

The Role of Social and Personal Identities Among At-risk and Non-at-risk Singapore Youths During Peer Mediation

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Peer mediation is a school-based intervention program that was implemented in response to the rising violence in schools, and to the need for alternative and more proactive discipline plans. Using the theoretical framework of the Social Identity Theory, this article highlighted the importance of peer mediation in helping adolescents resolve their conflicts in a positive and constructive way. Two vignettes, one with peer mediation and the other without, were used in this study. Each vignette described a conflict between an offender and a victim of different social identities. Responses to the questions at the end of the vignette gave evidence of the participants' perception of the victim's identity and their level of empathy for the victim in peer-mediation and non-peer-mediation situations. Results revealed that at-risk youths were more likely to perceive the victim in his personal identity and also displayed greater empathy for him during peer mediation. However, in a non-peer-mediation situation, they are more likely to perceive the victim in his social identity and displayed significantly less empathy. No significant differences were found among the non-at-risk youths in both vignettes. Implications of findings for successful mediation of conflicts are also discussed.

Peer mediation is a school-based intervention program that was implemented in response to the rising violence in schools, and to the

need for alternative and more proactive discipline plans (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1992; Crawford & Bodine, 1996; Horowitz & Boardman, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). In recent years, educators realized that teaching children how to manage conflicts is one of the most important competences that children need to master (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 2002). Due to the serious consequences of such conflicts, one of the most important challenges facing secondary school students then, is to learn how to positively resolve their conflicts with peers (Kauffman, 1993). Peer mediation teaches adolescents how to manage their conflicts in a positive way and it is based on the principles of restorative justice which is a more victim-centered model. It aims to restore victims and reintegrates young offenders, who tend to be at-risk youths, back into the society, and to repair or improve the damaged relationships between them (Braithwaite, 1996; Seymour & Gregorie, 2002).

The findings of a recent study conducted in this area showed that in successful resolution of conflicts between the offender and the victim, the offender has to identify with the victim, based on the similar characteristics defining their social groups (Huan, 2005). Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) explained that a social group consists of a set of individuals who have a common social identification or view of themselves as members of the same social category — that is, having the same social identity. Tajfel (1972) first defined social identity of an individual as “the individual’s knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership” (p. 31). For the adolescent, being a member of a peer group would constitute part of his social identity.

Aside from his social identity, Tajfel (1974) stressed that an individual also possessed his own personal identity. According to Tajfel, both social and personal identities of individuals fall on a continuum known as the interpersonal-intergroup continuum. At the interpersonal extreme, all social interactions are determined by personal relationships between individuals and their individual characteristics whereas at the intergroup extreme, social interactions between individuals are determined in terms of their membership in different social groups. While social identity refers to the individual’s membership in different social categories, his personal identity defines him as a unique person in terms of his individual differences from others in the group. It is what separates him from others, with his own set of idiosyncratic traits and

characteristics (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner, 1981; Turner et al., 1987). In personal identity, the individual acts in terms of his own goals and desires instead of behaving according to the norms of a group or category (Turner, 1987).

To further distinguish the difference between personal and social identities, Simon (1997) proposed that linguistic terms can be used to describe these two aspects of an individual's self. He suggested that self-aspects that connote personal identity are better described using the linguistic category of adjectives. Adjectives used to describe individual self-aspects such as traits and behaviors (e.g., intelligent, honest) imply that they vary along on a continuum (e.g., from not very intelligent to extremely intelligent). This proposal is partly based on a study by Semin and Fiedler (1988) who posited a four-category system of linguistic categories that are used to describe individuals with the highest being the category of adjectives, which is highly abstract in nature and describes the individual's disposition. Adjectives like aggressive or creative describe highly abstract dispositions or characteristics of a person which can be generalized across specific situations and events. For example, a statement such as "John is aggressive" implies great stability, that the person will behave similarly across different situations, in the future, and with other people (Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

Semin and Fiedler (1998) also found in their study on the relationship between people's language use and their attribution pattern that adjectives were used to encode or characterize behavior that is most revealing of an individual's personality. Andersen and Klatzky (1987) in an earlier study also found support for the use of adjectives in describing an individual's personal identity by stressing that trait-defined categories are relatively narrow in meaning, and they typically characterize specific attributes and closely related behaviors. These attributes or traits are usually singular in nature and are better represented using adjectival labels (Andersen & Klatzky, 1987; Wyer & Srull, 1986). Andersen and Klatzky (1987) added that these adjectival labels convey some single and enduring feature of an individual's personality, which is also representative of that individual's personal identity.

In comparison, Simon (1997) proposed that a person's social identity which is derived from his membership in social groups, is best described using the linguistic category of nouns. Nouns define discrete social categories with relatively clear boundaries. Specifically, the use of nouns implied qualitative similarities of critical self-aspects that one

shared with others, and highlighted the differences that differentiate one from the others who are not sharing the same critical self-aspects (e.g., African American versus Chinese American; boy versus girl) (Medin & Ortony, 1989; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). Hamilton, Gibbons, Stroessner, and Sherman (1992) commented that when communicating about social groups, our thought and speech often pertain to categories instead of characteristics of the group, and this is captured in the linguistic category of nouns. For example, when an individual is given a noun category such as “nerd,” “Chinese,” “delinquent,” or “minister,” an entire range of descriptive features and specific behaviors are conveyed within that category.

This is supported with the research by Andersen and Klatzky (1987), Andersen, Klatzky, and Murray (1990), and Klatzky and Andersen (1988), which showed that the concepts we use in thinking about types of people are in stereotypical categories (e.g., politicians, “jocks,” housewives), rather than trait-based (extraverted, athletic, feminine). These studies found that an important distinction between these two types of classification is that stereotypical categories are identified by nouns whereas trait-based types are identified by adjectives. Findings from the Andersen-Klatzky studies revealed that compared to trait-based adjectives, noun categories are richer and embrace features that give a wider variety of inferences about its members. These features not only include traits, but also physical characteristics, typical behaviors, and demographic characteristics. Using nouns to represent social categories convey greater meaning than single attributes, as nouns functions to summarize a wide range of characteristics of individuals who belonged to the same category.

Past research has shown that conflicts among adolescents in schools tend to be characterized by physical aggression, incivility and violence from youths toward their peers (Stevahn et al., 2002). These conflicts often arose out of incompatibility of behaviors, disagreements, and opposition (Garvey, 1984; Hay, 1984; Shantz, 1987). Coie, Dodge, and Kupersmidt (1990) also reported that youths who frequently used verbal or physical aggression such as bullying are more likely to have a negative social status in school and be at-risk of long-term adjustment problems. To a large extent, these findings imply that youths who are involved in conflicts tend to display behaviors that are typical of at-risk youths.

In Singapore, at-risk youths refer to “those who have been subject to a combination of interrelated biological, psychological, and social factors that result in greater likelihood for the development of delinquency, substance abuse, or other related anti-social and self-destructive behaviours” (Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime, 2002, p. 5). This is supported by Pianta and Walsh (1996) who defined “at-risk” as the likelihood that the youth would have acquired certain negative behaviors given certain conditions. Emphasis for the concept of risk is placed on the probable relationship between very specific conditions and their respective “identifiable outcomes” (p. 17). Past research has defined a risk factor as a characteristic or condition that increases the probability of an identifiable outcome taking place (Eaton, 1981). These risk factors could include individual characteristics, interpersonal relations, or social conditions that are associated with greater likelihood of negative or undesirable outcomes (Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Masten, 1994).

According to Burt, Resnick, and Novick (1998), these youths, given their present risk indicators, are potentially capable of acquiring more serious behavioral problems if the environment or the conditions around them nurture and respond to them in a negative direction. These youths are more likely to display negative behaviors such as defiance toward authority figures, tardiness in school work, involvement in fights and in Internet pornography which are similar to those displayed by incarcerated youths.

Based on the social identity theory, the social identity of these youths would therefore include those aspects of his self-concept that are derived from his membership within his peer group of at-risk youths. The social identity also provides the at-risk youth with a definition of who he is, according to the characteristics defining the group. These characteristics subsequently determine how he would think, feel, and behave as a member of the group (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

Research has shown that conflicts involving acts of violence and aggression were found to be more common among at-risk youths than non-at-risk youths (Akers, 2003; Angenent & de Man, 1996). Conflicts were found to be at elevated levels among these at-risk youths and many of these conflicts are committed on school grounds and are directed at fellow students (Claes & Simard, 1992; Jaffe, Leschied, Sas, Austin, & Smiley, 1985; Marcus, 1996; Windle, 1994). Earlier on, research showed that conflicts among youths arise as a result of incompatible

behaviors found between social groups, that is, between their social identities (Garvey, 1984; Hay, 1984; Shantz, 1987). Research in this area showed that with differing social identities between the offender and the victim, resolution of conflict was not successful and the offender's level of empathy for the victim was also significantly lower (Huan, 2005). Thus, one of the issues addressed by the peer mediation program is to help at-risk youths recognize differences in their social identities from which their violent disputes tend to arise (Canada, 1995; Casella, 2000; Katz, 1995; Pinderhughes, 1997; Soriano, Soriano, & Jimenez, 1994).

In view of the above, this study proposed that the offender (usually an at-risk youth) would shift in his perception of the victim's identity from social (represented by nouns) to personal (represented by adjectives) during peer mediation. In contrast, the victim would continue to be perceived in his social identity during non-peer mediation. It is also proposed that the empathy level of the offender for the victim would be significantly higher during peer mediation than in non-peer-mediation situations. On a similar vein, the responses of non-at-risk youths are also compared in peer-mediation and non-peer-mediation situations with the offenders' responses.

Method

Preliminary Study

A preliminary study was conducted in order to compile the list of nouns and adjectives for use in the vignettes in the main study. A total of 144 students aged between 14 and 15 participated in this preliminary study. Each participant was asked to list 10 words in which they would use to describe a prefect (symbolic of prosocial behavior) and another 10 words they would use to describe a fellow classmate. A frequency count was performed on all the words listed by the participants and the 20 most common participant-listed nouns and adjectives (10 from each category) were selected for the vignettes in this study.

Main Study

This study examines the responses of at-risk and non-at-risk youths with regard to their perceptions of a victim's (prefect) identity, as

represented by the difference between their mean noun score and mean adjective score used in peer-mediation and non-peer-mediation situations. Empathy of the two groups of youths for the victim is also compared. The independent variables in this study include the behavioral status of the youths (at-risk or non-at-risk) and vignette (peer mediation or non-peer mediation), whereas the dependent variables are the participants' mean difference score (mean noun score minus mean adjective score) in the vignette and their level of empathy for the victim.

Participants

Data for this study was obtained from 383 students (235 boys, 148 girls) in three homogeneous government-owned secondary schools with both having peer-mediation program as part of their schools' discipline intervention measures. The students' ages ranged between 14 and 15 and they are mainly from the Normal Academic and Technical streams. At-risk youths form the focus of this study and local research in Singapore has shown that most of them tend to be in academically weaker classes, that is, from the Normal Academic and Technical streams (A. C. E. Koh, 1997; Y. Koh, 2003; Magnus, Lim, Mesenas, & Thean, 2003). In the Singapore education system, students who do not pass their Grade Six national examination (50% or more) are streamed into the Normal Stream course which is designed for those less academically inclined students.

Measures

For this study, two vignettes, each describing a fight between two students, were developed. The first vignette described a conflict between two hypothetical classmates of the participant, one of whom is a prefect. A fight broke out between these two students and the prefect, being the victim, was beaten up by the other classmate. The fight was stopped and resolved by the discipline master but no peer mediation was carried out to help them resolve the conflict. The second vignette also described a conflict that is similar to the first vignette. However, unlike the first vignette, both students in this second vignette were instructed to resolve their conflict through a peer-mediation session instead of having the discipline master resolve the conflict for them.

At the end of each vignette, 20 words (comprising 10 adjectives and 10 nouns) are selected based on the results obtained from the preliminary study. The words were distributed in a random sequence with each word being placed on a 6-point scale of 1 (not like him) to 6 (just like him). Each participant is required to rate each noun or adjective on the 6-point scale in terms of how well it described the victim in the vignette. Mean scores for each participant's rating of nouns and adjectives were subsequently calculated.

Using each participant's mean adjective score to deduct from the mean noun score constitutes one of the dependent variable of this study. If the resulting mean score is positive (significantly higher mean noun score than mean adjective score), it implies that the victim is more likely to be perceived in his social identity. Conversely, if the resulting mean score is negative (significantly higher mean adjective score than mean noun score), it implies that the victim is more likely to be perceived in his personal identity. As discussed earlier, an individual's social identity which comprises his membership in different social categories are best described using the category of nouns while adjectives described unique traits and behaviors of an individual which convey his personal identity (Klatzky & Andersen, 1988; Simon, 1997; Wyer & Srull, 1986).

Empathy, another dependent variable in this study, was measured using a 7-item questionnaire modified from Mehrabian and Epstein's (1972) measure of empathic tendency that has 33 items and a split-half reliability of .84. For this study, only 7 items were selected based on relevance, as some were found not relevant (for example, "people make too much of the feelings and sensitivity of animals" and "little children cry for no apparent reason"), and to prevent "questionnaire fatigue."

These questions were answered on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much so) in relation to the scenario in the vignette. Each subject's empathy score is obtained from the sum of their response to the 7 questions. A high score on this scale represents a high level of empathy while a low score corresponds to a low level of empathy.

In order to determine the at-risk and non-at-risk status of participants in this study, a behavioral checklist by A. C. E. Koh (1997) with a reliability alpha of .87 was used. A reliability alpha of .93 was obtained in this present study. This checklist consists of 13 items that were modified from the checklists of Emler, Reicher, and Ross (1987), and Leung and Lau (1989). On a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to

6 (very often), subjects were asked to rate the frequency of their behaviors from each of the 13 items. By summing each subject's responses to the 13 items in the checklist, a total score was obtained.

Procedures

Permission was sought and approval obtained from the Ministry of Education in Singapore prior to conducting the research. Students' consent to participate in the study was also obtained and their responses to the study were strictly confidential. The vignettes were randomly distributed with each participant being given one of the two vignettes. No time restriction was placed on the subjects to complete all the questions in the vignette.

Results

Identification of At-risk and Non-at-risk Groups

A median split was performed on the participants' scores on the behavioral checklist to obtain the at-risk and non-at-risk samples. Out of a sample of 383 students, 211 (144 boys, 67 girls) were classified as at-risk youths while 172 (91 boys, 81 girls) were categorized as non-at-risk youths.

Participants' Perceptions of Victim's Identity

A 2 (vignette: with or without peer mediation) \times 2 (behavioral status: at-risk or non-at-risk) \times 2 (gender: male or female) ANOVA was used to assess the influence of peer mediation, participants' behavioral status and gender on the participants' perception of the victim's identity. Results revealed an interaction effect between vignette and behavioral status ($F(1, 375) = 38.25, p < .05$). There were main effects for vignette ($F(1, 375) = 38.17, p < .05$) and behavioral status ($F(1, 375) = 51.48, p < .05$). No other significant effects were observed including gender.

Inspection of the relevant means and analysis of simple effects of the interaction between vignette and behavioral status indicated that at-risk youths were more likely to perceive the victim in his social

identity ($M = 3.09$, positive value: more nouns than adjectives, $SD = 8.73$) in a non-peer-mediation situation, whereas in a peer-mediation situation, they are more likely to perceive him in his personal identity ($M = -8.82$, negative value: more adjectives than nouns, $SD = 8.98$), $t(209) = 9.74$, $p < .05$. For the non-at-risk youths, they are more likely to perceive the victim in his personal identity in both non-peer-mediation ($M = -9.89$, negative value: more adjectives than nouns, $SD = 9.86$) and peer-mediation ($M = -9.88$, negative value: more adjectives than nouns, $SD = 8.14$) situations, $t(170) = -.005$, *ns*. A summary of the findings is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Perception of Victim's Identity as a Function of Vignette and Behavioral Status of Participants

Behavioral status	Vignette				<i>t</i>
	Non-peer mediation		Peer mediation		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
At-risk	3.09	8.73	-8.82	8.98	9.74*
Non-at-risk	-9.89	9.86	-9.88	8.14	-.005

* $p < .05$

Empathy

A 2 (vignette: with or without peer mediation) \times 2 (behavioral status: at-risk or non-at-risk) ANOVA was used to examine the influence of peer mediation and participants' behavioral status on the participants' level of empathy for the victim. Results revealed an interaction effect ($F(1, 379) = 4.70$, $p < .05$). There were main effects for behavioral status ($F(1, 379) = 22.31$, $p < .05$) and for vignette ($F(1, 379) = 4.82$, $p < .05$).

Closer inspection of the relevant means and analysis of the simple effects of the interaction between vignette and behavioral status revealed that at-risk youths had significantly higher empathy for the victim in a peer-mediation situation ($M = 29.77$, $SD = 6.51$) than in a non-peer-mediation situation ($M = 26.37$, $SD = 8.63$), $t(209) = -3.174$, $p < .05$. However non-at-risk youths did not differ significantly in their level of empathy for the victim in both peer-mediation ($M = 31.76$, $SD = 6.73$)

and non-peer-mediation ($M = 31.73$, $SD = 7.92$) situations, $t(170) = -.021$, *ns*. A summary of the results is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of *t*-test for At-risk and Non-at-risk Youths in Terms of Empathy

Behavioral status	Vignette				<i>t</i>
	Non-peer mediation		Peer mediation		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
At-risk	26.37	8.63	29.77	6.51	-3.174*
Non-at-risk	31.73	7.92	31.76	6.73	-.021

* $p < .05$

Discussion

Results of this study revealed that the at-risk youth is more likely to perceive the victim in his social identity in a non-peer-mediation situation whereas in a peer-mediation situation, the victim is more likely to be perceived in his personal identity. This is indicated by the significantly more positive mean difference score that the at-risk youths obtained in a non-peer-mediation situation than in a peer-mediation situation. Earlier on, research has established that social identity is derived from the social categories that a person belongs to and is formed on the basis of his membership in his social groups (Turner, 1987). It was also discussed that the essence of these social categories are best illustrated with using nouns. Nouns communicate a variety of specific behaviors and characteristics of individuals who belong to the same social category (Andersen et al., 1990; Hamilton et al., 1992). Subsequently, resolution of conflicts becomes likely to be less successful as the at-risk youth would perceive the victim (prefect) as member from a different social group.

Conversely, results revealed that the at-risk youths obtained a significantly negative mean difference score in a peer-mediation than non-peer-mediation situation. This implies that the at-risk youths perceived the victim in his personal identity. Personal identity of an individual refers to that aspect of the individual that differentiates him from other individuals. It includes traits and attributes that are uniquely

specific to the individual (Turner, 1987). As discussed earlier, adjectives best describe an individual's characteristics and trait-like features. They encode behaviors that are most revealing about an individual's personality and they tend to be narrow in meaning, not involving many other features. Traits defined in adjectival terms tend to convey a single enduring characteristic of the individual and it is consistent and stable (Andersen et al., 1990; Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Thus if an individual's personal identity refers to those self-categories (traits and attributes) that are possibly defined in adjectival terms, having a significantly negative mean difference score would indicate that the at-risk youths perceived the victim as a unique individual instead of as a prefect in a peer-mediation situation.

In contrast, the results revealed that the non-at-risk youths obtained not significantly different negative mean difference scores and they had higher mean adjective scores than mean noun scores in both peer-mediation and non-peer-mediation situations. This suggests that they perceived the victim in his personal identity in both peer-mediation and non-peer-mediation situations. A plausible explanation for this finding is that non-at-risk youths tend to be prosocial in their behavior. Research has found that friendships of at-risk youths differ the greatest from friendships of non-at-risk youths in terms of high levels of conflicts found in the at-risk group. In comparison, at-risk youths also tended to be academically weaker, more likely to drop out of school before graduation and play truant from school (Phillips, 1989; Skager, 1989). To a large extent, the victim being a prefect (also prosocial) would not be perceived to have a different social identity from the non-at-risk youths. These results suggested that non-at-risk youths would perceive the victim as a unique individual, in his personal identity.

In terms of empathy, the results showed that the at-risk youths had significantly greater empathy for the victim in a peer-mediation than non-peer-mediation situation. This means that the at-risk youths were more likely to empathize with the victim perceived in his personal identity, in a peer-mediation situation. They were less likely to empathize with the victim perceived in his social identity, in a non-peer-mediation situation. Conversely, no significant difference was detected in the empathy mean scores of the non-at-risk youths for the victim in both peer-mediation and non-peer-mediation situations. The victim (prefect) is perceived in his personal identity in both situations and the

non-at-risk youths, to a large extent, would express similar amounts of empathy for the victim in both peer-mediation and non-peer-mediation situations.

Implications

The implications of this study's findings indicate that conflicts between youths face a higher likelihood of being resolved using peer mediation. As discussed earlier, conflicts between youths often arise as a result of differences between the social groups that they belong to, that is, between their social identities (Garvey, 1984; Hay, 1984; Shantz, 1987). The results of this study suggested that with peer mediation, conflicts between youths with different social identities have a greater likelihood of being resolved, once the victim is perceived in his personal identity, as an individual with no attachments to any social group. In his personal identity, there is also a higher chance for the offender to display greater empathy for the victim. One important point to note also from the findings of this study is that although offenders in peer mediation tended to exhibit behaviors that are typical of at-risk youths, not all youths at-risk will necessarily become offenders of conflict.

More importantly, the results of this study advocate for a shift in the offender's perception of the victim's identity in order for conflicts to be mediated successfully. Prior to using peer mediation, the offender tends to perceive the victim of the conflict in his social identity which is different from the offender's. Empathy for the victim was also found to be low. The outcome of conflict resolution would then tend to be negative. In contrast, the results showed that during peer mediation, the offender is more likely to perceive the victim in his personal identity and correspondingly, empathy for the victim was also greater. Resolution of conflict would also be positive. To a large extent, results implied that conflicts are likely to be mediated if the offender shifts in his perception of his victim from social to that of personal.

A final point to note involves the generalizability of the findings obtained in this study. The study was conducted among secondary students from the Normal Academic and Technical streams in Singapore. The findings would therefore only be applicable to mediation sessions that involve students from these two academic streams.

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