

The Function and Application of Peer Groups in College Ideological and Political Education

Zhuli Feng

Department of Marxism, Shandong Women's University, Jinan, China

Email: 18851725530@163.com

How to cite this paper: Feng, Z. L. (2023). The Function and Application of Peer Groups in College Ideological and Political Education. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 298-304.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.118020>

Received: July 26, 2023

Accepted: August 15, 2023

Published: August 18, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Peer groups play an irreplaceable role in the process of young people's socialization. With the help of Peer groups, ideological and political education can achieve twice the result with half the effort. Peer groups have significant characteristics in the formation mechanism, internal relations, cultural characteristics and core strength, which determines the function of satisfying the individual's inner sense of belonging and identity, influencing the values and behaviors of group members by inducing conformity behavior, and carrying out ideological education by example in a subtle way. Ideological and political educators in colleges should treat peer groups rationally, pay attention to training informal leaders, check peer group culture, and promote horizontal communication among peer groups, so as to make peer groups into a sharp tool for ideological and political education.

Keywords

Peer Groups, Colleges, Ideological and Political Education, Function, Application

1. Introduction

Peer groups exist widely among young people. It is an important process and place for young people to change from the family center to the social center, and plays an irreplaceable role in the socialization of young people. It is no exaggeration to say that the influence of peer groups on the growth of young people is no less than that of parents and teachers, and even ranks first among some young people (Chen, 2006). However, this social group with deep potential education value has been ignored to a certain extent. Since the major and discipline of ideological and political education were officially established in colleges in 1984, researchers have attached great importance to the study of ideological and polit-

ical education, but their attention has mostly focused on the three main subjects of colleges, society and families, while few researches centering on peer groups. In order to give full play to the positive role in ideological and political education in colleges, it is worth studying the connotation and characteristics of peer groups, and analyzing their function and application in ideological and political education in colleges. We firmly believe that the application of peer groups will well improve the effectiveness of ideological and political education in colleges.

2. Connotation and Characteristics of Peer Groups

From a sociological perspective, a peer group is defined as “a group of people of roughly similar social status and usually of similar age” (Cao & Wu, 2019). Specifically, it refers to an informal group composed of people who are similar in age and status, have roughly the same hobbies, values and behaviors, and often interact with each other. Generally speaking, peer groups have typical group characteristics in four aspects: formation mechanism, internal relations, cultural characteristics and core strength. Next, this article will discuss one by one.

2.1. From the Perspective of Formation Mechanism, Peer Groups are Informal Groups Formed Spontaneously

The formation of peer groups is not forced by school or family, but the product of the free combination of young people according to their own will. The same interests, values, upbringing, and even a common dislike can become the bonds that form a group. At the same time, as a spontaneous and informal group, peer groups do not have strict criteria, procedures and rules for membership (Tan, 2012), and the admission and release of members are more arbitrary, and members have the freedom to join in and withdraw at any time. In terms of identification, peer groups do not have a unified identity, but mainly rely on the relationship and activities between members.

2.2. From the Perspective of Internal Relations, Individuals Are Equal and Closely Connected with Each Other

Although there are some differences in the ability, personality and family background, there is no such situation as “ranking by generation” in peer groups. On the contrary, the members interact with each other based on equality (Meng, 2011). It is precisely this kind of equal and harmonious atmosphere that stimulates individual’s inner sense of belonging and identity, meeting their emotional and psychological needs. As a result, the peer group is endowed with a higher existence value. In order to continuously obtain this sense of identity and belonging, members will naturally have an internal psychological tendency to maintain the group, and then form a close unity.

2.3. From the Perspective of Cultural Characteristics, Each Peer Group Has Its Own Unique Group Culture

Culture is the characteristic that sets one group apart from another. To some ex-

tent, we can also view group culture as the values or behavioral norms commonly upheld by a certain group. The formation of group culture is a process of dynamic accumulation of consensus: based on common habits and attitudes, members further gather consensus through frequent and free communication activities, and then integrate into their own group culture. There are various forms and diverse contents of group culture. For example, the culture of some groups is the members' common standards of likes and dislikes, or similarities in language wording or dressing (Zhao & Zheng, 2018), and some are similar in dress. In view of the personality differences of group members, peer group culture has strong and weak points. For example, some group members tend to have a strong sense of existence, which will form a distinct and strong group culture; Some group members prefer to be silent and low-key, and the group culture is so hidden that even the members don't realize they have a unique culture. However, regardless of whether the group culture is strong or weak, once formed, its appeal and binding force will gradually increase. Through different group cultures, we can also interpret and judge the characteristics of a certain peer group.

2.4. In Terms of Core Strength, Each Peer Group Generally Has an Informal Leader

In a peer group, there is often a leader-like figure. Of course, this so-called leader is neither elected nor appointed, but is naturally formed because of his outstanding ability and is respected by other members, and we can call it an informal leader. Compared with other members, informal leaders have the following characteristics: outstanding ability and highly supported; have a greater say in group decision-making; be good at observing and adjusting the group atmosphere; able to protect the interests of group members. Informal leaders have a strong guiding function within groups, which determines potential application value in ideological and political education in colleges.

3. The Function of Peer Groups in Ideological and Political Education in Colleges

When carrying out ideological and political education, colleges may take some mandatory measures to achieve ideal teaching goals, which cause students' aversion and weaken the effect of education. Entirely different, general characteristics of peer groups determines that it is on the basis of equal relationship that the members of the peer group communicate with each other, which is beneficial to carry out deep-level communication and is easier to generate physical and mental pleasure and ideological resonance. Therefore, the role of peer groups in ideological and political education in colleges should not be underestimated, but worth digging deeply.

3.1. Meet the Individual's Inner Sense of Belonging and Identity, and Keep Individuals in a Good Mental State for Education

The inner sense of belonging and identity are very important psychological basis

in the process of young people's growth. Far from parents and hometown, college students are exposed to unfamiliar environments and new interpersonal relationships, so they urgently need the recognition and support of new groups. The peer group formed spontaneously based on commonality has become the first choice of many college students. Common hobbies and growth experiences can stimulate emotional identification and psychological dependence among members, and then satisfy individual's inner sense of belonging and identity (Wu & Zhang, 2019; Chen, 2014), keeping individuals in a good physical and mental state, so that to lay a good psychological foundation for receiving ideological and political education.

3.2. Influence Group Members' Values and Behaviors by Inducing Conformity Behavior

In the context of legal negligence, conformity is a universal psychological phenomenon and behavior pattern. It means that individuals are guided or pressured by the group to give up their own opinions and conform to the majority to avoid punishment. Conformity is an important way to transmit interpersonal influence within the peer group. In order to gain the acceptance and recognition of the group, individuals must show themselves in line with the group's characteristics, and this depersonalization in turn, reinforces group commonality. With the close communication of members within the group, conformity behavior is constantly strengthened, and the influence of peer groups on individual values and behaviors is gradually deepened, and there may even be a phenomenon that the influence of peer group is far more than that of school and family. It is worth noting that the influence of peer groups on individuals is dual, there are both positive guidance and negative penetration. Therefore, ideological and political educators in colleges should strengthen guidance and dig deep into the positive effects of peer groups to help individuals build good moral character.

3.3. The Role Models in the Peer Group Imperceptibly Carry out Ideological and Political Education

According to Bandura's social learning theory, human learning can be divided into two types: participatory learning and alternative learning. The latter refers to learning by observing and imitating others' behavior. There is no doubt that role models, as positive objects of alternative learning, have very important thought-leading value. Role models in peer groups mostly play a role in the form of implicit education, that is, other members receive education unconsciously by observing the externalized role model behavior naturally and without obvious interaction, and the change of ideological values also occurs subtly. A good example can give full play to the exemplary role of leading, driving members to the overall good.

4. The Path of Ideological and Political Education with the Help of Peer Groups

M. Mead, an American social psychologist, believes that in modern society, most

of the learning of the younger or older generation takes place among peers, and the influence of the peer group is even great enough to change the traditional way of cultural transmission (Zhang, 2019). Therefore, carrying out ideological and political education with the help of peer groups can not only help to win more subject power on the basis of family, school and society, but also improve the effectiveness of ideological and political education (Yun & Pang, 2022).

4.1. Take a Rational View of Peer Groups, and Lay a Good Foundation for Ideological and Political Education

It is an indisputable fact that peer groups exist widely among young people and play an important role in the young's socialization. In order to carry out ideological and political education with the help of peer groups, we must take a rational attitude and accept it positively, but not regard it as a "clique" or even deny and attack it. Ideological and political educators in colleges must show respect and support for peer groups with a friendly and trusting attitude, so as to establish a good interactive relationship with group members, especially informal leaders. Then try to find out their group culture, development goals, activity planning and so on, and give timely guidance and help, such as assisting them to carry out group activities. Thus, we can establish a good relationship of mutual trust with peer groups and lay a foundation for ideological and political education (Sun et al., 2015).

4.2. Pay Attention to Training Informal Leaders and Strengthen the Power of Example Demonstration

Informal leaders play a strong guiding role in peer groups and are an important starting point for carrying out ideological and political education with the help of peer groups. By doing a good job of informal leaders, we get to the heart of the problem (Zou & Song, 2023). Colleges should attach importance to cultivating informal leaders, give them the opportunity and space to fully display their talents, and enhance their leading role to group members by strengthening the power of example demonstration. For example, colleges can "assign heavy responsibilities" according to the personal strengths of informal leaders, and realize the change from informal leaders to formal leaders, so as to temper their determination and responsibility of "in their position, seeking their own government". In this way, when he returns to the peer group, he can guide the members to instil positive change with a higher profile and a stronger sense of responsibility.

4.3. Check Peer Group Culture and Promote the Integration of Ideological and Political Education with Group Culture

Once the peer group culture is formed, its appeal and influence on members tend to be strong. A good grasp of peer group culture means to seize the spiritual bond that gathers group strength (Liu, 2021). In view of the good and bad of peer group culture, ideological and political educators in colleges must find out

the form and content of peer group culture, eliminate the dross and retain the essence. At the same time, in order to give full play to the educational power of peer group culture, we must try to combine it with ideological and political education. For example, the ideal and belief education is combined with the peer group culture, so that the group members can unconsciously accept education of the ideal and belief. Of course, since many ideological and political educators have no experience in managing student bodies, this integration may not be easy, but it is worth trying.

4.4. Promote Horizontal Communication among Peer Groups and Alleviate the Effect of Closing Tendency

The peer group effect has a dual nature, there are both positive and negative aspects. The tendency of closure is one form of negative effect. After the formation of peer groups, it is easy to produce a closed tendency, which leads to adverse effects. For example, it is easy to urge individuals to blindly comply with the will and norms of Clique, which will form a bad atmosphere and guide the wrong value orientation over time. Another example is that internal activities in a closed environment for a long time can lead to a gradual weakening of individual role consciousness, and even the phenomenon of detachment from formal groups. In this regard, ideological and political educators in colleges should actively pay good attention, strengthen guidance, and promote horizontal communication among peer groups as a bridge, so as to promote open mutual appreciation and learning among peer groups. Finally realize the overall leap-forward development of each peer group (Wang, 2019).

5. Conclusion

As an important platform and place in the socialization process of young people, peer groups are the primary choice for many college students to seek inner sense of belonging and identity. Carrying out ideological and political education with the help of peer groups is an important direction to improve the effectiveness of education. In view of the uncertainty of peer group effect, it may have the consequences of magnifying, counterbalancing or even subverting ideological and political education. This requires ideological and political educators in colleges to pay more attention to and guide the peer groups, so as to give full play to the positive effects of peer groups, and add ways to enhance the effectiveness of ideological and political education.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Cao, R., & Wu, Y. X. (2019). Class Peer Groups and Adolescents' Educational Expecta-

- tions: The Effect of Social Conformity and Social Comparison. *Youth Research*, 5, 25-33+94-95.
- Chen, S. Y. (2014). On the Interaction of School, Family and Peer Group in the Social Support of College Students' Mental Health. *School Party Building and Ideological Education*, 24, 81-82.
- Chen, Y. S. (2006). Analysis and Countermeasures of Peer Groups in Ideological and Political Education. *Truth Seeking*, 9, 75-77.
- Liu, L. (2021). Influence of "Peer Group" Environment on Ideological and Political Education in Colleges and Colleges and Countermeasures. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Colleges of Finance and Economics*, 12, 37-39.
- Meng, Z. Y. (2011). An Analysis of Peer Group's Promotion of Moral Education from the Perspective of Social Identity. *Chinese Adult Education*, 20, 48-50.
- Sun, L., Xu, C. F., & Liu, Y. (2015). Review of Research on Ideological and Political Education of College Students' Peer Groups. *Journal of Jiangxi Normal Colleges (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 48, 5, 68-73.
- Tan, J. H. (2012). Study on the Participation Model of Peer Groups in College Students' Ideal and Belief Education. *Education Review*, 1, 63-65.
- Wang, L. (2019). The Influence and Guidance of Peer Group's Practical Communication on Ideological and Political Education in Colleges and Colleges. *Journal of Shanxi Youth Vocational College*, 33, 26-29.
- Wu, Y. X., & Zhang, F. (2019). The Health Cost of "Close Friends": Peer Influence and Adolescents' Academic Achievement and Mental Health. *Educational Research*, 41, 123-142.
- Yun, Y. T., & Pang, H. Y. (2022). Research on the Practice of Peer Education in Ideological and Political Teaching. *Economist*, 7, 173-174.
- Zhang, X. M. (2019). Research on the Participation Mode of Age Grade in the Integrity Education of College Students. *Chinese and Foreign Entrepreneurs*, 13, 203-204.
- Zhao, C. C., & Zheng, X. (2018). Shared Transmission: Youth Peer Groups in the Network Language Flow Study. *Journal of Shanxi Colleges (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 9, 72-80.
- Zou, T. L., & Song, X. Y. (2023). Peer Groups of College Students the Impact of the Collective and Its Education Guide. *Journal of Yangzhou Colleges (Higher Education Research Edition)*, 27, 104-111.