Adolescent Truancy and Juvenile Delinquency:

Testing Differential Oppression Theory

by Jennifer Raby
This study is focused on testing Robert Regoli and John Hewitt’s theory of differential oppression in an attempt to understand adolescent truancy both as a reaction to systemic repression and as a cause of juvenile delinquency. The data will be collected by doing a small, moderately moderated focus group consisting of former adolescent truants who are now successful in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of adolescent truancy and test Robert Regoli and John Hewitt’s theory of differential oppression. The exact percentage of adolescent truants that drop out of school altogether is difficult to estimate, as most states do not collect that data. While it has been established that habitual truants do indeed have a propensity for academic problems (Morris 1991), placing this label on students is problematic. Skipping school is a deviant behavior that can lead to further deviant behavior with more serious consequences, such as drug and alcohol use, criminal behavior and teenage pregnancy. Statistics show that among juveniles who are in custody, truancy is a common offense (Sickmund 2004). Truancy is also a common warning sign for young (aged 7-12) offenders (Loeber, Farrington 2000), in addition to serious and violent juvenile offenders (Loeber, Farrington 1998). If we are to reach this group of at-risk youth “before they become more seriously involved in drug use and other delinquent behavior...[it provides] an excellent opportunity to reduce the likelihood they will move into the juvenile justice system (Dembo, Gullledge 2009)”.

Though widespread statistics on truancy are not readily available due to the inconsistent reporting of truancy across the nation, both simple and chronic truancy have proven to be an issue that is troubling for both communities and individuals. Many truant students are unfairly stigmatized as “low-achieving” or “not as smart” as students
who attend class regularly. This research looks at testing Regoli’s theory of differential oppression in regards to how systemic oppression may or may not lead to juvenile truancy, which in turn may lead to bigger consequences later on. This relatively new theory may prove helpful in explaining the causes of habitual truancy in adolescents. Regoli theorizes that “the oppression of children produces at least four adaptations: passive acceptance, exercise of illegitimate coercive power, manipulation of one’s peers and retaliation (Regoli 2002: pg. 237).” This research holds theoretical significance as it is testing a relatively new and untested theory that could help uncover new information on a particularly troubling issue that potentially leads to serious consequences.

There are many factors that are important in the overall portrait of a truant adolescent. The biggest difficulty in identifying habitually truant students is defining what habitual truancy is- while the National Center for School Engagement defines habitual truancy as “a student with enough unexcused absences that they are referred to court”, it is left up to the state to decide how many days of unexcused absences qualify a court referral (four to five days a semester or ten days a school year is common).

I hope to not only test out the theory of differential oppression set forth by Regoli and Hewitt, but attempt to answer more general questions, such as how we can explain, as well as reduce, adolescent truancy. With this research, I will be employing variables that represent the four adaptations of differential oppression theory to test the hypothesis that adolescent truancy is not only the cause of serious issues like dropping out of school and juvenile delinquency, but also a reaction to systemic oppression and subjugation.
THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This research looks at testing Regoli’s theory of differential oppression in regards to how systemic oppression may or may not lead to juvenile truancy, which in turn may lead to bigger consequences later on. This relatively new theory may prove helpful in explaining the causes of habitual truancy in adolescents. Differential oppression states that because children are powerless and often seen as inferior to adults, they are expected to (and sometimes required to) bend to the wills of adults because of authority. The oppression of children will fall on a continuum that ranges from benign neglect to malignant abuse. Regoli theorizes that “the oppression of children produces at least four adaptations: passive acceptance, exercise of illegitimate coercive power, manipulation of one’s peers and retaliation (Regoli 2002: pg. 237).”

Because obedience is an expected reaction to adult authority, passive acceptance is the most common adaptation to oppression (though more common in females than males). Regoli suggests that it is possible that in some children, passive acceptance is only a façade to the oppressor. Whether approval of their lesser status is genuine or just a ruse, children appear to accept coercion, but inwardly repress hatred for their oppressor. This internalization can lead to problematic behaviors and disorders, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders, low self-esteem or psychiatric disorders. For some children, passive acceptance may be the means to an end- a way of getting payment as compliance, whether payment takes a monetary form (allowance) or a material form (clothing, food, gifts). Regoli also notes that “Resistance through passive acceptance may also involve ‘accidental’ failure by a child to complete homework assignments, frequent requests for bathroom passes to get out of class,
‘forgetting’ to be home on time, or feigning illness to avoid school or family responsibilities (Regoli 2002: p 250).”

The second adaptation, **exercising illegitimate coercive power**, states that children are attracted to delinquency because participating in “adult” behaviors allows them to exercise control over their lives. Exercising illegitimate coercive power includes sexual deviance, illicit drug and alcohol use and minor criminal acts, such as shoplifting or graffiti. In young girls, this can also include eating disorders- when they feel they have little or no control over their lives, they take over the food that is taken into or kept in her body. The exercise of illegitimate coercive power is primarily the youth exerting his or her will in whatever means possible in response to oppression.

While some youth attempt to regain power via control of their own self, others try to gain that power by exerting control over others. A third adaptation is the **manipulation of one’s peers**, which Regoli suggests is displacement of anger directed at a parent or teacher. For some children, bullying smaller or weaker children is a means to getting power when the child feels like they have none. Manipulation of one’s peers can manifest itself as bullying, spreading gossip in hopes of gaining status or the sexual labeling of girls by their male peers to show their subordinate status as both female and children. Females are more prone to verbally manipulate their peers and establish hierarchies within groups. The manipulation of peers tends to be especially problematic as negative interactions involving peers tend to get adults involved as well, and in an attempt to end the negative interactions, the adults establish further control of the children, which reinforces the oppression.
The fourth and final adaptation, retaliation, occurs the least often but is the most serious. Retaliation includes delinquent acts which range from property crimes to violent offenses. Oppressed children may feel the need to retaliate against the adults and the institutions that oppress them. Some examples of retaliation might include violence against teachers or parents, school vandalism or in more severe cases, violence against the school. Regoli also suggests that retaliation can also occur inwardly in some adolescents, who may become depressed and contemplate or commit suicide. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is not uncommon for suicidal tendencies or behavior to be a form for retaliation against an oppressive authority figure.

Differential oppression theory follows the principle that all children are oppressed by adults. Each specific instance of oppression falls on a continuum that ranges from benign neglect to malignant abuse. While many children are raised in homes where they can succeed and thrive, others are exposed to things such as individual child maltreatment, oppressive structural conditions and poverty. All children will react to systemic oppression by adults to reinforce their status as subordinate in one of four adaptations. While truancy itself occurs within the context of exercising illegitimate coercive power, the actions of a habitually truant adolescent might range from sexual misbehavior (exercising illegitimate coercive power) to violent crime (retaliation).
PREVIOUS RESEARCH


PSYCHOSOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRUANT STUDENT

While truant students are often unfairly labeled as low achievers, slackers or simply “not as smart” as those who go to class every day because they’re not obtaining the knowledge their peers are, it is unrealistic to assume that these labels are accurate for every chronically truant student.

Dr. Arthur Nielsen and Dr. Dan Gerber began their 1974 study with several preconceived notions about what constitutes an average truant student: “we knew that many truants have academic and behavioral problems in the classroom, are unpopular with peers, engage in delinquent activities and have a variety of family problems. Later in life, truants frequently drop out of school, become drug users or alcoholics, engage in criminal behavior and experience sundry psychological difficulties (Nielsen, Gerber 1979).” The study revealed the 33 middle school aged students that Nielsen and Gerber interviewed had stressful home lives, ineffective parental discipline, negative relationships with their teachers and were often of a lower socioeconomic level, which
correlated with their original hypothesis. One particularly interesting find in their study is the lack of academic or career inspiration from both adults in their personal lives and adults in their school. According to Nielsen and Gerber, the truant students in their study “had little contact with people for whom education had been rewarding. Even in fantasy, they found it difficult to imagine someone whose career they would like to emulate.”

In Sommer and Nagel’s 1991 study “Ecological and Typological Characteristics in Early Adolescent Truancy”, the researchers used a multi-method approach looking at 25 truant adolescents and 25 nontruant adolescent truants equally distributed between two seventh to ninth grade junior high schools in what they refer to as a “moderate-sized university town”. Sommer and Nigel’s study is particularly interesting because this is the first study done in adolescent truancy that uses a control group of nontruant students as a comparison. Sommer and Nagel look at some of the classic truancy literature as well, citing Zajonc and Markus, who suggested that only children or siblings with many years between them have an inherent biological advantage in regards to intelligence because they spend more time around adults than peers with siblings who are closer in age. This is something they looked at within their own study, and found indeed that nontruant students who later appeared on graduation lists had less siblings on average than truant students.

Social labeling theory may be able to explain some of the psychosocial characteristics of truant students as well. The theory states that people internalize the labels given to them and such labels can affect behavior. Jo Boaler, a professor of education at Stanford University, did a study of a high school in California that was
marked as “under-performing” by the government based off of standardized test scores, yet they scored higher than several “high-performing” wealthy schools in the area on other tests in mathematics. “They were also aware that their school was under-performing and did not expect to do well on the test,” Boaler states. “If you tell students they are low achievers, they achieve at a lower level than if you do not (Boaler 2003)”. The students in her study were greatly affected by the labels brought on by the SAT-9, with one student asking her why she was bothering to study math at their school when they were a 3- referring to the 3/10 score assigned to them based off of test scores. The students are told by other schools that they attend the “ghetto school”. Boaler tells stories of students internalizing the labels given to them by test scores, believing that they are indeed below average despite the learning that goes on in the classroom. It is reasonable to assume that students who are consistently told they are low-achieving would have a more negative attitude about school, which would make them less inclined to attend classes, thus perpetuating the cycle of negative attitudes towards school.

**TRUANCY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

Research in delving into the connection between adolescent truancy and substance use has also been conducted, with the overall conclusion being that there is a positive correlation between truancy and youth substance abuse.

Social bonding theory can also help explain truancy within the context of substance abuse as well. Truancy is an indicator of lesser bonds to the community in youth. Truancy has also been linked to the use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, as well as illegal drugs. “Truancy conceptually provides a good indicator of low school
attachment and of bonding with deviant peers and, therefore, likely links to drug use (Hallfors 2002). 

Both truancy and substance abuse have also been linked to higher rates of juvenile delinquency and it has been suggested that substance abuse fuels delinquency rather than the opposite. In addition to a relationship to substance abuse, delinquency and adolescent truancy mutually reinforce each other (Huizinga, Loeber, Thornberry 1994).

**TRUANCY AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY**

In addition to a relationship between truancy and substance abuse, there is also a connection between juvenile delinquency and truancy. Habitual truancy in one’s youth can be an indicator of more serious deviant behavior later on.

A study examining delinquency and the co-occurrence of other problem behaviors shows that there is a high percentage of males with school problems who are delinquents as well as a high percentage of females who are delinquents and also have school problems (Huizinga, Loeber, Thornberry 2000). Many youth who become serious and violent offenders later on have a history of disruptive (though not necessarily delinquent) behaviors in their childhood- behaviors such as disobedience, frequent lying, truancy and an aggressive attitude (Loeber, Farrington 2000). Research suggests that these behaviors in childhood indicate a likelihood of chronic deviation and delinquency beyond childhood. Over half of all crimes committed by juveniles are committed by chronic offenders. It has been shown that in young males especially, there is a high likelihood that authority conflicts (such as truancy) lead in an overt or covert pathway to crime later on (Kelly, Loeber 1997).
TRUANCY AND EDUCATION

For some students, the educational system (i.e: frustration with the adults they encounter) plays a part in the decision to skip class. Some students report their negative attitudes towards these authority figures make it less likely they will attend school, as they do not want to interact with them. Ability grouping can play a part in this, especially in honors or gifted and talented students. Whether it is that gifted students are bored or that curriculum delivery systems are failing to acknowledge their special needs, there is a relationship between facets of the educational system and chronic truancy.

Betts and Neihart’s study in 1988 provided a typology of gifted and talented students that ranged from our typical view of honors or gifted and talented students, high-achievers that have learned how to best navigate the system in order to get what they want (type I GT’s) to students who are rarely identified because of nontraditional talent that doesn’t necessarily fall within the academic arena, to students who are at risk for dropping out of school altogether (type IVs). Betts and Neihart point out that type I overachievers can easily become bored with school, type IVs in particular are “angry with adults and with themselves because the system has not met their needs for many years and they feel rejected (Betts, Neihart 1988)”. Both type I and IV can be prone to bouts of truancy. Sommer and Nagel addressed this in their 1991 study. “Asked why they thought students skipped school, the most frequent reasons given by truants and nontruants were: not caring/boredom, cutting as a challenge, influence of friends and being unprepared for class (Sommer, Nagel 1991)”.
In their aforementioned study of psychosocial characteristics of truancy, Nielsen and Gerber noted that “70% of the truants viewed school as the major cause of their truancy and 91% saw it as a significant cause...The majority of truants said that their most negative experiences at school were difficulties they encountered with school adults (Nielsen, Gerber 1974).”

**TRUANCY REDUCTION**

Because both the definition and reporting of truancy are so inconsistent, the manners in which truancy is dealt with are also extremely inconsistent. Just as it is left up to the state (or in some cases, the county or the school districts) to decide what constitutes a habitually truant student, it is also left up to them to decide what to do with the truant students. Tactics seen in truancy reduction that will be discussed in this section include: state legislation that allows for the legal sanctioning of both the truant and their parent or guardian, community centers and “carrot and stick” methods of consequences for habitual truancy.

A review of previous literature pertaining to truancy reduction suggests that eliminating single instances of truancy can be an asset to battling habitual truancy. When Wisconsin made significant changes to their truancy laws in 1998, they allowed municipalities to enact ordinances against simple truancy (single instances of truancy) as well as habitual truants, suggesting that eliminating single instances of truancy can help battle chronic truancy in the long run (Wisconsin 2000). They also increased sanctions against the parents of chronically truant children (or who fail to enroll their children in school at all). In addition to these increased consequences to both habitual truants and their parents, they made their definition of habitual truancy much
narrower, from five absences in ten days or ten absences in a semester to five days in a semester.

In North Miami Beach, the police made targeting juvenile truancy and offenses their priority, patrolling community hot spots for adolescents between the hours of 9AM and 3PM and if adolescents could not demonstrate a legitimate reason for being absent, the police officers transported adolescents to a Truancy Evaluation Center, which is staffed by teachers, counselors and police officers (Berger 2000). In addition to police interaction and legal sanctions, teenagers in Georgia, as well as sixteen other states, will lose their driver’s licenses if they miss ten or more days of school per academic year (Kelderman 2004).

Though not focused on truancy reduction, Nielsen and Gerber noted that “the truant serves as a reminder of inadequacies in the school and of its inability to capture the interest of many students, only some of whom are truant. The punitive response to truancy combines anger about this with a desire to locate the blame outside the school, in the bad student and his or her family. Such responses proved both ineffective and alienating (Nielsen, Gerber 1974)”.

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METHODS

SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

For this study, ten current university students who were once adolescent truants were selected through purposive sampling to participate in one of two focus groups with semi-structured moderation. All of these students attend Metropolitan State University of Denver and are in the Honors Program, meaning they all have a 3.25 GPA or above and are involved in academic extracurricular activities and/or are involved in the community. Participants in the focus groups were encouraged to explore the topic of truancy via response to five prompted questions asked by the moderator. The focus group moderator's interjection was limited to the initial questions that began the conversation and prompts when there are gaps in conversation or when the subjects stray too far from the topic. The focus groups lasted for roughly an hour and took place in the conference room of the MSU-Denver Honors Program office. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Because of the nature of the group setting that these focus groups took place, it is possible that there were some things participants felt uncomfortable sharing in front of others. It is also possible that some information was exaggerated by the participants.

Focus group one consisted of three males (Henry, Drew and Mark) and two females (Audrey and Chastity). Henry, Drew, Mark and Audrey are all traditional college-aged students between the ages of twenty and twenty-two. All three of our males are from different areas of the suburbs around Denver, while Audrey identified as being from a small town in the mountains. Chastity, a first year psychology student from
suburban Denver, is in her early thirties and is returning to higher education after a long break.

All of the participants in focus group two are female. At the time of the focus group, our youngest participant, Jacqueline, was 19, while our oldest, Boston, was 41. Caroline, Ann and Lilly all fell somewhere between those two. The backgrounds of this focus group were more diverse, with only Ann and Caroline being from the Denver suburbs. Boston reported growing up in Arizona, Lilly discussed growing up in a small town in South Dakota and Jacqueline is from upstate New York. Of these five college students, four of them (all but Jacqueline) dropped out of high school and went back and got their GED later.
CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT

Four variables that represent Regoli’s four principles of differential oppression (passive acceptance, illegitimate use of coercive power, manipulation of one’s peers and retaliation) allowed the researcher to test the hypothesis that truancy is a response to the oppression of youth that leads to criminal behavior. The first question asked by the researcher pertained to how often the participants feigned illness to avoid school and how often homework assignments were “forgotten”. After fifteen minutes of discussion on this topic, the next question asked (which correlated with the illegitimate use of coercive power) was in regards to behaviors such as drug or alcohol use, minor criminal acts, promiscuity and sexual deviance while the participants were truants. After fifteen minutes of discussion on that topic, the researcher asked about bullying or harassment while the participants were truant, with regards to the principle of manipulation of peers. The last question that specifically pertained to Regoli’s four adaptations (pertaining to the adaptation of retaliation) was about criminal behavior. The focus group ended on a discussion of the participant relationships with their family (specifically, their parents) during their time as adolescent truants.
EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The dependent variable used in this study is truancy. Focus group participants were asked to estimate how many days on average they were truant from school per semester. One participant, Henry, estimated that out of a sixteen week semester, he was missing about six weeks total, feigning illness at least once a week and skipping other classes on top of that. Audrey stated that she only attended classes that she felt were important, skipping whenever she found them to be a waste of time. Others, like Drew, Caroline and Chastity, reported going to school, but leaving once they got there. The participant had to state they were truant for at least five days per semester or ten days per academic year to be considered for this research study. Five days during a semester is also the average number of absences a student can have before being considered habitually truant in most states. Adolescent truancy and the behaviors that occurred during truancy were examined according to Regoli and Hewitt’s theory of differential oppression, with each action potentially being placed under one of the four adaptations (passive acceptance, exercise of illegitimate coercive power, manipulation of one’s peers or retaliation).

PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE

Passive acceptance is the most common adaptation to oppression in children, as children learn quickly that obedience to their parents and other adults is expected. Passive acceptance is more common in females than males because female adolescents are often systemically oppressed both as women and as children; a phenomenon Regoli refers to as being “doubly oppressed” in his book Delinquency in Society. It is suggested
that some children only seem to adapt via passive acceptance; presenting a façade of 
obedience and focusing hatred for their oppressors inward. Such repression may lead to 
problems such as disordered eating, low self-esteem and psychiatric disorders.

In focus group one, which consisted of three males and two females, behaviors 
that correlated with passive acceptance were fairly common. Feigning illness was a fairly 
common practice, with one participant stating that he pretended to be sick at least once 
a week (and missed other classes on top of that), resulting in him missing about six- 
eight weeks out of a sixteen week semester in his freshman year of high school. Audrey, 
a traditional college student from a rural mountain town just outside of Aspen, CO, 
estimated that she played sick “about ten-twenty times a year” after her freshman year. 
Others in the group, such as Drew and Chastity, stated that playing sick never worked in 
their households, so they didn’t attempt to do so. Drew also stated that in his household, 
he just took days off rather than feigning illnesses, telling his parents that he just needed 
a “mental health day” and then he would stay home.

In addition to playing sick, participants in focus group one showed other traits of 
shirking responsibilities. “Forgetting” homework was a common behavior of 
participants, as was changing “last modified” dates on assignments and pretending that 
they had sent emails with their assignments that had just gotten lost in the system in 
order to get away with handing in assignments late. Drew described a practice of not 
doing anything for the first nine weeks of a twelve week trimester and then doing 
homework the last two weeks in order to pass the classes. “Everybody would get a piece 
of paper with one or two [missing assignments] on it. I’d get two or three pages stapled 
together. And I’d do it for like three weeks and bust out as much of it as I could, turn it
in, pass the class and I never saw anything wrong with that. And I got A’s on everything I did. It was just nine weeks later. More like, just, I didn’t care.”

With most participants in focus group one, most of the students made their truancy very apparent to authority figures, stating that they “just wouldn’t go”. Mark stated that he and his siblings would have their mother call them in for classes, since she was friends with the school receptionist. However, Chastity recalled “just learning to hide it better” after being caught with marijuana on school grounds at the end of her freshman year led to a summer of community service and severe punishment. “I learned to make it outwardly appear as though I was doing everything I was supposed to do. I didn’t ditch quite as much, I got good grades, I worked almost a full-time job from the time I was sixteen on. And I just made it look really good; even though I was still doing the same things - I was just doing them at different times.” Regoli specifically notes this in his theoretical work, stating “such acquiescence or passive acceptance may be only a façade, however, presenting to the oppressors the appearance of conformity.”

In the second focus group, traits and behaviors associated with passive acceptance were more common, which correlates well with Regoli’s theory that states that passive acceptance is a more common adaptation with females. Four of the five participants stated that they played sick on a regular basis. Caroline stated that she probably missed about seventy percent of her classes her junior year. Caroline, who is thirty, a wife and mother and also a dynamic student with close to a 4.0 grade point average who is on the executive board of several extracurricular activities and honor societies, was eventually told by school administration that she either needed to drop out or she would be expelled. She dropped out and went to get her GED instead.
Boston, a nontraditional student at age 41, reported that she would even go as far as to get in fights and get suspended to avoid going to school. One of the participants, Ann, reported that she didn’t feign sick and just flat out refused to go to school stated that “crippling social anxieties” played a large role in her choosing not to go to school, as well as low self-esteem and body dysmorphic disorder. Regoli states that because “passive children do not explore full autonomy”, the inward repression results in negative self-perceptions, which can manifest in eating disorders and low self-esteem, as the participant described.

Unlike the participants in the first group, though, the participants in focus group two did not state that they “forgot” homework or put it off until it was convenient for them. It was stated by several participants in group 2 that they flat out refused to do the work because they were bored or because it was meaningless. Jacqueline, the youngest participant of focus group two at age 19, recalled an experience in high school where she was assigned packets to prepare for an upcoming state test. She refused to do them, stating that “I’m not doing this. This is a waste of my time. I will take the test right now and I will beat all of you people spending all your time doing these packets.” It resulted in her father going to the principal to officially excuse her from the preparation packets. Caroline recalls that she wasn’t in class enough to receive homework and if she did go and there was something due, she got an attitude about it. She stated that she “definitely had a feeling of, you don’t know what I’m dealing with and I shouldn’t have to do this homework because my life is so different than all of these rich kids that I go to school with”.

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EXERCISE OF ILLEGAL COERCIVE POWER

Regoli and Hewitt suggest that the second adaptation to systemic oppression, the exercising of illegitimate coercive power, is an attempt to exert what children see as “adult” behavior. Children are trying to obtain a sense of control or autonomy, rather than let authority figures such as their parents or teachers exercise control over them. The illicit use of drugs and alcohol, sexual misbehavior and minor criminal acts are all part of exercising illegitimate coercive power.

The exercise of illegitimate coercive power was very prevalent in both focus groups. In focus group one, Henry recalls being involved in a lot of drug usage at a young age and was given a paraphernalia ticket at the age of fourteen. He states that his morning routine was “waking up and smoking a bowl” and that any day he actually went to class, he was always intoxicated or on something. Mark discussed constantly going out and getting drunk in high school, in addition to smoking marijuana, and that those behaviors lasted from when he was a freshman until a few months before he graduated from high school. He also recalls shoplifting, recalling an incident where he went up to a small mountain town with a bunch of friends, walking around downtown and stealing something from every single store.

Of our female participants in group one, Audrey recalled going with her sister to college parties, lying and saying that she was nineteen instead of sixteen. She discussed shoplifting a lot in high school, stating that she and a boyfriend would go to Sports Authority: “we stole skis, snowboards, a pair of $300 snowboard boots, tons of clothing. We were just really good at it. It was like a sick little hobby. I’ve never gotten caught.” Chastity stated that she started smoking cigarettes in the eighth grade and smoking
marijuana and drinking alcohol as a freshman in high school, stating that she would do at least a shot before leaving for school in the morning. She also went through a period of sexual deviance stating that, “I did a lot of drugs and drank a lot and slept around until my early twenties and I was just a huge blurry mess for a while.” This participant also discussed a period of shoplifting, recalling a trip to California for school where she and friends had a competition over who could steal the most.

The outlier of focus group one was Drew, who stated that “to this day, the only alcohol I’ve ever consumed has been in the presence in front of my parents, I’ve never smoked a cigarette, never done any drugs and never smoked pot”. Focus group two had a similar outlier in Jacqueline, who stated that she “didn’t party, didn’t smoke, didn’t do anything” and that she never had a drink until she graduated high school. She states that a large part of what discouraged her from that behavior in large part was her father, who grew up on a military base. “I was terrified of doing something that would piss him off,” she said.

In focus group two, the exercise of illegitimate coercive power was also common. Boston indicated that she began smoking cigarettes at age thirteen, smoking marijuana at age fourteen and drinking alcohol during her freshman year in high school. She recalled taking Big Gulps to school full of vodka and cranberry, or Slushees with vodka.

Lilly had been arrested thirteen times by age fourteen, for offenses such as false impersonation, minor consumption, breaking and entering and truancy. She was on a Child In Need of Supervision (CHINS) petition, was sent to reform school for a year or so around age fourteen and says that the Juvenile Detention Center “had her father’s name on speed dial”. This participant discusses her experiences as a child, with her birth
mother giving her up for adoption at age six and being adopted at age eight. Her rationale for her behavior was that “nobody’s ever taken care of me really, and so why should I listen to anybody when they’re trying to live my life? I’m just going to do what I want and what I wanted to do at the time was a lot of destructive behavior”. She also says that in some ways, her behavior also had to do with wanting her adopted family to prove their love to her, that they would stick by her no matter what she put them through.

Caroline stated that she began drinking at the age of fourteen, though she never did drugs, didn’t participate in sexual intercourse until she was eighteen and tried smoking but didn’t like it- she states that there were things she didn’t do because she felt “like there was a line if I crossed my parents really would just lose their crap”. She also states that she did quite a bit of shoplifting as an adolescent and was arrested a couple times for breaking curfew. Caroline believes her behavior was partly caused by “feeling like I had a right to be angry, and I had a right to do what I wanted to do to express my anger to the world”. Ann specified that while she smoked marijuana for the first time at age fourteen, it never turned into a problem. A lot of her problems, she states, didn’t begin until her early twenties, when she began drinking a lot. She also says that she had a bad cocaine habit for about a year. She explicitly said that while her problems didn’t begin until after high school, all of her problems that came out in her 20’s started there.

**MANIPULATION OF ONE’S PEERS**

The act of bullying one’s peers (usually weaker and/or younger) is another reaction from adolescents to systemic oppression. The manipulation of one’s peers is another way of gaining a feeling of control over one’s own life and giving the adolescent
a feeling of power. Physical bullying isn’t the only facet of this adaptation, which also includes gossip and verbal abuse, as well as the creation of social hierarchies (especially in females).

Gender and group dynamics were of particular interest to the researcher when examining this particular adaptation to systemic oppression. If it was indicated that the adolescents were in a group while skipping school, the researcher was looking for information on the nature of the group interaction: if this group had established a hierarchy, if it had a “leader”, if they had seen others bullied or been bullied themselves while in this group and if the bullying that had occurred been more physical or verbal. Judging by the statements made by the focus group participants, bullying was not very prevalent within friend groups while truant, but rather, bullying was a large reason for many of these students for being truant. In the examination of gender with this adaptation, the researcher paid particular attention to whether or not females in the group recall having been harassed or manipulated by male members of their peer groups as adolescents, as well as any recollections from male participants that indicate the manipulation of females in their peer groups as adolescents.

In focus group one, Drew didn’t have stories of being bullied while truant, mainly because “I ditched class not to be with people, but because I wanted to be away from them. If somebody was like, hey we’re going here... I would purposely not go there.” He discussed a lot of bullying in middle and high school, stating that there were a group of kids who took turns picking on him and “the more someone gets sent to the office, the less the principal is going to believe them... And it got to the point after two or three of those that the principal didn’t care that they started the fights, they just assumed it was
something I did, and it got to that point and that’s kind of why I rebelled and never went to class in high school. I would come home and tell my parents what was going on and their answer, because of that, would be *what did you do to cause it?*” He cited that “people don’t appreciate intelligence until college” and “you can’t stick a fourth grader with an IQ of 140 in a room with just average kids and expect him not to get picked on... and you can’t take that same fourth grader in three years and just expect that to go away magically”.

Audrey also recalled being ostracized as well because of intelligence, stating that she had an advanced reading group that she was the only member of, and she was singled out and had no friends. She switched schools, but the same problem occurred. As a result, she skipped both her eighth grade year and her senior year of high school. She also recalled that as a sophomore, she dated a guy that was rude to her and allowed his friends to make fun of her and feeling like she couldn’t do anything about it because they were her only friends “because they were also sort of the weird kids like me”. Chastity also recalled “getting ostracized a lot for being outside of what people considered to be the norm”, stating that “coupled with the close relationships I had with women, getting called dyke as I walked down the hallway, even though I wasn’t out to myself yet” was a big part of why she didn’t want to be at school.

Mark had a different sort of experience, stating that he probably bullied people more than he ever got bullied, though because he was the only one in his friend group that really cared about school; he sometimes got picked on for that. He claims that if he had stayed friends with those people, he would’ve dropped out before he ever graduated as they “just wanted to smoke weed and fly by high school”. He eventually ended those
friendships in his senior year, because he was “tired of being singled out for wanting to do something with his life”. Henry stated that he “was never bullied into ditching class, or bullied by those people. There was never a sick component to it where I’m skipping class to be with these people, yet getting bullied by them”. However, he does refer to being bullied in middle school a lot, with most of those kids going to the same high school as him. He called it “a contaminated social environment”. When he switched schools, the bullying got a lot better and he learned to enjoy school more, but there were definitely still those that “liked to talk about me and spread rumors about me, even though I wasn’t out to myself yet”. The participants of focus group one also stated that socioeconomic status had a lot to do with their negative interactions with their peers, with three of the five participants stating that they had gone to school with mostly upper-middle class peers, and that “the cars you drove and how much money your parents had” mattered a lot in the environments they were in.

In focus group two, all five participants recalled being bullied in high school, with Caroline summarizing that “it wasn’t like physical fighting; it was just everyone talking about everyone else”. Most of the participants recall being picked on, with one (Boston) stating that she recalls being picked up and put headfirst into a trashcan as a freshman in high school, while Ann recalled verbal comments about her weight or the clothes she wore. Lilly stated that gossip “was like a second nature, especially if you were a woman. I heard it all- I’m a lesbian, I had sex with so-and-so, I had an abortion, I had this STD”. She believes that part of this had to do with growing up in a small town where everyone knew everything about everyone else’s life. Jacqueline, having experienced a similar small-town upbringing, agreed with this, though she says that she doesn’t know of any
rumor in particular that was started about her. She says that wondering if people were talking about her was a constant worry for her. Ann stated that for her, rumors didn’t begin until she stopped going to school and she didn’t find out until years later.

Only Boston experienced a different sort of situation, stating that “the few rumors I did hear about myself, I never did anything about because the environment I grew up in, to say something is basically to start something... In my neighborhood, you didn’t gossip or say anything about anybody, because you either got beat really, really bad or there was a drive-by shooting... I couldn’t gossip if I wanted to, because that would be really bad for myself and my family”.

**RETAILIATION**

While retaliation is the least common of the four adaptations, it is often the most serious. Retaliation includes property and violent crime, as well as suicide, which were the three measures examined in this study. Looking for behaviors that fit with this particular tenant of differential oppression required more probing from the researcher, as the topics involved were more sensitive in nature. The researcher looked for mention of the participants being charged for any sort of property or violent crime as truant adolescents. In regards to violent crime, the researcher prompted participants to discuss any altercations with authority figures, such as parents or teachers, particularly if the participant initiated the altercation.

There was little evidence of retaliation in focus group one, with no participants reporting any violent crime occurring during their time as truant adolescents. Henry reported getting paraphernalia ticket at age fourteen, and several participants recalled
experiences of shoplifting, but no other crime was reported. Two of the five participants recalled suicidal thoughts during middle and high school, though no attempts of suicide were reported.

Behaviors associated with the tenant of retaliation were more common in focus group two, with several participants recalling more serious offenses during adolescence. For instance, Boston grew up near a desert in Phoenix and she recalls setting the desert on fire twice, though she was never caught. She also spoke of her experiences working with the city for a summer job at age fourteen, where she was fired after getting caught stealing money from her co-workers. Lilly recalls driving to a nearby 7-11 while skipping school one time with friends, and the unlicensed driver hit the accelerator instead of the brake and drove right into the store. While everyone was focused on the car that had driven in, Lilly walked in and stole food from the convenience store and then just walked out. She also recalls skipping school for the sole purpose of going to a nearby Woolworth’s and shoplifting, to the point where after she was caught, they put up a picture of her in the back and she was no longer allowed inside. Caroline spoke of driving around drunk while skipping school. One time in particular, she remembers going to get food and her friend that was driving hit the car next to him, caused a significant amount of damage and then drove off. In this focus group, none of the participants reported suicidal thoughts or tendencies during adolescence.

**FAMILY HISTORY**

Because differential oppression theory is rooted in the oppression of children by adult authority figures such as parents or teachers, the researcher thought it pertinent to ask participants about the relationships with their parents during the time of their
truancy. The behavior described by participants regarding parental behavior during their adolescent period fell into the continuum of parental oppression described by Regoli as ranging from benign neglect to malicious abuse.

The participants of focus group one reported a high level of tension in relationships with their parents during adolescence, with one male participant in group one, Drew, stating outright, “I [f—king] hated my parents. I will say that without a doubt. They know it and I know it, and they know why.” The experiences of participants in focus group one fell on more extreme ends of Regoli’s continuum of oppression, with Chastity stating that her parents were more focused on their own problems than anything and expected that she and her brother would just make it through okay and another participant telling about an abusive stepparent. A more lax style of parental control bordering on neglect was described by participants in focus group one, with Audrey recalling that she never took her mother seriously and that any time she was “punished”, she would just go into her room and sneak out. Mark was the only participant of group one that reported a more positive relationship with his parents during adolescence, though he believes that their relationship would not have been nearly as good if they had been aware of some of his deviant behavior. When Mark reported that he thought their relationship was saved by lying, other participants quickly agreed that their own familial relationships benefitted because their parents didn’t know about everything they were doing.

In focus group two, several participants stated that they had good relationships with at least one parent during adolescent, if not both. While Jacqueline at one point admitted that she was “scared s—tless” of her father, she stated when asked about her
relationship with her family that she had a good relationship with both parents during adolescence. Other participants talked about strained relationships with stepparents, though good relationships with biological parents.

Despite overall better familial relations in group two, two of the participants still recalled parental behavior at the extreme ends of Regoli’s continuum. Boston explained that she had almost no relationship with her family until about age 38, calling her father “that man” and referring to thinking of her mother as “some vessel that spit out all these kids”.

Ann’s relationship with her family was also very stressed. With a sick mother, several siblings and other relatives who stayed with the family, she spoke of skipping school often to take care of her siblings or family members. Ann spoke of a good relationship with her mother, stating that they had mended their relationship as she got older, though at the time of her truancy, she held resentment towards her for having to take care of everyone, and also for not sticking up for herself, Ann or her siblings during rough periods with their father. Ann stated that “because of her health problems, she really needed me around. So it was a much more complicated relationship with her than with my dad. Because my dad, at least there was that certainty of, I know who you are, and you’re a [d—k], and I don’t want to have anything to do with you. And you clearly don’t want anything to do with me”. She also said that if it wasn’t for her mother, she would have absolutely no relationship with her father.
CONCLUSIONS

Empirical evidence supports the four adaptations to oppression coined by Robert Regoli and John Hewitt. In focus group one, the exercise of illegitimate coercive power was the most common adaptation found in statements from participants. The least common adaptation to oppression was retaliation, with little evidence of the adaptation found in this group. In focus group two, passive acceptance was the most common adaptation to oppression, which correlates well with Regoli’s theory, as it states that passive acceptance is the most common adaptation in females. The least common adaptation for focus group two was the manipulation of one’s peers.

In addition to looking for empirical evidence to test Regoli and Hewitt’s theory of differential oppression, the hypothesis that adolescent truancy is not only the cause of serious issues like dropping out of school and juvenile delinquency, but also a reaction to systemic oppression, was also being tested. The oppression of children by adults had a strong positive correlation with adolescent truancy. Evidence supporting this hypothesis can be found in statements made by several participants, though the source of the oppression varied depending upon the participant.

One can also find evidence supporting a correlation between habitual truancy and oppression by the educational system itself. Several participants stated they wouldn’t go to class because they were bored. A statement from Caroline summed this up perfectly: “I was just really bored in class. I felt like we went over things five times when I got it halfway through the first time. And I just wasn’t gonna go waste my time doing that”. Other issues with the educational system popped up as well, with one participant in group two stating that she had several teachers who talked down to her and were cruel
to her. Though one teacher in middle school had her tested into an honors class, despite the fact that earlier teachers had labeled her with a learning disability, she ultimately dropped out of school in her sophomore year of high school, stating that “when you go through so many years of being told that you're stupid, and you're not smart…it sits with you”. Though Caroline too ultimately dropped out and got her GED, it was the administration who gave her the ultimatum that she either needed to drop out or she would be expelled. Issues with authority figures in the education system correlate with both Regoli’s theory as well as an earlier study done that found that “70% of the truants viewed school as the major cause of their truancy and 91% saw it as a significant cause...The majority of truants said that their most negative experiences at school were difficulties they encountered with school adults (Nielsen, Gerber 1974).”

Despite the amount of empirical evidence that supports Regoli’s theory of differential oppression, the theory cannot explain all behavior of the ten focus group participants. While participants in the first focus group had extremely tense familial relationships, similar (and in some cases, more extreme) behavior was reported by members of the second focus group, many of whom had notably better relationships with at least one parent, if not both. In addition to this, any of the participants described issues with peers as a big part of their truancy and while Regoli’s theory may hypothesize that their peers are similarly oppressed, there is no evidence of such oppression in statements made by focus group participants.

There is no easy solution to “solving” adolescent truancy. Many truancy reduction programs exist. Some states have legislature that addresses the problem of chronic truancy. However, there is no “one size fits all” solution for this problem, and there are
several things that need to be addressed before the bigger issues. As previously stated in this paper, the inconsistent reporting of truancy is a big problem in defining truancy, and defining truancy on a national level is necessary to do before we as a society look to eliminate it. While truancy reduction programs are necessary and often helpful, we cannot implement a widespread program until we have more concrete data on the population we are working with.

There are many factors that are important in the portrait of a “truant adolescent”. Empirical evidence shows Regoli and Hewitt’s theory of differential oppression to be accurate in describing the behaviors of children oppressed by adults. By looking at the phenomenon of adolescent truancy through the lens of differential oppression theory, we see that we may consider the oppression of children by adults to be one factor we can use to study adolescent truants.
Works Cited


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