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# “I’ve Got Your Back!”: The emotional influence of loyalty and fear of rejection on conformity and group compliance among adolescents

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# Abstract

The fear of rejection by peers has been investigated in past and present literature with regards to adolescent conformity. However, adolescents' loyalty to their friends has not yet been explored. Given Aotearoa New Zealand bicultural nature and Māori tikanga emphasis on whanaungatanga (or relationships), the influence of cultural factors on peer relationships was of particular interest in the current study. Kaupapa Māori research highlights that Māori and non-Māori think and act differently due to differing worldviews. Therefore, the decision to conform to one's peer group may be influenced by these differing perceptions. Participants included male adolescents (15 to 18 years old) from local high schools who responded to a scenario-based questionnaire relating to the processes and reasoning that influenced their decisions about everyday social situations. Two-factor analyses of variance were conducted, and comparisons were based on ethnicity (Māori and non-Māori), prime group (Loyalty and Rejection Fear) and scores on the loyalty and rejection fear Likert scales. The study found that Māori and non-Māori did not differ significantly with regards to feelings of loyalty toward or fear of being rejected by their peers. Participants were mostly conflicted in their decision making when there was more than one group of loyalties.

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# Foreword

*"Youth development happens through quality relationships"*

This is the basic assumption of the present thesis, which was conceived during a long period of working with young people considered "at risk" in today's society. I have had extensive experience of supporting adolescents who have been in trouble with the police, have difficulties making helpful choices in situations that involve risk or peer pressures, and those that have been raised in environments that have not been conducive to learning how to form safe and stable relationships.

Adolescents in families who have experienced significant economic losses, or who live in chronic poverty, are at heightened risk of psychological difficulties and "problem" behavior. Research on economic strain and its impact on the adolescent indicates that the main effects of financial stress are transmitted to the adolescent through the negative impact they have on parents' mental health and marital relations (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Generally speaking, parents under financial strain are harsher, more inconsistent, and less involved as parents, which in turn, lead to problems for their children. Poor children are more likely to be exposed to violence, feel alienated from school, and have higher overall stress levels, all of which can contribute to mental health problems.

The impact of these factors has hindered adolescent decision making and can often increase the young person's vulnerability to emotional difficulties, crime or mental illness. The evidence shows that adolescents' frontal lobes of their brains may not be

fully developed until their early twenties, and this is the area that is in charge of logic and common sense! So couple these factors with general adolescent stressors and we have a recipe for a "fork in the road." Which path the adolescent goes down is heavily based on their decision making ability, their attitude towards themselves and/or life, experiences gained, opportunities available, and the support (parental, peer and community) around them. Parents can adopt family management and communication principles such as using promotive strategies (strengthening an adolescent's confidence), or restrictive strategies (minimising an adolescent's exposure to danger), which may alleviate some of the challenges.

A significant new trend in psychology is known as "positive psychology". Initiated by Martin Seligman, positive psychology emphasises people's inherent strengths and resilience and focuses on the abilities of clients rather than their dysfunction. Young people are heavily influenced by their peer group. If we want to understand adolescent behaviour we need to know more about the factors that might make it easier for teenagers to resist negative peer influence without sacrificing their group identity and their perception of loyalty.

## Youth Development

The current research study adopted a framework consistent with the Government's Action on Child and Youth Development work programme, incorporating key principles from the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA; Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002). In particular the six key principles of the YDSA are embedded as themes

into the chapters, urging the reader keep these principles in mind as they approach the current research and further research relating to youth.

In brief, the Strategy's vision is to create "a country where young people are vibrant and optimistic through being supported and encouraged to take up challenges" (p. 7). The process by which this is achieved is through a commitment and belief in the following key principles:

1. Youth development is shaped by the "big picture";
2. Youth development is about young people being connected;
3. Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach;
4. Youth development happens through quality relationships;
5. Youth development is triggered when young people fully participate; and
6. Youth development needs good information.

In relation to this present study, I share the Strategy's belief that young people can grow up knowing they can contribute positively to their community or friendship group, have quality connections, have a choice in the way their lives play out, and feel positive about their identity and skills. This also in turn, helps the Strategy's vision to be played out, thereby contributing to this process.