Preference of Normal Stream Students for Peer Mediators: A Social Identity Theory Perspective

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Peer mediation is a school-based intervention program that aims to teach adolescents to manage their conflicts and resolve their differences in a positive and constructive way. In this paper it was demonstrated how a theoretical framework was used in explaining the process of peer mediation using tenets from the Social Identity Theory. Specifically, it examines the role of the mediator in a peer mediation setting, looking at the type of mediator students from the Normal Stream (less academically inclined classes) prefer, during a peer mediation session. Three vignettes were used in this study and students were randomly assigned the vignette type (see Appendix). From the participants' responses to the questions at the end of the vignette, the participants' level of identification for the mediator and their perceived outcome of the mediation session were obtained. Results revealed that the less academically inclined students had a significantly stronger preference for the prefect mediator than for the mediator who is an ex-gangster. No gender effects were found. Implications of the findings for schools are discussed.

Key words: peer mediation; social identity theory; academically weaker students

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Teaching children how to manage conflicts is one of the most important competencies that children need to master (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 2002). Kauffman (1993) stressed that one of the important challenges facing secondary school students is learning how to resolve conflicts with their peers. This is because the serious consequences caused by interpersonal conflicts among students in school environments have become issues in schools and these student conflicts are mostly in the form of verbal and physical aggression, unreasonable behavior and property damage (Crawford & Bodine, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). With rising student aggression and violence in schools, peer mediation represents a move away from the discipline measures which stressed on punitive and seclusion-type approaches of behavior control to one that is preventive and student-centred (Smith, Daunic, Miller, & Robinson, 2002).

Peer mediation is based on the philosophy of providing students with effective alternatives in resolving conflicts through non-adversarial means, and to restore relationships between those in conflict (Mesenas, 2000). It is a group-based intervention measure that aims to restore victims and reintegrate offenders back into the society with the help of their peers, and to repair or improve the damaged relationships between them (Braithwaite, 1996; Seymour & Gregorie, 2002). Peer mediation therefore encourages students to question the use of violence as a conflict management strategy and to analyze problems arising from conflicts critically (Williamson, Warner, Sanders, & Knepper, 1999).

Research in peer mediation has so far focused on the positive outcomes of the program carried out in schools. Success of the program was reportedly based on anecdotal evidence, reduction in the number of discipline cases in school, and improvement in the students' academic grades (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). It is observed that to date, peer mediation research has not employed much use of theory to explain the process of peer mediation and this paper proposed to address this lack of theoretical base in the research of peer mediation by using tenets from Social Identity Theory.

Social identity theory was developed in the early 1970s by Tajfel and

Turner as an attempt to understand intergroup behavior, group processes and the social self (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). According to Tajfel (1972), the social self or the social identity of a person is defined 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). The basic idea to social identity is that the social group or category into which one falls or feels belong to, provides a definition of who one is, in terms of the charac-teristics defining that category. Since peer mediation is a group-based intervention that helps to mediate conflicts between adolescents who are from different social groups within the school, the social identity theory could be thus employed to explain the processes involved in mediation.

In the theory, Tajfel (1978) proposed that individuals are motivated to evaluate their social groups positively in comparison with other groups in order to attain a positive self-concept, and subsequently a positive social identity. Typically they would evaluate their own group more favourably than the out-group. According to Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, and Hodge (1996), it is the need for positive social identity that is the basic motiva-tional mechanism responsible for favouring one's in-group. This positive evaluation of one's group is also known as in-group bias or in-group favour-itism (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001). Similarly, members of lower status groups would also strive to attain a positive social identity when compared with members from higher social status groups. However, this paper proposes that although low status group members may strive to achieve a positive social identity, they may not necessarily attain it through in-group favouritism. This is because past research has shown sometimes, lower sta-tus members may be positively oriented towards the out-group and display positive attitudes towards the dominant group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979) how the lower status group mem-bers attain their positive social identity and respond to the comparison with higher status group is dependent on whether they perceived the stratifica-tion system as legitimate or stable, and whether the boundaries delineating

the social group are perceived as permeable. If the procedures determining the social stratification are legitimate with impermeable boundaries, the lower status students are likely to employ individual mobility strategy to dissociate themselves from the inferior group that they are in so as to enhance their individual identity (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). According to Jackson et al. (1996), this dissociation of the individual from his social group does not necessarily involve leaving the group physically. Psychologically, the individual may leave by decreasing his identification with the group and increasing identification with the higher status group, or decreasing one's similarity with one's negative group. The individual may also decrease the amount of interactions with his group members. Thus, this study proposes to examine if students from low status groups would strive to attain a positive social identity through identifying with higher social status group members.

Besides social identity, Tajfel and Turner (1979) stressed that personal identity is another aspect of an individual's self that is equally valid and authentic as the social self. Turner (1987) explained that personal identity is what makes an individual similar to himself and different from others, that is, what specifies him and separates him from others. This therefore implies that in his personal identity, an individual's behaviors does not conform, and is not influenced by any social group's norm and beliefs. In this study, it is postulated that where comparison is made between an individual perceived with a negative social identity and one in his personal identity, the lower status students would have higher levels of identification for the latter who is not perceived to belong to any social group and thus does not have any social status attached, than for the former whose social identity is negative.

In Singapore, prior to entering the secondary school at grade seven, students are streamed according to their academic results obtained at grade six. Students who had performed poorly in the examination are assigned the Normal Streams (Academic or Technical) while those with higher academic ability are streamed into the Special or Express courses (Ministry of

Education, 2002). Those who are aesthetically more inclined would also have to be academically strong as schools with such programs are also the better ranking ones in Singapore. Such a streaming procedure creates an environment for comparison between students of different courses, with those in the Normal course being assigned low status. According to a local study by Khoo and Oakes (2003), academic performance is related to one's social status in the school. High academic achievers have a higher social status in school and teachers were perceived to rate them as the more important students in the school. They are also often the prefects in school. Conversely, students from the academically weaker classes were found to have a lower status both in and outside of the school. In Singapore, various local research have shown that youths of various offences such as gang violence, substance abuse and etc. tended to be found predominantly in the Normal Stream. Academically, these youths were also found to be weaker (Choi & Lo, 2002; Kee, Sim, Teoh, Tian, & Ng, 2003; Koh, 1997; Koh, 2003; Magnus, Lim, Mesenas, & Thean, 2003; Tan, 2004). These students would therefore compare negatively with their counterparts from the better academic classes and would find ways to cope with their low status in schools. To a large extent, the low status would not offer these students with a positive social identity and they would thus strive for higher status to attain a positive social identity.

In a local study by Koh (1997), students' perceptions about the social status of their peers from different academic streams were surveyed and the results obtained showed that students in the Express stream are perceived to have a higher social status while those in the Normal course are perceived to have a lower social status. The data also showed that students from the Normal Stream also perceived themselves to have a lower social status in the school.

Based on the social identity theory, lower status Normal Stream students would thus perceive the social stratification in school as legitimate with impermeable boundaries since it is based on their results in a formal national examination. In consistent with what Jackson et al. (1996) explained

earlier, this paper aims to examine if these Normal students who are assigned lower social status in school, would strive to achieve a positive social identity through decreasing their similarity with their low status group and increasing their level of identification with the members from the higher social status group instead of through in-group favouritism. This is examined in terms of the Normal students' level of identification with different types of peer mediators, each representing a different social status group, during a mediation session. As postulated earlier, the study will also examine if the Normal students would identify more with a mediator in his personal identity than one perceived to have a negative social identity.

Method

This study therefore proposes to examine the responses of the less academically-inclined students with regard to their level of identification with different mediators of differing identities (social or personal) in a peer mediation setting and their perceived outcomes to the mediation session. The independent variables in this study comprise the vignette (scenarios of conflicts depicting mediators with different social identities); the gender of the participants and the school they are in. The dependent variable is obtained from the participants' responses to the 12 questions measuring identification and perceived outcome of peer mediation found at the end of the vignettes.

Participants
Data for this study was obtained from 208 pupils of two secondary schools in Singapore. These two schools are government-owned schools and both have peer mediation as part of their schools' discipline intervention measures. Of the 208 pupils who participated in this study, 115 were male adolescents and 93 were female. They were from Secondary Two and Three Normal (Academic and Technical) streamed classes as students from these classes form the focus of this study.

Measures

In this study three vignettes were developed to measure the participants' level of identification with the mediator and their perceived outcome to the mediation session. Due to the focus of this study which looks at the role of social and personal identities in influencing the students' strife for positive social identity, the vignettes' emphasis is on describing the mediators with different identity types. The first 2 vignettes describe the mediators in their social identities, one who is a prefect and the other an ex-gangster. The kinds of friends and the type of activities they engaged in with their clique of friends are described in the vignettes. For the ex-gangster vignette, the focus is on their continuous socialization with gang members even though he does not commit any more gang-related offences. The third vignette described a mediator in his personal identity, in terms of his individual interests and his unique personality traits and characteristics. An identical set of vignettes using names of female students was developed for the female gender participants.

In each of these vignettes, a conflict between one of the participant's classmates and another student is described. In the hypothetical conflict, the other student was confronted by the participant's classmate who is a same-sex peer, and the incident took place outside the school gate. To resolve the conflict, the school authorities asked a mediator, who is their peer but a neutral party, to help mediate the conflict. Each of these vignettes is approximately 180 words in length. At the end of each vignette, there are 12 questions to which the participants responded. These questions were answered on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very likely) and they apply to both genders with the necessary modifications made to the names in the vignettes. The 12 questions are as follow:

1. How likely would you be in the same group as SL? (one of the mediator's names)
2. How likely would you hang out with SL?
3. How likely would you accept SL as a member of your own group?
4. How likely would you listen and follow what SL has to say?

5. How similar do you think you are to SL?
6. How likely would you help SL if he is in trouble?
7. How likely would you go out with SL after school?
8. How likely do you think SL will be fair in helping to solve the problem between PK and JP?
9. How likely do you think the problem between PK and JP will get solved?
10. How likely would you want to follow what SL does in school?
11. How likely do you think PK will feel bad about what he has done?
12. How likely do you think PK will understand what JP feels?

Manipulation Check Question

For the first two vignettes (with prefect and ex-gangster mediators), a manipulation check question (Question 13) was added at the end of the 12 questions to ensure that the profile of the mediator has been aptly described in the respective vignette:

13. How likely is SL a member of a gang (or prefect) group?

Procedure

Following the routine procedure for data collection in Singapore, 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 obtained and their responses to the study were strictly confidential. The vignettes were shuffled into a random stack before being distributed to the participants according to their gender. No time restriction was placed on the subjects to complete all the questions in the study.

Results

Manipulation Check

More than 75% of the participants responded to question 13 in the first two vignettes with a score value of more than 3 on a 6-point scale, indicating that the social identities of mediators were aptly described and perceived by

the participants. Mean score values for both vignettes were 4.1, which is above the mid-point score of 3.

Identification and Perceived Outcome of Mediation as Two Factors

A principal components analysis of the 12 questions in the vignettes was performed and it produced two factors, labelled as the "identification" factor (8 items), and the other, as the "perceived outcome of mediation" factor (4 items). Normality checks were conducted for all 12 items as well as the 2 factors and the results showed that no significant departures from normality were found for both factors.

Results obtained from the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy for the 12 items was .868 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity obtained a significant value of $< .01$, indicating that the data was suitable for factor analysis. Both factors accounted for 55.86% of the variance with the first factor accounting for 35.94% of the variance and the second factor accounting for 19.92% of the variance. All 12 items in the vignettes were retained as their communalities ranged from .387 to .710 which were adequate. A summary of the factor loadings is found in Table 1.

For internal consistency estimates, the identification factor yielded a reliability alpha of .89 while the perceived outcome of mediation factor yielded an alpha value of .70. Correlation between the two factors yielded a value of $r = .48, p < .01$. Data obtained for both factors were analysed separately as 2 ANOVAs instead of using the MANOVA as the DVs of both factors are well-correlated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

Identification as Factor

The identification factor has an eigenvalue of 5.192 which accounted for 35.94% of the variance. The level of internal consistency found among the vignette items comprising the identification factor was quite high ($\alpha = .89$). Factor loadings of the items are shown in Table 1.

A 3 (mediator: prefect or ex-gangster or individual) × 2 (gender: female or male) × 2 (school: A or B) ANOVA was used to find the impact that

Table 1   A Summary of Factor Loadings and Communalities of All 12 Items

Factor loadings of all 12 items	Identification	Perceived outcome	Communalities
How likely would you hang out with SL (Q2)	.840		.710
How likely would you accept SL as a member of your own group (Q3)	.809		.672
How likely would you want to be in the same group as SL (Q1)	.781		.641
How likely would you go out with SL (Q7)	.760		.617
How likely would you listen and follow what SL has to say (Q4)	.733		.600
How similar do you think you are to SL (Q5)	.618		.387
How likely would you want to follow what SL does in school (Q10)	.609	.355	.451
How likely would you help SL if he is in trouble (Q6)	.540	.399	.497
How likely do you think PK will feel bad about what he has done (Q11)		.741	.548
How likely do you think PK will understand what JP feels (Q12)		.725	.553
How likely do you think the problem between JP and PK will get solved (Q9)		.716	.541
How likely do you think SL will be fair in helping to solve the problem between PK and JP (Q8)		.600	.485

Note. All factor loadings below 0.3 are not presented in the table above

different mediators, the participants' gender and school have, on the participants' level of identification for the mediator. Results revealed a main effect for mediator, $F (2, 196) = 17.74$, $p < .01$. No other significant effects were found.

A Tukey's post-hoc test was conducted on the mediator factor's main effect and inspection of the relevant means indicated that the participants identified more with a mediator who is a prefect ($M = 30.17$, $SD = 8.62$) than with one who is an ex-gangster ($M = 22.51$, $SD = 9.00$), $t (139) = 5.15$, $p < .01$. They also had a significantly higher level of identification for the mediator described as a unique individual ($M = 28.97$, $SD = 7.19$) than with a mediator who is an ex-gangster ($M = 22.51$, $SD = 9.00$), $t (135) = -4.62$, $p < .01$. However, no significant difference was found in the participants'

Table 2 **Summary of Means and Standard Deviations of Mediator Vignettes for Identification Factor**

Mediator	M	SD
Prefect	30.17	8.62
Ex-Gangster	22.51	9.00
Individual	28.97	7.19

level of identification between the prefect mediator ($M = 30.17$, $SD = 8.62$) and the mediator described as a unique individual ($M = 28.97$, $SD = 7.19$), $t(136) = .38$, ns. Table 2 presents a summary of the means and standard deviations of the 3 different mediator vignettes in terms of the identification factor.

Perceived Outcome of Mediation as a Factor

The perceived outcome of mediation factor has an eigenvalue of 1.51 which accounted for 19.92% of the variance. Internal consistency among the vignette items comprising the factor yielded an alpha value of .70. Factor loadings of the 4 items are found in Table 1.

A 3 (mediator: prefect or ex-gangster or individual) × 2 (gender: male or female) × 2 (school: A or B) ANOVA was used to examine the impact that different mediators, participants' gender and school have on the participants' perceived outcome of the mediation session. Results revealed that there was a main effect for mediator, F $(2, 196) = 5.41$, $p < .01$. No other significant effects were found for this factor.

A Tukey's post-hoc test was performed on the main effect for the mediator factor and inspection of the relevant means indicated that the participants perceived better outcomes to the mediation session when the mediator is a prefect ($M = 15.58$, $SD = 3.63$) than when the mediator is an ex-gangster ($M = 13.49$, $SD = 4.58$), $t(139) = 3.01$, $p < .01$. However no significant difference was found in the participants' perceived outcomes to the mediation session between a mediator who is a prefect ($M = 15.58$, $SD = 3.63$) and one who is described as a unique individual ($M = 14.65$, $SD = 3.87$), $t(136) = 1.44$, ns. The participants also did not significantly differ in their perceived outcomes to the mediation between a mediator who

is an ex-gangster ($M = 13.49$, $SD = 4.58$) and one who is described as an individual ($M = 14.65$, $SD = 3.87$), t (135) = –1.61, *ns*. A summary of the means and standard deviations is presented in Table 3.

Table 3   Summary of Means and Standard Deviations of Mediator Vignettes for Perceived Outcome of Mediation Factor

Mediator	*M*	*SD*
Prefect	15.58	3.63
Ex-Gangster	13.49	4.57
Individual	14.65	3.87

Discussion

Identification Factor

Results in this study revealed that during peer mediation, Normal Stream students identified more with a mediator who is a prefect than with one who is an ex-gangster. An explanation for this is that these students do not display in-group bias although they possess a motivational drive to attain a positive social identity. As explained earlier they recognise the legitimate social stratification with impermeable boundaries and therefore dissociate themselves from the group by decreasing in their identification with group. To a large extent, these students have come to acknowledge their low status and as Brown and Wade (1987) had reported, individuals from the low achieving classes with lower social status would tend to evaluate themselves less positively than individuals who are from high achieving classes with a higher social status.

As discussed earlier, peer mediators in Singapore schools are often selected from the better academic classes and are perceived as socially competent individuals who display prosocial behaviors and positive modelling characteristics. Therefore in choosing to identify more with the prefect mediator than with the mediator who is an ex-gangster during peer mediation, the low achieving students (low social status) are striving to improve their negative social identity by positively orienting themselves towards the higher status individuals (prefects) as asserted by social identity theory.

It was also observed from the results that participants identified more with a mediator who is described as a unique individual (no attachments to any social group) than with a mediator who is an ex-gangster. Personal identity defines the individual in his own set of idiosyncratic traits and personality characteristics (Turner, 1981). An individual in his personal identity would therefore be perceived not as someone negative, but a neutral party, which is considered as more positive than one with a negative social identity. In contrast, certain negative implications are assumed in individuals who are members of a gang. Being in a gang before, an ex-gangster would be perceived as someone with a negative social identity. Therefore, the low achieving students in their strife for a more positive social identity, would identify more with a mediator described as a unique individual who is neutral, that is, in his personal identity, rather than with one who is an ex-gangster mediator with a negative social identity.

However, no significant difference was found in the participants' level of identification between the mediator who is a prefect and one who was described as a unique individual. As discussed above, a mediator described in terms of his personal identity is perceived as someone who is neutral and not negative. Although the participants' level of identification mean scores are higher for the prefect mediator than those scores for the mediator in his personal identity, there was no significant statistical difference between them, as neither mediators were perceived to have a negative identity.

Perceived Outcome of Mediation Factor

Results obtained for the second factor in this study showed that the participants perceived better outcomes of the mediation session when the mediator is a prefect than when he is an ex-gangster. This parallels the finding of the identification factor above, where students from the low achieving classes also identified more with the prefect mediator than with the mediator who is an ex-gangster. In identifying more with the prefect mediator, the participants also perceived better outcomes to the mediation session when the

mediator is a prefect instead of an ex-gangster, as their perceptions towards the prefect mediator are more likely to be positive. They would therefore think that the prefect mediator would be more successful in resolving the conflicts between the disputants than the ex-gangster would.

However, no statistical significant difference was found in the participants' perceived outcome of the mediation session between a mediator who was described in his personal identity and mediators who are prefects or ex-gangsters, although the absolute mean values showed that the participants had a higher mean score for the mediator who was described in his personal identity than for a mediator who is an ex-gangster, which to a certain extent, implied that they perceived better outcomes to the mediation process when the mediator is perceived as a unique individual.

Research in peer mediation conducted overseas has focused on the positive outcomes of the program with not much usage of theory to explain its process. In comparison, results from this study provided a theoretical framework in explaining the processes involved during a mediation session, specifically looking at the role of the mediator's identity type in influencing the students' responses towards peer mediation. To a large extent, this differs from other studies which looked at the outcomes of programs. Findings in this study have important implications for schools using peer mediation as an intervention measure in the school's discipline program. It emphasized the notion that students selected as mediators should possess prosocial behaviors and display positive modelling characteristics. With higher level of identification and more positive perception of the mediation outcome, conflicts between adolescents in school have a higher probability of being resolved and relationships restored in a positive manner.

In addition, schools could also explore having mediators who had progressed academically but were once low achievers. The implication of this for future research is to find out if low achieving students like the Normal Stream ones, would identify with these mediators who once shared similar social status and subsequently, a similar social identity as well.

Limitations of Study

One of the limitations in this study possibly lies in the validity of the "perceived outcomes of mediation" factor. Only one out of the 4 items measuring the factor explicitly asked for the respondent's opinion regarding the mediator's role in relation to its consequences for peer mediation. The other 3 items implied this relation implicitly as they measure the outcome of the mediation session by asking the respondent's opinion about the offender's feelings towards the victim after going through mediation, and if the mediator would be unbiased in resolving the conflict during mediation, which impinges indirectly on the outcome of the mediation session.

Another limitation to this study is that although local studies were cited to show that Normal Stream students do perceive themselves to be of lower social status in the school (Khoo & Oakes, 2003; Koh, 1997), this study did not measure such perception of the Normal Stream subjects prior to administering the vignettes to them. Similar future research could allow for the measure of the Normal Stream students' perception of their self-image in terms of their social status, prior to conducting the study.

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Appendix

Vignette 1

You have a classmate PK. PK was caught by the Discipline Master for beating up another boy, JP, outside the school gate. PK and JP were then told to attend a meeting to discuss what has happened. At the meeting, PK and JP meet another student, SL.

SL is one of the leaders in the prefect group. He is often involved in organizing school functions with the other prefects. He likes to play chess with his friends when they are free. He never forgets to wear his prefect badge to school everyday.

SL is supposed to help PK and JP solve the problem between them. At the meeting, SL first tells them that they are supposed to take turns to explain what happened outside the school gate and how they felt about it. No one is allowed to cut in while the other person is talking. After that, both PK and JP are supposed to come up with a way together to solve the problem. Once they have done that, they will sign on a paper to show that they have agreed to follow it. SL does not help them in any way except to make sure they talk to each other without getting into a fight or quarrel.

Vignette 2

You know a classmate PK. PK was caught by the Discipline Master for beating up another boy, JP, outside the school gate. PK and JP were then told to attend a meeting to discuss what has happened. At the meeting, PK and the boy meet another student, KC.

KC was an ex-gangster. He used to be the leader of 12 to 15 other gangsters who were always involved in fights and bullying others with his gang. He was always seen hanging around arcades playing computer games and billiards with this gang members. Like his gang members, he has the same tattoo of a little dragon on his upper right arm.

KC is supposed to help PK and JP solve the problem between them. At

the meeting, KC first tells them that they are supposed to take turns to explain what happened outside the school gate and how they felt about it. No one is allowed to cut in while the other person is talking. After that, both PK and JP are supposed to come up with a way together to solve the problem. Once they have done that, they will sign on a paper to show that they have agreed to follow it. KC does not help them in any way except to make sure they talk to each other without getting into a fight or quarrel.

Vignette 3

You know a classmate PK. PK was caught by the Discipline Master for beating up another boy, JP, outside the school gate. PK and the 'bullied' boy were then told to attend a meeting to discuss what has happened. At the meeting, PK and JP meet another student, TJ.

TJ is a student in one of the Secondary Three classes in the school. Like any other student, he forgets to hand in his homework sometimes and comes late to school occasionally. Like most boys, he plays soccer with his schoolmates during recess. He is quite neat in his appearance. On weekends, he goes out for movies with his friends or takes his meals at fast food restaurants.

TJ is supposed to help PK and JP solve the problem that is between them. First, TJ tells them that they are supposed to take turns to explain what happened outside the school gate and how they felt about it. No one is allowed to cut in while the other person is talking. After that, both PK and JP are supposed to come up with a way together to solve the problem. Once they have done that, they will sign on a paper to show that they have agreed to follow it. TJ does not help them in any way except to make sure they talk to each other without getting into a fight or quarrel.