as any appetitive drives which are one of the reasons adolescent is triggered to commit to a group. It is argued by

Dunn and McGuire (1992) that the interest in the whole issue of peer relations has had two main bases. Firstly, it is said that the nature of interactions among children has a key significance in social, cognitive and moral development. Secondly, there is a view that association exists between troubles peer relationships and adjustments problem either at current time or later developmental stage. Popular children are reported to have a more positive overall attitude while rejection is often related to disruptive behavior.

Lashbrook (2000) reported findings from his research which indicates that negative emotions play a role in peer influence, particularly feelings of inadequacy and isolation as well as feeling ridiculed, all of which may be indicative of shame. As teen struggles with identity development in the context of group attachments such feelings or experiences are likely to engender strong feelings.

A study by Cullingford and Morrison (1997) focuses on the early experience of young offenders and their understanding of the meanings of their lives. Analysis were done on the reasons internal and external why they have gone down a route which has led them to prison and one of the themes emerges is the influence of peer groups. Peer pressure is a specific instance of social influence which typically produces conformity to a particular way of acting or thinking. The influence of peers increases relative to other sources from childhood to adolescent but this does not mean that parental influence disappear altogether.

Parental socialization remains important to children and can lead to peer-rejection in school if not done accordingly as mentioned in previous heading. Although, the exact balance between parents and peers varies depending on the specific behavior or belief as well as family qualities such as degree of bonding and closeness, it is interesting to note that the power of peer relation is often underestimated by many and the extent to which the peer group forms an alternative form of cultural identity, distinct from and sometimes in contrast to normal society including the formalities of school is beyond expectation (Kandel and Andrews, 1987; Cullingford and Morrison, 1997).

Other than the theories mentioned earlier, one influential theory in discussing moral development and human behavior is from Piaget and Kohlberg. Both of them agreed that moral development is one important aspect which may contribute to growth in total (Fabes and Martin, 2000). Piaget theory of development is based on observation and questioning. According to Piaget, the basis to moral development is subjected to laws. Piaget made the assumption by observing a group of children

playing marbles. While playing, children had to take into account the rules of the game in which justice is the key. That way, they explore their potential and the development of their moral. Piaget theorized that a child's moral expanded more during interaction with peers compared to with parents. This is because the relationship between parents and children is of a different level of maturity and their interaction is based on giving reward and punishment, or to promote trust. Relationship between children and their peers is based upon reciprocity and equality to maintain their social connection. This shows that peer relation is more influential than any other external factors.

Peer relation not only brings negative effects towards the development of human behavior but it also brings many positive effects. Ladd indicated that children with a range of friends at the time of school admission developed more favorable attitudes towards school within the 1st 2 months and maintaining of these friendships was linked to continuing positive perceptions of school. Making new friends after starting school was associated with gains in school performance while early peer rejection was associated with a less positive attitude towards school, higher level of school avoidance and poorer scholastic performance (Comor, 1994). However, it is encouraging to note that children can be helped to develop social skills. This is to gain peer acceptance and avoid the risk of lowered self image and of negative social or behavioral development due to rejection.

From the cases discussed, it became clear that peer group influence was an important factor in the deviant behavior of young offenders. It is therefore apparent that access to positive peer relationships is very important. There is evidence that affiliation is a very strong human needs and motive with an implication that compliance to peer pressure may be an acceptable price to pay for peer acceptance, even if this means engaging in activities that would not have been chosen.

CONCLUSION

In any event, it would appear that the need for acceptance and positive approval is as powerful as a biological need for many people and the inability to gain these is fundamental to many forms of emotional disorder. The dimension behind peer relation is often related to other social learning factors. One influential factor behind peer acceptance is parental guidance because children who faced rejection in school, most of the time are the same people who faced poor parenting at home. Apart from that experience and surrounding factors also contributed to the successfulness of peer relation,

because children who are not very popular in primary school will upgrade their attitude and styles so that they would get more attention and acceptance in secondary school. Realizing the fact that young children are great learners, the best way to enhance peer acceptance is by developing self-esteem and social skills and these can be learned from parents and teachers. Peer relation is not the only measures to behavior development however, it is safe to say that successful peer relationship at a young age would lead to positive development of human behavior. All in all, the development of human behavior is a complex on-going process which is governed by many interrelating factors and does not rely dominantly on one factor. Therefore, every body has a role to play in building the identity and character of one person may it be media, parents, teachers or a community member.

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