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Expectations on Adolescent  
Delinquency

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THE INTERACTION OF PEER AND ADULT EXPECTATIONS  
ON ADOLESCENT DELINQUENCY

by

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Recently much research has attempted to find causal factors that influence adolescents' success or failure in social roles. Researchers have examined various aspects of adolescent behavior such as educational aspirations and educational failure, occupational aspirations or lack of them, and delinquent and conforming behavior. Some writers have suggested that adolescents belong to a distinct subculture, influenced more by peers than by their parents (Cohen, 1955; Coleman, 1961). Others see familial socialization and parental influence as primary in guiding adolescent self-image and actions (Kandel and Lesser, 1958). The studies are most commonly constructed in an either/or fashion, examining how either peers or family shape adolescent behavior. Consequently, there are no conclusive data on the comparative influence of parents and peers on teenage delinquency.

Recent attention has also focused on male and female differences in delinquent behavior. Publicity centers on the rise in female crime in recent years. Yet studies over the past ten to fifteen years that use anonymous questionnaires suggest that male and female adolescents report similar patterns of delinquent activity. The sex differences in official statistics are a result of different responses from the authorities (Hindelang, 1971, 1973; Gray, 1976).

In this paper we examine, the relative influence of parents, peers and teachers on males' and females' delinquent proclivity. Much has been written on peer and parental influences on adolescent behavior (Jensen, 1972; Cohen, 1955; Liska, 1969; Williams, 1972; Herriott, 1963; Brookover and Thomas, 1962); and recent evidence assigns more and more importance to school structure and teacher attitudes as important determinants of adolescent behavior (Kelly and Balch, 1971; Kelly, 1971; Kelly and Pink, 1972; Kelly, 1974; Rhodes and Reiss, 1969; Polk and Schafer, 1972). Herriot (1963) and Brookover and Thomas (1962) found that adolescents' perceptions of the expectations of parents, peers and teachers significantly influenced their educational aspirations.

This research uses these three reference groups in predicting delinquency of males and females. Self-report data collected from all seventh grade students attending two junior high schools in the Seattle area in 1964 are used. The data were gathered under the direction of Leroy C. Gould with the expectation that they could be used for predicting and identifying high risk delinquent seventh grade youth (see Gould, 1969; Berleman, et. al., 1972; Harding, 1972). As noted above, it is important to use self-report data when comparing the impact of reference groups on male and female delinquency to control for the influence of sex difference in arrest patterns.

#### Theoretical Background

Our examination of the nature and extent of peer and adult-oriented conformity by male and female adolescents, has two important aims: 1) determining if single or multiple reference groups influence individual decisions; and 2) examining any differences in the patterns of influences on male and female delinquency.

The significance for adolescents of specific others in varying social structures ought to reflect the importance of those structures (Schwartz and Baden, 1973). As proposed by the symbolic interactionists, what people think of themselves is a function of their perception of what others reflect back about their behavior. Yet, the process is not so simple as mirror-reflections of societal response. Having perceived the responses of others to their behavior, people may accept and fit them into their sense of self; or they may reject or even ignore these responses (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, in order to understand the actor it is imperative to understand the audience with which the actor interacts, specifically, which responses are incorporated and which rejected. Thus, if one were solely involved in a peer culture, adopted it as one's own and perceived parents as separate from self, there is no reason to expect parents or other adults to be significant others. However, if the actor sees him/herself as located in several social systems, e.g. family,

school and peer group, then one must say that from the actor's standpoint these are "multiple-role set determinants" (Schwartz and Baden, 1973).

Yet, the self is not just shaped by others. As George Herbert Mead asserted, human beings can be the object of their own actions. While the self may be initially influenced by significant others in shaping delinquent self concepts, once these influences are acted upon, by committing delinquent acts, self reacts to his/her own actions and the perceived expectations of others en toto, and on that basis projects future delinquent actions. Thus, we must examine not only the relative influence of peer group, family and school, but also the influence of ego's own actions on future behavior.

Beyond establishing the multiplicity versus singularity of reference groups, we compare the relative influence of teachers, parents, peers, and self on delinquent behavior for each sex group. Given the nature of sex roles in this society there is some reason to believe that there could be sex differences in the patterns of influence of these three reference groups on male and female delinquent behavior. What little comparative work has been done on male and female delinquent behavior is contradictory and focuses on the delinquent actions of males, without much regard for the relative influence of significant others on the behaviors of members of each sex.

Differential role expectations for males and females, sex differences in socialization patterns and application of social control, structurally determined differences in opportunities to commit particular offenses, and differential access or pressures toward criminally oriented subcultures and careers all influence male and female delinquent behavior differently (Hoffman-Bustamente, 1973). Yet, the pattern of delinquency as determined from self-report data remains basically the same for both sexes (Hindelang, 1971, 1973, Gray, 1976). Also paradoxically, while Cohen (1955) sees females as not subject to the peer subculture he describes as appropriate for understanding male delinquency, Hindelang (1971, 1973) found

female delinquency to be essentially the same in patterning as male delinquency. This similarity in the relative frequency and nature of offenses reported by males and females could imply a similarity in influence by significant others.

Clearly, the situational dependency of reference group influence on delinquent behavior is unsettled at best. Moreover, information on similarities and differences between the sex groups is sparse. This analysis will help clarify the influence of peers, parents, teachers, and self on male and female delinquent behavior. By taking on the subjective view of the actor via self-report data, the direct referential influences of these groups on delinquency behavior is compared between the sexes.

#### Methodology

Multiple regression analysis is used to determine the relative influence of the expectations of parents, peers and teachers and the reported delinquent behavior of peers on the students' self-reported delinquency. Secondly, assuming that not only expectations and behaviors of others, but one's own behavior influence future actions, we explore the influences of these variables on projected future delinquency. These analyses are performed separately for each sex group so we can specify and compare the relative influence of the reference groups on the formation of delinquent behavior.

The data used in this study are self-reports of delinquent behavior. The respondents were assured that they would remain anonymous. Data from 162 females and 358 males are used in this analysis.

The students were given questionnaires on which they were asked questions related to delinquent involvement. Specifically, they were to respond to the inquiry: "Have you done these things? If so, how often?" Nine items were listed: 1) Drive a car without a driver's license; 2) Skip school without an excuse; 3) Disobey parents' authority (to their faces); 4) Take little things which do not belong to you (worth

less than \$2); 5) Buy or drink beer, wine or liquor (including drinking at home); 6) Run away from home; 7) To on purpose damage or destroy things that do not belong to you; 8) Threaten another kid for money; 9) Beat up kids who haven't done anything to you. The student could respond in one of four ways to each item: often, sometimes, seldom, or never.

The responses were collapsed into positive and negative categories: often, sometimes and seldom as positive answers, never as a negative response. The positive replies were assigned a score of 1, negative answers a score of 2; and the sum of the student's response to all nine items was calculated. This composite score was considered the measure of an individual's delinquency. Similar computations were made for replies to the following questions: "Would your friends expect you to do any of these things? How often?;" "What about your parents; would they expect you to do any of these things? How often?;" "What about your teachers; would they expect you to do any of these things? How often?;" "Have your friends done any of these things? If so, how often?;" and "Do you think you might do any of these things in the near future? How often?"

## Results

### Univariate Distributions

Each of the composite variables has a range of 9, from a lower limit of 9 to an upper limit of eighteen. The closer a score is to 18 the more conventional or pro-social that score is. Summary descriptive statistics for each variable are given in Table One.

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Table One About Here  
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Several comparisons may be made with the results in Table One.<sup>1</sup> The most striking thing in the data is the overall similarity in delinquent behavior patterns reported by both males and females. Upon closer examination we find that while males report more delinquent behavior than females at the present ( $t=-4.346$ ,  $df=518$ ,  $p(\text{two-tail}) < .001$ ), greater expectations by peers, parents, and teachers for delinquency ( $t=-3.466$ ,  $df=518$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $t=-2.867$ ,  $df=518$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and  $t=-3.251$ ,  $df=518$ ,  $p < .01$  respectively), and greater delinquent behavior of friends ( $t=-3.053$ ,  $df=518$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than do the females, the females anticipate more delinquent behavior than males in the future ( $t=5.674$ ,  $df=518$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Accordingly, when we compare the level of future delinquency expected with the self-report, we find the two figures quite similar for the males ( $t=.13$ ,  $df=357$ ,  $p=.901$ ), yet strikingly different for the females ( $t=17.56$ ,  $df=161$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with more delinquent acts expected in the future. Perhaps this increasingly delinquent projection of behavior is a manifestation of the adolescent girl's desire to exert more control over her environment or to be more of an adult in her actions, for example by drinking alcohol or driving a car. Certainly, these acts might be viewed by the more rapidly maturing 7th grade girl as things which she could or might do in the near future to assert an adult self-concept.

The perceived expectations of peers are closer to the student's reports of delinquent behavior than their perceptions of either parents' or teachers' expectations. That is, when we compare the females' self-reported delinquency with their perception of their friends' expectations, we find that the scores are virtually identical ( $t=.31$ ,  $df=161$ ,  $p=0.761$ ); whereas comparisons with parental and teacher expectations show large differences ( $t=7.09$ ,  $df=161$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $t=6.30$ ,  $df=161$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Similar results appear with the male data. A comparison of self-reports and peer expectations yield a  $t$  value of 0.86 ( $df=357$ ,  $p=.388$ ), while comparisons with parental and teacher expectations show much larger differences ( $t=14.12$ ,  $df=357$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $t=9.94$ ,  $df=357$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Both males and females report their friends as being more involved in delinquent activities than themselves ( $t=-8.07$ ,  $df=357$ ,  $p < .001$  for males and  $t=-7.02$ ,  $df=161$ ,  $p < .001$  for females). Females anticipate more future delinquency



than their friends now have ( $t=5.46$ ,  $df=161$ ,  $p<.001$ ), while males see their future delinquency as less in magnitude than their friends' current activities ( $=-7.81$ ,  $df=357$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Finally, we note the similar perceptions of adult expectations, especially with the females. In the sample of junior high girls, the perceived expectations of teachers are virtually identical to the perceived expectations of parents ( $t=0.06$ ,  $df=161$ ,  $p=0.951$ ), while differences with the males are not overwhelmingly large ( $t=1.75$ ,  $df=357$ ,  $p=.081$ ). In contrast, both the expectations and actual reported delinquency of peers are consistently and overwhelmingly different than the expectations of the adults.

Bivariate Associations

Table 2 gives the zero-order Pearson correlation coefficients between future delinquency expectations, self-reported delinquency, the expectations of parents, peers, and teachers, and the reported delinquency of peers.

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Table Two About Here

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These zero-order correlations are all high enough that we may reject the null hypothesis of no association at the .001 level of significance. Thus, the relationships between the variables can be characterized as positive and strong, and we can suggest 1) that the students' perceived expectations of peers, parents and teachers are positively related to delinquent behavior, both initially and with the future projections; and 2) that students' past actions may enter as a dominant influence in shaping future delinquent leanings. However, to fully understand the nature of these influences we turn to multiple regression analysis.

Multivariate Analysis<sup>2</sup>

The multiple regression equations are given in Table 3.

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Table 3 About Here

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We first use the expectations of parents, peers and teachers as predictors of self-reported delinquency (equation 1 and 5). This allows us to observe the independent influence of the perceived expectations of each reference group on delinquent behavior. Then, still using self-reported delinquency as a dependent variable, the actual delinquency of peers is added as an independent variable (equations 2 and 6). Third, the relative influence of self-reported delinquency, and the expectations of parents, peers and teachers on future delinquency is computed (equations 3 and 7), and finally the actual delinquency of peers is added to the equation as a predictor variable (equation 4).

First, it is important to note that from 38% to 58% of the variation of the dependent variables is explained by linear associations with the independent variables. This indicates that the variables included in the equations can indeed explain a good deal of the variation in the behavior of the students.

Second, in all the prediction equations, expectations of peers are of more predictive value than expectations of parents or teachers. This pattern does not hold for the actual behavior of peers, which provides about the same explanatory value as parental expectations in predicting future delinquency of males, but no help in predicting the projected future delinquency of females, a result that may come from the moderate collinearity noted above (footnote 2).

The expectations of parents are usually of more predictive value than the expectations of teachers. The only exception is in equation 7, where the future

delinquency of females is the dependent variable.

Turning now to the equations themselves, we first examine the predictions of self-reported delinquency (eqs. 1, 2, 5, and 6). With the males the expectations of parents exert a significant influence in both equations 1 and 2. When the influence of parental and peer expectations is controlled, teacher expectations exert a negative influence on male self-reported delinquency. This reaches a level of significance in equation 2 when the actual behavior of peers enters the equation. That is, when peer behavior is added as a variable, the influence of peer expectations drops, but remains the most important influence; the influence of parental expectations drops slightly; and the influence of teacher expectations becomes even more negative. With the females, the expectations of peers, parents, and teachers are all positive predictors of self-reported delinquency, but only the influence of peer expectations is substantial. When the actual behavior of peers is added to the equation, each of the other coefficients declines and the behavior of peers is the most important predictor with the expectations of peers second in importance. Neither parental nor teacher expectations is a significant influence.

While there is an overall similarity in the predictions of male and female self-reports, there are some differences. The influence of peers is most important in all the equations, yet the expectations of parents and teachers only enter significantly into the prediction equations for males. The influence of adults with the females is insignificant. This is true whether or not the actual delinquency of peers is included in the equation. Moreover, the influence of peers is higher with the females than with the males (contrast  $b=.518$  in eq. 5 with  $b=.395$  in equation 1); and more of the total variation of female delinquency than male delinquency is explained by the expectations and behaviors of others.

In predicting future delinquency we again find slightly dissimilar patterns with the males and females, but of a different nature. As before, parental expectations influence future delinquent plans of boys, but are of no significance in explaining

the future delinquency of girls. In contrast to the predictions of self-reported delinquency, the expectations of teachers are of no importance in predicting the delinquency of males, but do have a slight positive influence on the future plans of the females. With the males expectations of peers and self-reported delinquency exert about the same influence on projections of future activities. When the behavior of peers is added to the model it contributes almost as much explanatory power as the expectations of parents. In contrast, with females, the most important predictor of future delinquency is the self-report of current activity. The expectations of peers are next in importance, but exert a much smaller influence. The actual behavior of peers adds no explanatory power to the equation.

#### Discussion

Our aim in this analysis has been to 1) determine the extent to which multiple reference groups influence self-reported delinquency of adolescents and 2) to compare the nature of this influence for boys and for girls. From the above discussion we may conclude that parents, peers and teachers each influence the amount of delinquency young people report and expect in the future, and that, with some exceptions, the overall patterning of influence is similar for boys and girls, a finding ignored in research. Often the impact of each reference group is not equal. In general, the influence of expectations of peers on self-reports of current delinquency and on anticipated future delinquency is higher than the expectations of parents and teachers when the other variables are statistically controlled. The actual level of peer delinquency is as important as peer expectations in influencing self-reports of delinquency, but drops strongly in importance in equations predicting future delinquent acts. The greater influence of peers than adults is reasonable when we consider the relative amount of time young people spend with members of these reference groups. This explanation may also account for the greater influence of parents than teachers that occurs especially in the predictions for males.

Explanations related to time spent with reference groups, however, cannot explain the differing degree of influence from each reference group found with males and females. In examining influences on self-reported delinquency, we find that females are much more strongly influenced by the expectations and actions of their peers than by the expectations of their parents or teachers. The differential influence of peers and adults is much smaller with the boys. This difference could be a manifestation of the females' more rapid maturation, which would place them more squarely in the peer subculture than their male counterparts. Cohen (1955) argued that females are not subject to the peer subculture he describes as appropriate for understanding male delinquency. Ironically, this argument is not substantiated by our data. Rather, females seem to be more peer conscious than males of the same age (12 or 13).

Differences between the sex groups persist when we examine influences on projected future delinquency. Females turn to their past actions as a primary determinant of their future delinquent actions, and then with much less impact to peer expectations and teacher expectations. Both the previous actions of the males and the expectations of peers provide an important impact on their anticipated future delinquency with parental expectations and actual delinquency of peers having a smaller influence. Teachers have no significant influence on future delinquency for males. The fact that females turn to their own past delinquent actions before others is another indication of their greater maturity than males of a comparable age. The females may be more inner-directed, while the males are more other-directed in making anticipations for self.

The reversing influence of parental and teacher expectations from males to females, while interesting, should not be overemphasized because of the relatively low magnitude of the coefficients involved. What is important is the sparsity of adult influences on female anticipations of future delinquency. This may be seen as further indication of females seeking maturity and independence, disavowing parental influences as

secondary to their own and peer perceptions. Males, on the other hand, are more easily influenced by perceived parental expectations. They have as yet not dis-associated themselves from their parents, in present or future considerations.

The fact that teacher expectations do not enter into future male anticipations for delinquent actions could simply result from sampling error. However, if we are to accept the finding that teachers do negatively influence self-reported delinquency of males and do not influence their future delinquent actions, then we must propose a different causal model for males than females in the analysis of teachers as an influence in delinquency. Perhaps the influence of teachers on males does not extend to any appreciable degree beyond the school environment. That is, teachers, perhaps because they are generally females in a grade school setting, are not significant models to seventh grade boys. In fact, students may even contradict their teachers' expectations for current behavior leading to the negative associations in equations 1 and 2 in Table 3. Their expectations would have little effect in the long run leading to the results seen in equations 3 and 4. Obviously the question of the influence of teachers deserves further analysis. Certainly this discussion is not to be confused with the significant influence the school structure has on children's self-concept and their belief in their ability or inability to be successful due to that structure (cf. Polk and Schafer, 1972).

#### Summary and Conclusions

In this paper we examined influences of selected reference groups on the self-reported and future anticipated delinquency of early adolescent males and females. Using a symbolic interactionist approach we suggested that people develop their self-definitions and actions from their interpretations of the expectations of others. One's own actions also influence not only the interpretations of other's expectations but future actions as well. We used multiple regression analysis to examine the relative influence of friends, parents and teachers on delinquency of a group of

seventh grade students in the northwest. From 38% to 58% of the variation of the dependent measures of delinquency was explained by the prediction equations. Separate analyses were made for males and females and the results were compared.

The most obvious conclusion we can make from the above data is that adolescent seventh graders are influenced by peers, adults and selves in developing delinquent behavior patterns. and, to a large extent, females and males are similarly influenced by these groups and act out in similar patterns. Interestingly, females appear to be more influenced by their peers than do their male counterparts. However, when moving from initial self-reports to future delinquency anticipations for self, the girl's own self-concept as represented by her self-reported delinquency is more highly associated with what delinquent acts she will commit in the future than her perceptions of either peer or adult expectations. This is not true for the boys. While peer influences are most important, the influence of parents is by no means insignificant. Teacher expectations, although they do not enter into females' initial delinquent proclivity and negatively influence males' initial self-report, become a slight influence in future female delinquent acts while the influence of parents drops to approximately zero.

Aside from the relative position each independent variable plays in determining adolescent self concept as regards delinquency, it is important to remember that both adults and peers influence adolescents at some point in their delinquent career. The fact that peer influence is heavier than the influence of either parents or teachers lends credence to peer subculture theories of delinquency. Yet, the influence of self is also important. Perhaps peer subculture theories would do well to broaden their scope within the symbolic interactionist framework. That is, although peer expectations may initiate an adolescent along a delinquent path, the total effect of adolescent peers, adults, and their own reaction to themselves encompasses the largest percentage of the total variance of delinquency, and it is within this broader interactional picture that we may find the most explanatory value.

Table One

Means and Standard Deviations of Each Measure

Variable	Females		Males	
	$\bar{X}$	s	$\bar{X}$	s
Future Delinquency	14.852	1.597	15.938	2.189
Self-Report Delinquency	16.667	1.687	15.927	1.843
Peers' Delinquency	15.735	2.426	15.045	2.362
Peers' Expectations	16.704	1.949	16.017	2.309
Parents' Expectation	17.562	0.870	17.229	1.336
Teachers' Expectations	17.556	1.266	17.075	1.668
	n=162		n=358	

Lower score indicates more reported delinquency.



Table Two

Zero-order Pearson Product Moment Correlations  
Between the Measures

		Females					
	Self Report	Future Delinquency	Peer Expectations	Parent Expectations	Teacher Expectations	Peer Delinq.	
Self Report	1.000						
Future Delinq.	.680	1.000					
Peer Expect.	.648	.551	1.000				
Parent Expect.	.348	.329	.428	1.000			
Teacher Expect.	.285	.327	.357	.341	1.000		
Peer Delinq.	.717	.543	.745	.351	.293	1.000	

  

		Males					
	Self Report	Future Delinquency	Peer Expectations	Parents Expectations	Teacher Expectations	Peer Delinq.	
Self Report	1.000						
Future Delinq.	.661	1.000					
Peer Expect.	.576	.670	1.000				
Parent Expect.	.435	.456	.405	1.000			
Teacher Expect.	.228	.303	.382	.405	1.000		
Peer Delinquency	.539	.549	.558	.333	.350	1.000	

Table Three

Multiple Regression Equations of Influences on Delinquency

Males

- (1)  $SR = 4.663 + .395 \text{ PrEx} + .360 \text{ PaEx} - .074 \text{ TeEx}$   $R^2 = .3833$   
 (109.735)c (29.781)c (2.013)
- (2)  $SR = 4.332 + .282 \text{ PrEx} + .235 \text{ PrDel} + .323 \text{ PaEx} - .119 \text{ TeEX}$   $R^2 = .4432$   
 (49.017)c (38.010)c (26.310)c (5.591)a
- (3)  $FuDel = -1.063 + .377 \text{ PrEx} + .444 \text{ SR} + .207 \text{ PaEx} + .019 \text{ TeEx}$   $R^2 = .5752$   
 (78.137)c (71.477)c (9.349)b (0.136)
- (4)  $FuDel = -.998 + .338 \text{ PrEx} + .392 \text{ SR} + .206 \text{ PaEx} + .123 \text{ PrDel} - .008 \text{ TeEx}$   $R^2 = .5856$  (0.024)  
 (58.579)c (51.722)c (9.481)b (8.909)

Females

- (5)  $SR = 4.345 + .518 \text{ PrEx} + .148 \text{ PaEx} + .060 \text{ TeEx}$   $R^2 = .4278$   
 (75.937)c (1.250) (0.473)
- (6)  $SR = 4.965 + .362 \text{ PrDel} + .192 \text{ PrEx} + .115 \text{ PaEx} + .044 \text{ TeEx}$   $R^2 = .5482$   
 (41.862)c (6.934)b (0.943) (0.310)
- (7)  $FuDel = .6211 + .514 \text{ SR} + .117 \text{ PrEx} + .135 \text{ TeEX} + .077 \text{ PaEx}$   $R^2 = .4966$   
 (52.590)c (3.293) (2.944) (0.419)

PrDel does not add any explanatory power to the prediction of FuDel.

SR -- Self reported delinquency  
 PrEx -- Expectations of peers  
 PaEx -- Expectations of Parents

TeEx -- Expectations of teachers  
 PrDel -- Reported delinquency of peers  
 FuDel -- Future delinquency of students

- a) significant at .05 level  
 b) significant at .01 level  
 c) significant at .001 level

1. Two different methods were used in computing the t statistics in this section. When comparisons are made within a sample, for instance, between females' self reported and future delinquency, difference scores must be used. That is, we must compute the difference between the self reported score and the future delinquency score of each student, average these differences and test the hypothesis that this mean difference is significantly different from zero ( $H_0: D \neq 0$ ;  $H_1: D = 0$ ). When we make comparisons between the two samples, for instance, between the self reported delinquency of males and females, we compute the mean of each sample and then test the hypothesis that the difference of these means is significantly different from zero ( $H_0: \mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$ ;  $H_1: \mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ ). Two-tailed tests are used throughout this section.

2. Following Johnston's (1972: 159-164) suggestion, we used the multiple correlation coefficients between the independent variables to search for presence of multicollinearity. The only pair of variables that was found to be highly dependent on each other was the perceived delinquency expectations of peers and the actual delinquency of peers for the females, with over half the variance of one variable explained by its linear association with the other ( $r^2 = .550$ ). Although with the males these two variables were related, the relationship is not as strong. Actual delinquency of friends of the females is used as a predictor in only one of the equations in Table 3. Care should be taken in its interpretation.

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