

# Reducing Deviance Through Youths' Mutual Aid Group Dynamics

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## Abstract

The mutual aid group, as supported by the social worker, emerges to play a vital role in helping group members reduce their deviance or behavioral problem. However, how the collaboration of the group and social worker accomplishes the reduction has remained uncharted. Based on social capital theory, mutual aid and cohesion within the group and social workers' specific aid for the group are likely responsible for the reduction. The test of such hypotheses relies on a two-wave panel survey of the members of 60 mutual aid groups who had deviant behavioral problems, located in Hong Kong, China. These groups had 241 youths completing both initial and 1-year follow-up surveys. Results manifested the direct or unconditional contributions of mutual aid, group cohesion, and social workers' specific aid to reducing deviance. Hence, social workers can enhance the effectiveness of the mutual aid group in reducing youths' deviance.

## Keywords

mutual aid, behavioral problem, group cohesion, social worker aid

A mutual aid group refers to a group of people helping each other to solve their problems (Flogheraiter & Pasini, 2009). As many youths with deviant behavior problems form mutual aid groups to tackle their problems, the youth group members merit practical and research concerns (Redman, 2010). Notably, research has found that such a mutual aid group helps its members to reduce their risk of deviance, such as alcoholism, substance abuse, and offense (Jagendorf & Malekoff, 2000). Nevertheless, mutual

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aid among the youth members has been a supposed but unconfirmed factor for the risk reduction. The supposition rests on principles that group activities or dynamics, involving sharing, discussion, problem solving, and generally mutual support, are contributors to the reduction (Steinberg, 2004). Such group dynamics are also in principle likely to benefit from support by professionals, notably social workers, who are responsible for liaison among various groups and people (Wituk, Shepherd, Slavich, Warren, & Meissen, 2000). However, these principles have been empirically uncertain in view of the presence of unsupportive findings and suspicion about the effective mechanisms of mutual aid group dynamics and professional intervention (Ben-Ari, 2002). This uncertainty and suspicion has left a question about whether and how mutual aid, group cohesion, and social workers' support for the group separately and jointly reduce the deviance of group members is of concern. To address the question, the study uses two-wave panel surveys to examine the effects of earlier factors on later deviance.

The mutual aid group is of concern as a formal organization established to help its members to solve their problems (Flogheraiter & Pasini, 2009). Its formality rests on leadership and activities such as regular meetings to facilitate mutual aid (Oka, 2003). The mutual aid group can involve youths who have behavioral problems or deviant behavior, including substance abuse and offense, typically with the aid of social workers, who are responsible for quelling the problems (Jagendorf & Malekoff, 2000; Kacen & Bakshy, 2005). In addition to such youth mutual aid groups, mutual aid groups are widely applicable and popular to people with various problems (Emond, 2003; Karabanow, 2004; Redman, 2010).

The youth mutual aid group per se merits a focus, because of the ubiquity and distinctiveness of the group (Tonigan, Toscova, & Connors, 1999). Accordingly, the group represents a community or microcosm, comprising youths with their own common problems and concerns (Oygaard, Thuen, & Solvang, 2000). The group also attracts professional services to encourage their users to form or join the group (Chatwin & Tovey, 2004). Moreover, the group meets the need for strengthening community care for social service users (Hatzidimitriadou, 2002). These crucial and singular features of the group thus warrant the concentration of research effort on the group (Kelly, 2003).

Particularly, the dynamics within the mutual aid group is not yet transparent and is in need of illumination (Steinberg, 2004). At issue is the effectiveness of such a mutual aid group, in view of worry about the youths' inability to solve their problems and provide reciprocal support and aggravation of their problems due to contagion among problem youths (French & Dishion, 2003; Kelly, 2003). The latter may arise because of the youths' susceptibility to their peers to maintain their identity or norm. This creates the iatrogenic problems of behavioral problems (Heinze, Toro, & Urberg, 2004). Meanwhile, youths with behavioral problems may have difficulties in sustaining group cohesion and mutual aid (Simons, Christopher, Oliver, & Strange, 2006). Despite the difficulties, group cohesion, mutual aid, and social worker contact and aid are all expected components of the group to reduce deviant behavior in the member of the mutual aid group.

Group cohesion means a good relationship, characterized by social harmony, togetherness, committed involvement, and joint problem solving among members (Glass & Benshoff, 2002). The cohesion is clearly integral to the survival of a group, or otherwise a fragmented group just fails to function. More specifically, group cohesion is a helpful element of the mutual aid group in facilitating the transmission of aid, information, hope, and learning. This is because learning from others requires having a good relationship and identification with others (Roffman, 2004). Nevertheless, group cohesion does not appear to be a panacea that necessarily performs a healing function (Kaufman, Rohde, Seeley, Clarke, & Stice, 2005). A way out of the uncertainty is the contention that the helpfulness of group cohesion is conditional, conceivably on support provided by the group (Weis, 2003). Accordingly, if the group were not supportive, group cohesion would not help.

For the mutual aid group, mutual aid is especially crucial and integral. Mutual aid means having group members helping each other. Such mutuality indicates that the group is dynamic and vibrant enough to be helpful (Rubbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Mutual aid has appeared to be helpful in sustaining the youths' well-being, health, and adjustment (Haweg, Little, & Pasupathi, 2002; Kanaiaupuni, Donato, Thompson-Colon, & Stainback, 2005). However, mutuality can be stressful rather than helpful, as it conveys a sense of obligation that constrains one's freedom (van Aswegen, 2000).

Social workers play a crucial role in sustaining the mutual aid group among youths with behavioral problems, because of the inadequacy of these youths to help themselves (Jagendorf & Malekoff, 2000). To provide effective support, social workers need to offer specific help to the mutual aid group to strengthen its functions (Litwak & Meyer, 1966). Such specific help is customized help that meets the specific and situational need of the group (Laudet, Magura, Cleland, Vogel, & Knight, 2003). Hence, social workers' support would function as an important way of empowerment to sustain the survival of the mutual aid group (Kacen & Bakshy, 2005).

## **Justification by Social Capital Theory**

Social capital theory justifies the contributions of the mutual aid group, its members' mutual aid and group cohesion, and social workers' specific support for the group to reducing deviance among young members of the mutual aid. In the first place, social capital means beneficial resources accessible through trustful and reciprocal social relation (Woolcock, 1998). Social capital also amply applies to mutual aid concerning youths in community and group contexts (Marks, 2012). As such, mutual aid group activities such as mutual support and group cohesion and contact with social workers and their support from the group are all the indicators of social capital, to the extent that they help convey resources (Flogheraiter & Pasini, 2009). Based on this concept, social capital theory essentially posits that access to resources through social relationship is a key to harnessing the resources to achieve goals (Lin & Erickson, 2008). The relationship can exist among the mutual aid group and between the group member and the social worker (Hawkins & Maurer, 2012). Crucially, the theory specifies factors

that contribute to the access. One prominent factor is trustfulness and reciprocity in the relationship to ensure the sustainable transmission of valuable resources (Thomson, 2005). Corresponding to trustfulness and reciprocity would be group cohesion and mutual aid in the mutual aid group. Group cohesion enhances trust through the intense relationship, interaction, and negotiation among group members (Barrera, 2007).

Another principle of social capital theory states that social capital or access to valuable resources is the product of the quantity and quality of help (Rothstein, 2005). This principle also endorses the benefit as a multiplicative product of mutual aid and group cohesion, which represent the quantity and quality of social capital, respectively. Accordingly, the product of social worker contact and group cohesion generates more benefits, as contact with social workers and group cohesion represents the quantity and quality of social capital, respectively. Social capital theory thus explains the contribution of social capital to success in work, education, and other aspects of life (Clark, 2004; Putnam, 2002).

However, the contributions expected by social capital theory to the reduction in deviance have yet been uncertain and even doubtful, in view of some counterarguments. The latter suspect that the grouping of deviant youths reinforces and aggravates deviance (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006). Specifically, mutual aid may represent teaching and learning of deviant behavior (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). Group cohesion, alternatively, may strengthen deviant peer norms and collective resistance to prosocial norms (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009). Moreover, social worker aid to the group may count as interference with the group to incite group members' resistance and conflict (Kacen & Bakshy, 2005). These counterarguments highlight the value of testing the following hypotheses, as derived from social capital theory, concerning the member of the mutual aid group:

**Hypothesis 1:** Mutual aid exhibits a negative effect on deviance. For this, social capital theory posits that mutuality in the aid sustains the effectiveness of the aid in meeting the group aim of rehabilitating the youths from deviant problems. Accordingly, mutuality or reciprocity is a functional strength of social capital (Thomson, 2005).

**Hypothesis 2:** Group cohesion exhibits a negative effect on deviance. For this, the theory posits that group cohesion ensures the effectiveness of the group in achieving the group aim of rehabilitation. Accordingly, cohesion is a structural strength of social capital that guarantees the helpfulness of aid (Barrera, 2007).

**Hypothesis 3:** The coupling of mutual aid and group cohesion exhibits a negative effect on deviance. For this, the theory posits the multiplicative effect of cohesion and aid (Rothstein, 2005). Accordingly, combination of the functional quantity of aid and structural quality of cohesion would create a multiplicative effect.

**Hypothesis 4:** Attendance at the group exhibits a negative effect on deviance. For this, the theory regards interaction or attendance as the basis for receiving aid, that is, attendance furnishes the channel for accessing aid from the group.

**Hypothesis 5:** Social workers' specific aid to the group exhibits a negative effect on deviance. For this, the theory proposes that the support would represent social capital generally, or aid or the provision of resources specifically (Wituk et al., 2000).

**Hypothesis 6:** Contact with social workers exhibits a negative effect on deviance. For this, the theory regards contact as the basis for obtaining aid. In this connection, social workers represent a source of social capital, which provides aid or resources (Wituk et al., 2000).

**Hypothesis 7:** The coupling of contact with social workers and group cohesion exhibits a negative effect on deviance. For this, the theory posits the multiplicative effect of the quantity and quality of social capital to enhance the effectiveness of social capital (Rothstein, 2005). In this case, group cohesion and contact with social workers register the quantity and quality components of social capital, respectively; that is, the social worker safeguards the quality of the aid from the group (Wituk et al., 2000).

## **This Study**

This study uses panel data collected from an initial survey (Wave 1) and follow-up (Wave 2) survey of the members of mutual aid groups in Hong Kong. These groups operate autonomously, based on their own resources and work plans. Nevertheless, they are also accessible through social work agencies, which provide support for the formation and operation of the groups. For these groups, social workers offer various inputs to strengthen their group cohesion and effectiveness (Ngai, Cheung, & Ngai, 2009). The inputs include support for organizing activities, provision of advice, materials, facilities, and meeting places, and referral to health or other services.

Mutual aid groups for reducing youths' deviance tend to accord with the cultural context of Hong Kong. Accordingly, the context particularly detests crime, deviance, and other behavioral problems, and thus treasures desistance from the problems (Cheung & Cheung, 2008). Furthermore, the context is favorable to the development of social capital for reintegrating problem youths in the community (Wong & Lo, 2011).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Given institutional ethical approval, the study acquired survey data from 60 mutual aid groups composed of youths with behavioral problems, based on a pertinent up-to-date database (Cheung et al., 2005; Ngai et al., 2009; Ngai, Cheung, & Ngai, 2011). This database identified social work services linked with the groups to facilitate the study to contact the groups. Through these services, the initial survey collected data from 448 members of the groups, out of 540 questionnaires dispatched, giving a response rate of 83.0%. Criteria used for sampling the youth participants included the participants' formal membership in the groups and the groups' connection with the social work services, such as receiving social work support. One year after the initial survey, the follow-up survey collected data from 241 members who had responded to the initial survey, giving a retention rate of 53.8%. Analysis of the follow-up data thereby required a statistical adjustment method for minimizing bias due to attrition or

**Table 1.** Means.

Variable	Scoring	Only those responding to both Wave 1 and Wave 2 surveys			
		All	Wave 1	Wave 2	Both
<i>n</i>		448	241	241	482
Deviance	0-100	18.7	19.1	19.6	19.4
Group cohesion	0-100	70.3	70.6	67.4	69.0
Attendance at group activity	Times	4.0	4.6	3.9	4.2
Mutual aid among group members	Persons	5.7	6.6	5.8	6.2
Social workers' specific aid to the group	0-100	66.0	66.1	64.2	65.2
Social worker contact	Persons	2.1	2.1	2.3	2.2
Living with father	0, 100	77.0	81.9	81.3	81.6
Living with mother	0, 100	82.6	87.7	87.1	87.4
Parent widowed	0, 100	3.4	1.6	1.7	1.7
Age	Years	18.3	17.2	17.2	17.2
Female	0, 100	51.4	52.7	52.7	52.7
Education	Years	9.6	9.6	9.6	9.6
Acquiescence	0-100	47.3	48.5	47.1	47.8

selection into the follow-up survey (see the "Analysis Procedure" section below). The surveys adhered to the ethical requirements for informed consent and confidentiality to safeguard youths' willingness and privacy of responses. These youths completed the questionnaires independently during their group meetings and returned them within sealed envelopes. The surveys also got the approval and support from the social work services, which, however, could not get access to the completed questionnaires.

During the initial survey, the respondents' average age was 18.3 years and the age ranged from 12 to 24 years (see Table 1). Among the respondents, 51.4% were female, 82.6% lived with their mothers, and 77.0% lived with their fathers. The respondents had an average of 9.6 years of schooling (i.e., between Grades 9 and 10). All these characteristics similarly appeared in those youths who responded to the follow-up survey as well. Accordingly, those responding to both initial and follow-up surveys had an average age of 17.2 years initially. Among them, 52.7% were female. They also had an average of 9.6 years of schooling.

### Measurement

In each of the two-wave surveys, a questionnaire incorporated the measures of deviance, group cohesion, and social workers' specific aid to the group. These measures were the composites of multiple questionnaire items, each of which captured ratings on a 5-point scale. The lowest point of the scale, "none or very little," yielded a score of 0, the second point, "rather little," a score of 25, the third point, "average," a score of 50, the fourth point, "rather a lot," a score of 75, and the highest point, "very much,"

a score of 100. Besides, the measures of mutual aid and social worker contact involved the numbers of persons contacted during the 6 months preceding the survey. The measure of attendance at group activity involved the times of attendance per month in the 6 months preceding the survey.

Deviance or problem behavior combined getting drunk with alcohol, abusing illicit drugs, damaging public properties, yelling at others, and using foul language during the month preceding the survey (Elliott et al., 1989). The internal consistency reliability of five-item measure was .710 during the initial survey and .725 during the follow-up survey.

Group cohesion combined the respondent's perceptions that the group members "got along harmoniously," "solved problems concertedly," "engaged in group activity enthusiastically," "solved problems collectively," "was (not) indifferent to group affairs," "(not) lacked a sense of security in the group," "had (not) power struggle," "had (not) conflicts," "(not) withdrew from the group," and "(not) fragmented the group." The latter four items involved reverse scoring (Glass & Benshoff, 2002). All the 10 items referred to what had happened in the 6 months preceding the survey. The internal consistency reliability of the 10-item measure was .828 during the initial survey and .856 during the follow-up survey.

Social workers' specific aid to the group was a composite of three items that the respondent found that social workers' aid to the group was "meeting the needs of your group," "tailor-made for your group," and "taking care of the situation of your group." These instances happened in the 6 months preceding the survey. The internal consistency reliability of the three-item measure was .891 during the initial survey and .876 during the follow-up survey.

Mutual aid and contact with social workers referred to the number of group members involved in the mutual aid and social workers contacted, respectively. Attendance at mutual group activity referred to the times of attendance per month. In this regard, the youth reported the numbers and times based on his or her experience in the 6 months preceding the survey. Such self-reports of mutual aid properties have been viable (Kelly, 2003; Laudet et al., 2003).

Acquiescence involved a measure that was the average of all the rating items to reflect the tendency to rate every item highly. This measure was an important control factor used in the analysis to minimize the bias due to the method of self-report rating (Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2010). Possibly, the bias would inflate the relationships between deviance and group cohesion and other inputs, because of their common reliance on the rating method.

Selectivity to follow-up response was another control factor estimated to minimize the bias due to the attrition of the sample from the initial survey to the follow-up survey. The selectivity was the hazard of follow-up response predicted significantly by variables collected in the initial survey (Brigg, 2004). A hazard referred to the probability of follow-up response divided by the cumulative probability of not having a follow-up response, based on a normal distribution.

## Analysis Procedure

The first step of analysis was a logistic regression analysis of the response to the follow-up survey on variables identified in the initial survey (Brigg, 2004); that is, the outcome variable was a binary one indicating the presence in the follow-up survey. This analysis used a stepwise selection procedure to cull significant predictors of the follow-up response. The hazard predicted by analysis represented the respondent's selectivity to the follow-up response. This hazard served as a control factor for the analysis of deviance and group cohesion at the follow-up in the second step, restricted to youths who responded to both the initial and follow-up surveys. Such a step to analyze deviance used a linear regression analysis based on a mixed-effect model, which specified the mutual aid group as a random factor, in addition to the fixed factors of predictors concerned (Peugh & Enders, 2005). The mutual aid group was a random factor in that they represented a sample found in Hong Kong that could but not necessarily make a difference in deviance or group cohesion. To guard against any bias due to some deviation from the normal distribution regarding deviance (*skewness* = 1.019; *kurtosis* = 0.726), bootstrapping provided robust tests based on 1,000 random subsamples of the original sample (Muthen & Muthen, 2006; Nevitt & Hancock, 2009). Furthermore, to correct for any bias due to heteroskedasticity, regression analysis using relevant weighted least-squares estimation provided additional estimates and tests (Cottrell & Lucchetti, 2013; Verbeek, 2012). The analysis of deviance, furthermore, proceeded in two steps: first with Wave 1 variables as predictors, and second with the addition of Wave 2 variables. Such a first step clarified the lagged effects over time, whereas the second step highlighted the additional net effects due to group cohesion, social worker contact, and their interaction in Wave 2. For the ease of interpreting the effect size, all analyses used the standard scores of variables involved to estimate standardized effects.

## Results

Youths' deviance, on average, was at a very low level ( $M < 20$ , see Table 1). Meanwhile, group cohesion and social workers' specific aid to the group were moderately high ( $M > 64$ ). On average, 2.1 social workers provided the aid to the group, attendance at group activity was 4.0 times per month, and 5.7 group members provided mutual aid within the group during the initial survey. The average duration of a session of mutual aid group activity was 2.65 hr.

In the first step of predicting the response to the follow-up survey, the logistic regression analysis revealed that the response was higher in the youths who had a younger age ( $\beta = -.350$ ; see Table 2), more attendance at group activity ( $\beta = .346$ ), and more group members providing mutual aid ( $\beta = .346$ ). Notably, the youth who responded to the follow-up survey was younger than the youth who responded to the initial survey ( $M = 17.2$  vs.  $M = 18.3$ ; see Table 1). The former youth was thus likely to select oneself into the follow-up survey, and such selectivity was a control factor included in the next step of analysis. Hence, prior deviance and group cohesion, and

**Table 2.** Standardized Effects on Selectivity to Respond Again.

Variable	$\beta$
Attendance at group activity	.425**
Mutual aid among group members	.346**
Age	-.350**
$R^2$ (Cox and Snell)	.106

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

social workers' specific aid, did not significantly affect the response to the follow-up survey. This dispelled the risk that the effects of group cohesion and social workers' specific aid on deviance later were artifacts due to self-selection.

In the second step of analysis (i.e., linear regression analysis), all the regression analyses using maximum likelihood estimation with the mixed-effect model and with bootstrapping tests, and weighted least-squares estimation with heteroskedasticity correction gave consistent results about the prediction of Wave 2 deviance (see Table 3). The prediction showed significant effects from the Wave 1 predictors of age ( $\beta = -.170, p < .05$ ; see Column 1 in Table 3), parental widow(er)hood ( $\beta = .221, p < .001$ ), acquiescence ( $\beta = .300, p < .001$ ), Wave 1 deviance ( $\beta = .266, p < .001$ ), mutual aid ( $\beta = -.234, p < .01$ ), social workers' specific aid to the group ( $\beta = -.195$ ), and the interaction between mutual aid and group cohesion ( $\beta = -.143$ ). Notably, the negative effect ( $\beta = -.144$  to  $-.237$ ; see Table 3) of Wave 1 mutual aid on Wave 2 deviance supported Hypothesis 1 (about the negative effect of mutual aid on deviance). The negative effect ( $\beta = -.106$  to  $-.143$ ) of the interaction between Wave 1 mutual aid and group cohesion and Wave 2 deviance supported Hypothesis 3 (about the negative effect of the interaction between mutual aid and group cohesion). In other words, when both mutual aid and group cohesion were higher, deviance later was particularly lower. The negative effect ( $\beta = -.089$  to  $-.195$ ) of Wave 1 social workers' specific aid on Wave 2 deviance supported Hypothesis 5 (about the negative effect of social workers' specific aid on deviance). Hence, Hypotheses 1, 3, and 5 held in the analysis that controlled for various Wave 1 factors, including prior deviance, acquiescence, and selectivity.

Furthermore, additional Wave 2 variables that indicated significant effects on Wave 2 deviance were Wave 2 group cohesion ( $\beta = -.339, p < .001$ ; see Column 2 in Table 3) and its interaction with social worker contact ( $\beta = -.137, p < .001$ ). The negative effect ( $\beta = -.275$  to  $-.339$ ; see Table 3) of Wave 2 group cohesion on Wave 2 deviance supported Hypothesis 2 (about the negative effect of group cohesion). The negative effect ( $\beta = -.125$  to  $-.186$ ) of the interaction between Wave 2 group cohesion and social worker contact and Wave 2 deviance supported Hypothesis 7 (about the negative effect of the interaction between group cohesion and social work contact). This effect suggested that when group cohesion and social work contact were both higher, deviation was particularly lower. Besides, the significant effects found in the first step of analysis remained significant, and thus Wave 2 variables did not substantially eclipse or

**Table 3.** Standardized Effects on Wave 2 Deviance.

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Deviance, Wave 1	.266***	.286***	.270***	.286***	.342***	.306***
Social worker's specific aid, Wave 1	-.195**	-.143*	-.187*	-.143	-.131***	-.089*
Mutual aid, Wave 1	-.234**	-.227**	-.237**	-.227**	-.181***	-.144**
Group cohesion, Wave 1	.006	.101	.010	.101	.012	.074*
Group attendance, Wave 1	-.042	-.080	-.057	-.080	-.042	-.090*
Social worker contact, Wave 1	.008	-.005	.007	-.005	-.029	.038
Group cohesion, Wave 1 × Mutual aid, Wave 1	-.143*	-.121*	-.141**	-.114*	-.130***	-.106***
Group cohesion	—	-.339***	—	-.339***	—	-.275***
Social worker contact	—	.036	—	.037	—	.063
Group cohesion × Social worker contact	—	-.137***	—	-.186**	—	-.125***
Age	-.170*	-.159**	-.173**	-.159**	-.093***	-.090**
Female	-.086	-.129*	-.081	-.129*	-.047	-.035
Education	-.062	-.038	-.068	-.038	-.061	-.017
Public assistance receipt	.066	.048	.064	.048	.052	.027
Living with the father	.150*	.124*	.144*	.124*	.083	.097***
Living with the mother	-.047	-.040	-.047	-.040	.010	-.012
Living with both parents	.054	.031	.085	.047	.073*	.057*
Parental widow(er)hood	.221***	.206***	.224	.206	.200***	.206***
Acquiescence	.300***	.293***	.281***	.293***	.270***	.278***
Acquiescence, Wave 1	.083	.083	.080	.083	.058	-.028
Selectivity to respond again	.061	.134	.062	.134	.026	.100
Random variation						
Residual	.608	.491	—	—	—	—
Group	.019	.000	—	—	—	—
R <sup>2</sup>	.373	.509	.371	.507	.782	.869
ΔR <sup>2</sup>		.136***		.136***		.087***

(1) Effects of Wave 1 predictors only, using maximum likelihood tests.  
 (2) Additional effects of Wave 2 predictors, using maximum likelihood tests.  
 (3) Effects of Wave 1 predictors only, using bootstrap tests.  
 (4) Additional effects of Wave 2 predictors, using bootstrap tests.  
 (5) Effects of Wave 1 predictors only, heteroskedasticity corrected.  
 (6) Additional effects of Wave 2 predictors, heteroskedasticity corrected.  
 \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

mediate the effects of Wave 1 variables. Overall, Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7 received support from the two-step analysis.

In contrast, Hypotheses 4 and 6 about the negative effects of group attendance and social worker contact on deviance did not find support according to the significance test. As such, group attendance and social worker contact reduced deviance only with the coupling of other factors. Besides, selectivity into follow-up response did not engender a significant effect on Wave 2 deviance.

## Discussion

Findings mainly reveal the negative effects of mutual aid, the specific aid of social workers, cohesion in the mutual aid group, and the conjunction of the cohesion with social work contact on the subsequent deviance of the member of the mutual aid group. These findings support five of the seven hypotheses concerning relief of the deviance through the mutual aid group. Specifically, the contributions of the mutual aid group are in terms of its group cohesion, mutual aid, and attendance at the group, whereas the contributions of social worker input are in terms of social worker contact and social workers' specific aid to the group. These contributions can occur unconditionally or conditionally. Unconditional contributions arise from mutual aid, group cohesion, and social workers' specific aid to the reduction in deviance later. Moreover, mutual aid has an additional conditional contribution through the coupling with group cohesion. In other words, group cohesion contributes conditionally through coupling with mutual aid. Moreover, group cohesion and social worker contact contribute conditionally through their coupling. Group cohesion therefore represents a key to the direct and conditional contributions to the reduction in deviance. Similarly, social worker input can reduce the youths' deviance both unconditionally and conditionally.

All these contributions are explicable by social capital theory, which identifies factors to strengthen the benefits of obtaining resources through social relation. Such beneficial resources rest on the mutuality, cohesion, specificity, durability, other quantitative and qualitative parameters, and their multiplications in the social relation or grouping (Jones & Woolcock, 2009; Robison & Ritchie, 2010; Rothstein, 2005). As these parameters broaden, intensify, and solidify the transmission of resources within the group, connection with and aid from the group would be beneficial multiplicatively. The theoretical input of social capital theory has found alternative support from research concerning the contributions of reciprocity, cohesion, and specificity in the group, social relation, or social support (Hides et al., 2010; Paddock et al., 2007). For instance, the multiplication of specific and durable or repeated aid from social workers and the mutual aid group would consolidate the benefit of the mutual aid group to the reduction in deviance.

Whereas mutual aid, group cohesion, and social workers' specific aid tend to reduce deviance unconditionally, attendance at the mutual aid group and social worker contact only contribute to the reduction conditionally. This finding reveals the limitation of the mutual aid group composed of youths with behavioral problems in reducing the youths' deviance. The group attendance has the limitation because youths' own behavioral problem would dampen the helpfulness of youth group activity (Heinze et al., 2004). Possibly, the group activity does not offer help and is unhelpful. Hence, social worker guidance is one essential means to uphold the benefit of group attendance (Rosenbaum et al., 2004). In this connection, social worker contact is not enough to reduce deviance, simply because the contact is not sufficiently specific to be helpful. Rather, a larger number of social workers would provide more benefits under the condition that the mutual aid group is more cohesive. The greater benefit may result from social workers' input to the helpful group that is cohesive; that is, social workers' input

would magnify the helpfulness of the cohesive group. This is a case of complementarity that the group and social workers intensify each other's benefit (Chatwin & Tovey, 2004). In a sense, social workers may provide guidance to steer the help of the mutual aid group toward the right way.

Whereas recent group cohesion tends to reduce deviance unconditionally, group cohesion 1 year before seems to reduce deviance only conditionally. The condition for the latter is mutual aid in the group. This finding indicates that the direct contribution of group cohesion dissipates with time. The dissipation reflects the case that group cohesion is not highly stable ( $\beta = .221$ ) and the volatility of social relationship and its influence. Such cases are likely because of rapid change in the youth's life through schooling, work, and service engagement (Alwin & McCammon, 2003). Hence, group cohesion in yesteryear could become obsolete and irrelevant. The dissipating contribution of group cohesion, nevertheless, contrasts with the direct contributions of earlier mutual aid and social workers' specific aid. The difference lies in the fact that the aid from the group or social workers is clearly helpful in its own right, whereas group cohesion itself is not an instance of help. Rather, group cohesion may function as a means of social control to forbid deviance, and this function is likely short-lived (White, 2009). As such, the enduring contribution of group cohesion would depend on concrete help associated with mutual aid. In terms of social capital theory, group cohesion then functions to amplify the circulation of concrete resources within the group. When the resources are not concretely available with the passage of time or without pertinent support, the benefit of group cohesion would diminish. Importantly, group cohesion itself would benefit from mutual aid in the group and social workers' specific aid to the group. The contribution of group cohesion, nonetheless, would hinge on concrete aid from the group and social workers.

The study thereby offers results that substantiate and elaborate existing research on youths' deviance. Specifically, the results are consistent with research that has indicated the contribution of professional help, group work, and cooperative activity to the reduction in deviance. In addition, the results clarify conditions for the contribution to lessen the doubt about the contribution of social work services, peer support, and association with peers with problems (Farrington & Welsh, 2007). Essentially, the study suggests that the mutual aid group supported by social workers can generate social capital characterized by the reciprocal, specific, and durable supply of valuable resources through social connection to alleviate deviance. In particular, support from and cohesion among peers can be helpful to dampen deviance when they are reciprocal and responsive to social workers' specific aid. Moreover, social work input is helpful when it is available to youths committed to the group. Without such reciprocity, commitment, and specific aid, the mutual aid group could not maintain social capital to convey concrete help to divert group members' deviance.

The study also shed light on issues concerning the mutual aid group and deviance. First, the mutual aid group is at issue for its possible iatrogenic effect on deviance. The study relieves the issue by demonstrating the contribution of mutual aid and cohesion in the group (Dodge et al., 2006). Second, social work input into the mutual aid group

has been at issue, as the input may complicate problems with the group (Steinberg, 2004). The study tackles the issue by showing the direct and conditional benefits of social work input, coupled with cohesion in the group. Third, the youth peer group is at issue of its tutelage of deviance and inadequacy in social capital (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Haynie, 2001). The study tempers the issue by showing that social worker support for mutuality in the group helps facilitate conventional social control and prosocial mutual aid from the group. Overall, an issue concerning the usefulness of the mutual aid group arises from rejection, dropout, and inadequate expertise in the group (Carlsen, 2003; Kelly, 2003). The study addresses this issue by illustrating that mutual aid, group cohesion, and social worker special support collaborate to avoid the problems and ensure the usefulness of the group.

### *Implications*

For reducing youths' deviance or behavioral problems, mutual aid in and social workers' specific aid to the mutual aid group merit promotion. Both factors are vital in exerting their contributions unconditionally and over time. The factors of the youths and social workers not only are independent contributors, but also can combine to generate a greater contribution based on their complementarity. Social workers can also amplify the contribution of youths' group cohesion to reducing deviance. Furthermore, promoting youths' mutual aid and group cohesion altogether can generate an additional synergistic effect to expedite the reduction in the youths' deviance. As youths' group cohesion is crucial, enhancing the cohesion through the promotion of youths' mutual aid and social workers' specific aid to the mutual aid group is in turn an effective approach. The various concerns for promotion essentially converge into the consolidation of social capital in the nexus of the mutual aid group and social work services. This consolidation would hinge on the boosting of mutuality, specificity, and durability in the nexus to maximize social capital or valuable resources accessible for reducing the youths' deviance. Such an aim of building social capital is consonant with the operational logic of the mutual aid group (Flogheraiter & Pasini, 2009).

Realistically, the mutual aid group may not be as effective and mutually supportive as expected to be (Lorenz, 1998). Obstacles to the effective operation of the mutual aid group abound (Chatwin & Tovey, 2004). In this connection, social workers are required to provide support for the group to safeguard its functioning. This support is clearly justified by the present findings about social workers' contribution to enhancing the effectiveness of the mutual aid group. The findings thereby clarify the need for social worker support and relieve the doubt about social workers' contribution to the mutual aid group (Kacen & Bakshy, 2005). Essentially, sustaining social capital based on the prosocial orientation of social work is what social workers can help mutual aid groups to tackle their deviant problems.

Given the effectiveness of mutual aid in reducing the group member's deviance, the social worker can strive to encourage the group member's mutual aid. The striving can be fruitful, in view of existing research and practice (Laudet et al., 2003).

## Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited in its self-report survey (i.e., nonexperimental study) of young mutual aid group members at a single site of Hong Kong. Moreover, the group members, as identified to have behavioral problems, represent a specific target population. All these limitations in sampling, design, and measurement decidedly require future research to address to corroborate and generalize the findings of this study. For the purpose of generalization, future research needs to broaden the target population to cover youths of diverse backgrounds. It importantly needs to unravel if and how contextual factors make a difference in the findings.

Future research can also do a good job in substantiating social capital theory. Accordingly, the research needs to identify and analyze explicitly the factors of social capital, including trustfulness, reciprocity, and transmission of valuable resources through social ties. The crucial links for the analysis are the contributions of reciprocity, specificity, and durability of the mutual aid group and social worker support. In addition, vital are the conjunctions of the mutual aid and social worker support to resources accessed and used, and the contribution of such resources to the reduction in deviance. Moreover, the complementarity of contributions from the mutual aid group and social workers is a clue to enriching social capital theory (Litwak & Meyer, 1966). An obvious need for future research is on the impact of mutual aid from the group that does not receive social worker support. This is to examine whether the mutual aid group that lacks social capital from outside aggravates deviance (Dodge et al., 2006).

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