Reactions to an Ambiguous Hypothetical Peer Group: Evidence for an Adolescent Imaginary Audience?

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REACTIONS TO AN AMBIGUOUS HYPOTHETICAL PEER GROUP: EVIDENCE FOR AN ADOLESCENT IMAGINARY AUDIENCE?

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The theory of adolescent egocentrism holds that early adolescents mistakenly assume others are watching and evaluating their every move. A key component of this theory is that adolescents create and react to an imaginary audience that they believe is constantly watching and evaluating them. This tendency is thought to explain increased self-consciousness and susceptibility to peer pressure during early adolescence. Sensitivity to an imaginary audience is said to diminish by late adolescence. The origins of adolescents’ imaginary audience sensitivity has eluded empirical verification, and has also been difficult to operationalize. One of the goals of the following study was to refine the measurement of imaginary audience sensitivity, an area often cited as being in need of researchers’ efforts. The other was to see if, compared to other age groups, early adolescents are more likely to believe others are always watching and evaluating them. Pre-adolescents, early, middle, and late adolescents (N = 598) were presented with a hypothetical peer group conversation about another peer. Participants were told only that the target was either the participant him or herself, or one of two other, same-sex peers. While the comments were clearly evaluative, it was not clear whether they were admiring or critical in nature (e.g., "I can’t believe that he did that" and "I don’t remember her being this way last year"). The findings did not support the notion that early adolescents believe others are always watching and criticizing them. Across and within all four age groups studied, only about 1 in 5 participants believed that the group was talking about them. The best predictor of that belief was a positive interpretation of the group’s evaluative comments (i.e., as admiring). Overall, the results do not provide evidence for an early adolescent imaginary audience.