ABSTRACT—Peer rejection has gained much attention in recent years, due to repeated findings that negative peer experiences in childhood predict adjustment difficulties in adolescence and adulthood. The dominant conceptualization within developmental psychology has overwhelmingly focused on deficits within rejected children that contribute to their difficulties and has neglected contextual factors in the peer group setting that may also influence peer rejection. This article reviews growing evidence that the social context in which peer interactions occur does affect children’s liking or disliking of peers and argues that a complete model of peer rejection will be obtained only through understanding influences of social contexts. Implications for improving existing peer-rejection interventions and for public policy are discussed.

KEYWORDS—peer rejection; social context; reputational bias; group norms; social dominance

It has been well established that peer-rejected children are more likely than accepted children to drop out of school, engage in criminality, develop substance-abuse problems, and suffer from depression and anxiety as adolescents and adults (Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992; Parker & Asher, 1987). Predictive relationships between peer rejection and subsequent problems often hold after statistical control of the original childhood levels of problem behavior, suggesting that the experience of rejection can initiate or exacerbate adjustment difficulties. Further, children’s peer-rejected status is relatively stable over multiple school years (Gillessen, Bukowski, & Haselager, 2000). Collectively, these findings demonstrate the urgency of understanding why some children are rejected by their peers and developing interventions to assist this population.

The dominant conceptualization of peer rejection in developmental psychology has focused on the deficits within rejected children that contribute to their social difficulties (see Bierman, 2004). Such deficits include maladaptive aggressive or withdrawn behaviors (Dodge, Coie, Pettit, & Price, 1990), social information processing biases (Dodge et al., 2003), failure to assess peers’ responses to their behaviors (Ladd, 1981), inappropriate goals in peer interactions (Melnick & Hinshaw, 1996), and emotion-regulation difficulties (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002) that interfere with their peer relationships. The aim of this article is not to discount the influence that deficits within rejected children may have on their peer problems; rather, it is to raise awareness that the social context in which peer interactions occur also influences rejection. Peer relationships require reciprocal exchanges that do not occur in a vacuum where only the rejected child’s behavior matters. Understanding the social context is therefore essential to developing a complete model of peer rejection.

We review research from developmental and social psychology relevant to three contextual factors that may influence a child’s peer rejection: (a) deviation from peer-group norms, (b) cognitive biases held by the accepted peer group, and (c) the presence of a social dominance hierarchy of the peer group. Because a child’s status as peer-rejected or peer-accepted is typically determined in the classroom, we discuss how teachers may lessen the possibility of peer rejection through affecting these three social context factors in the classroom peer group. We conclude with suggestions for interventions and implications for public policy.

Notably, the social psychology literature has long examined influences of the situation (as opposed to the person) on interpersonal relationships, yet little of this tradition has been
incorporated into developmental psychology’s attempts to understand children’s peer rejection. We suspect that differences in research methodologies thwart the translation of findings. Social psychology research typically involves laboratory studies that expose college students to short experiences of experimentally manipulated rejection. Although such research may not be considered applicable to long-term outcomes of children facing peer rejection in naturalistic environments, relevant theories in social psychology can broaden developmental psychologists’ conceptualization of peer rejection and may lead to a fruitful integrative approach.

**DEVIANCE FROM GROUP NORMS**

If a child does not conform to the behavioral or demographic norms of the peer group, this may encourage peer rejection of that child. The concept of forming ingroups based on the similarity of peers and the rejection of those deemed deviant is well established in social psychology (Allport, 1954), as well as in developmental psychology’s group socialization theory (Harris, 1998). Importantly, what is considered deviant is socially constructed and varies across peer groups, depending on what the prototypal behavior happens to be in a particular group (Archer, 1985).

A body of developmental research supports this notion. Wright, Giammarino, and Parad (1986) conducted a study in a facility where severely emotionally disturbed children resided in groups. Although aggressive and withdrawn children were generally found to be peer-rejected, aggressive children were more rejected in groups where withdrawn behavior was common than in groups where aggressive behavior was common, and withdrawn children were more rejected in groups where aggression was common than in groups where withdrawal was common. These findings have been replicated in lab-based interactions (Boivin, Dodge, & Coie, 1995) and in regular education classrooms in North America (Sentse, Scholte, Salinivall, & Voeten, 2007; Stormshak et al., 1999) and China (Chang, 2004; Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). Other research has documented children’s proclivity for behavioral homophily in their friendship networks (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988), which may also explain why children are best accepted in groups of similarly behaving peers.

Future research that considers types of aggression and withdrawal, as well as the age and gender of the youth involved, may advance understanding about how norms for the acceptability of these behaviors vary across groups. Whereas peer groups of boys, for example, may be most tolerant of physical aggression and therefore least likely to reject a child for displaying this behavior (Chang, 2004), girls may be most tolerant of relational forms of aggression (Crick, 1997). In fact, there are suggestions that enacting a gender-nonnormative form of aggression is more strongly linked to poor adjustment than is enacting a gender-normative form of aggression (Crick, 1997). Further, peer groups may be more accepting of proactive aggression than of reactive aggression, and this distinction may be more prominent among older youth than among younger children (Kemps, Matthys, de Vries, & van Engeland, 2005). Finally, because social withdrawal becomes more infrequent as children age (Coplan & Armer, 2007), peer groups of older youth may be more likely to reject reticent individuals than are younger children’s peer groups (Waas & Graczyk, 1999).

In addition to deviation from behavioral norms, a child’s deviation from the peer group’s demographic norm may also increase the risk for peer rejection. Social psychology research has long suggested that individuals organize themselves into race- and gender-based categories (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) and like others who share their group membership (Brewer, 2007). Developmental psychology studies suggest that, from an early age, most children choose friends of their same race and gender (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Specifically, regarding children’s selection of same-gender friends, Maccoby (1988) has argued that although male–female differences in play styles exist, these differences are not sufficiently distinct to account for the intensity of gender segregation observed; rather, children view same-gender peers as their ingroup and opposite-gender peers as an outgroup, thereby promoting rejection of peers who do not share their gender.

This tendency to befriend demographically similar peers may explain findings from several studies indicating that African American children are more likely to be peer-rejected in predominantly White classrooms than they are in predominantly Black classrooms, and that this pattern is reversed for White children (Jackson, Barth, Powell, & Lochman, 2006; Kistner, Metzler, Gatlin, & Risi, 1993). Further, within mixed-gender classrooms, boys are more likely to be peer-accepted by other boys, and girls are more likely to be peer-accepted by other girls (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2007), leading some developmental psychology researchers to solicit sociometric nominations from only the child’s same-gender peers when assessing rejection (see review in Daniels-Beirmess, 1989). Friendships may also be encouraged by similarity on other demographic variables besides race and gender, such as socioeconomic status, religion, and cultural background (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996).

The interplay between demographic factors and peer relationships is nuanced, with status differences beyond mere minority standing also influencing peer rejection. For instance, White children may be less likely to initiate friendships with cross-race peers than are ethnic-minority children (Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987). Race may interact with gender as well, but the direction of effects is unclear. Whereas one study found that being in a minority ethnic group more strongly predicts peer rejection for girls than for boys (Kistner et al., 1993), other work suggests that ethnic-minority girls are more likely to have cross-race friends than are ethnic-minority boys (Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987).
Finally, a child in the demographic majority group may risk being rejected for affiliation with a minority group. White youth who engage in cross-race friendships, for example, may fear rejection by same-race peers for this action (Moe, Nacoste, & Insko, 1981). In addition, youth who deviate from the peer group’s gender norm in friendship preferences (e.g., a child who has an opposite-gender best friend), behavior (e.g., a boy who plays with dolls), or sexual orientation commonly receive negative judgments by peers for these transgressions (Kovacs, Parker, & Hoffman, 1996).

In sum, a body of literature suggests that, a child’s possible behavior problems aside, simply deviating from the peer-group norm may subject the child to peer rejection. One implication of this is that a child rejected in one peer group may be accepted by another peer group in which the child better matches the group norm. The best empirical test of this hypothesis would be to simultaneously compare the same child’s sociometric status in distinct groups of unfamiliar peers, but to our knowledge, such a study has yet to be conducted.

**REPUTATIONAL BIAS**

In the same way that individuals may resist altering negative stereotypes about outgroup members (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996), accepted peers may employ a cognitive style of selectively processing a rejected child’s behavior that makes it unlikely that they will ever change their negative opinions about the child (see review in Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990).

For instance, peers interpret the ambiguous behaviors of children whom they dislike as hostile in intent and interpret the ambiguous behaviors of children whom they like as benign (Peets, Hodges, Kikas, & Salmivalli, 2007). Peers also selectively remember disliked children’s negative behavior and forget their positive behaviors (Flannagan & Bradley, 1999). Further, they attribute the negative behavior of a disliked child to internal, stable traits and attribute the child’s positive behavior to situational causes (Guerin, 1999; Hymel, 1986). Thus, peers are disposed to give the benefit of the doubt to their friends, while interpreting the identical actions by a disliked child in a way that maintains that child’s peer-rejected status (Peets et al., 2007). The tenacity of negative reputations, even in the face of disconfirming evidence, is found in children as early as preschool to first grade (Denham & Holt, 1993; Mrug & Hoza, 2007).

Although the bulk of the existing literature has focused on ways in which accepted peers’ cognitive biases perpetuate the rejected status of already-disliked children, we raise the possibility that such biases may also have the potential to initiate peers’ rejection and dislike of children considered to be in the outgroup. This possibility has not been well tested in the developmental psychology literature, but the social psychology literature describes the “ultimate attribution error”: viewing outgroup members’ negative acts as reflecting stable traits of those members and viewing their positive acts as exceptions (Pettigrew, 1979). The social psychology literature also documents the occurrence of expectancy effects, by which individuals presume that outgroup members will be unfriendly and therefore unconsciously seek and elicit evidence that confirms this expectation (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996).

In sum, peers may be cognitively primed to perceive the behaviors of outgroup members in such a way as to affectively promote the dislike and rejection of those individuals, as opposed to merely acknowledging them as different without negative valence. In contrast, these cognitive biases may be reversed to affectively encourage the liking of ingroup members. Finally, we note that both social psychology (Lyons & Kashima, 2003) and developmental psychology (Sunwolf & Leets, 2004) research suggests that stereotypes can spread to initiate the rejection of a child by naïve peers who have never personally had a bad experience with the target child but have overheard comments about that child’s negative reputation.

**SOCIAL DOMINANCE HIERARCHY**

The existence of a social dominance hierarchy in the peer group may be a third contextual factor that influences peer rejection. Social dominance refers to the ability of an individual to control resources in his or her peer group (Hawley, 1999). In some peer groups, members vary in their social dominance such that certain individuals take more than their share of the group’s resources and others receive less than their share. This discrepancy in power between group members is known as a social dominance hierarchy (Hawley, 1999).

The process by which a social dominance hierarchy encourages peer rejection is distinct from those described in the previous two sections, which focus on cognitive processes within accepted peers (perceived difference from children who deviate from group norms and reputational biases against disliked children). In contrast, the social dominance hierarchy is a characteristic of the peer group and not a characteristic of any individual accepted child per se. It affects peer rejection primarily through the behavioral actions of the peer group rather than through cognitive mechanisms, although it is possible that the peer group’s behaviors can lead to the cognitive processes described in the previous sections.

A child’s level of social dominance is related to, but not necessarily identical to, his or her sociometric status. Youth highest in social dominance, for example, often have controversial sociometric status (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006); that is, they are liked by many peers and disliked by many others. However, children low in the social dominance hierarchy are typically peer-rejected (Hawley & Little, 1999). We propose not only that peer-rejected status may lead to low social dominance, but also the reverse—that low social dominance may lead to peer rejection. As discussed in the social psychology literature, individuals attribute negative personality traits to those with few resources and believe that shortcomings within the person are to blame for such
failures (Lerner & Miller, 1978). A similar process may occur for children, such that a social dominance hierarchy results in some children having little power in their peer group, which in turn facilitates peers' negative cognitive judgments and affect about those children.

In addition, once a child has been established as being at the bottom of the social dominance hierarchy, relational processes may perpetuate that child's standing. Peers with the highest social dominance tend to marginalize, exclude, and put down the children with the lowest social dominance (Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Pellegrini, 2001), and they may enact such behaviors not only to express their dislike of these children but also to solidify the existing pecking order and their position at the top of it. Youth in the middle of the dominance hierarchy are unlikely to intervene in these episodes, not just because they, too, may dislike children who are low in social dominance, but also because they fear that intervening may cause them to be relegated to lower social dominance themselves (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999).

The process of behaviorally marginalizing children low in social dominance also potentially communicates to newcomers the relative standing of all group members, which may reinforce a child's place in the dominance hierarchy. Similar to the way in which naïve peers can adopt prevailing stereotypes about a rejected child by hearing them from group members, naïve peers may copy the behaviors they observe on other group members enacting toward children low in social dominance (Olson, 1992). It is possible that peers' recognition of a child as low in social dominance may elicit the cognitive processes, described previously, of perceiving that child as different and making negative attributions about the child. However, the social dominance hierarchy may also promote rejection without the involvement of cognitive mechanisms, because, as has been demonstrated in observational learning paradigms (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961), naïve peers may imitate the actions that they see others performing toward certain children without necessarily possessing stereotypes about those children.

TEACHERS’ INFLUENCE ON THE CLASSROOM PEER GROUP

The classroom is the predominant peer-group setting in which children's peer status is determined, particularly for youth of elementary school age (Chang, 2004). Although it is possible for children to be peer-rejected at school but well liked in another environment such as church or a sports team, research routinely uses social status in the classroom to assess peer rejection because it has better predictive power for subsequent adjustment than does a child's rejection in other settings (Parker & Asher, 1987). Given the centrality of the classroom peer group as a setting for rejection, it is important to foster classroom environments that encourage peers to be more tolerant of children who deviate from group norms, to avoid cognitive biases against disliked children, and to minimize a social dominance hierarchy in the of the peer group.

A crucial factor in such an effort may be the teacher's behavior toward students. For example, a teacher's personally liking a child predicts that child's becoming better accepted by peers over time (Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001) because the teacher's behavior may set a model for peers to follow. A teacher's liking of a student may mediate as well as moderate the typical link between a child's aggressive and withdrawn behavior and peer rejection (Chang et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2007; Gazelle, 2006) because peers take cues about whether or not to judge a child as deviant based on the teacher's response to that child's behaviors. A teacher's sincere praise of a rejected student may lead peers' perceptions of the child to be more favorable (White, Jones, & Sherman, 1995), perhaps because the teacher is drawing attention to positive behavior that disconfirms negative stereotypes held by the peer group about that child.

Teachers' instructional strategies may also send messages to peers about the differential value of children. For example, focusing on the process of learning rather than on correctness and minimizing stratification by achievement may lessen peer rejection (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Donohue, Perry, & Weinstein, 2003) because these strategies communicate that all students have equal status and that students should appreciate differences among peers instead of rejecting deviants. Although such strategies primarily display a teacher's tolerance for diversity in children's learning styles, they may provide a parallel message that students should also tolerate diversity in children's social or behavioral styles. That elementary school children with the lowest academic achievement in their classroom are highly likely to also be peer-rejected (Buhs & Ladd, 2001) suggests the relevance that classroom academic stratification has for social stratification.

INTERVENTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing treatments for peer rejection largely follow the child-focused conceptualization of social problems (Mi kami & Pfiffner, 2006) and attempt to remediate deficits within rejected children. However, reviews suggest that effectiveness of child-focused interventions is circumscribed (Beelman, Pfingsten, & Losel, 1994; Moote, Smith, & Wodziarski, 1999). Participants sometimes demonstrate the improvement in their social behaviors but not in their sociometric status (e.g., Hoza et al., 2005), supporting the idea that social contextual factors surrounding the rejected child are instrumental in determining acceptance. Yet interventions targeting such factors remain understudied. Here, we review promising attempts that do exist and provide recommendations that may further improve contextual intervention approaches. Because the classroom is the primary setting in which peer rejection is determined, interventions that incorporate the peer-group context have typically involved elementary school
children’s classroom peers, and the classroom may be the optimal environment for future interventions of this nature.

Interventions that utilize cooperative activities between accepted and rejected children may reduce peer rejection by decreasing peers’ perceptions of rejected children as deviant, dismantling cognitive biases peers hold against rejected children and preventing a social dominance hierarchy where group members have unequal status. Social psychology research suggests that positive ingroup–outgroup relationships and reduced prejudice against ethnic minorities are encouraged by ingroup–outgroup interaction that requires members to have equal status contact in pursuit of superordinate goals and in which outgroup members communicate individuating information about themselves that disconfirms prevailing stereotypes (Allport, 1954). Results from interventions that, following these rules, have arranged cooperative interaction between rejected students and accepted classroom peers indicate that social acceptance increases after these activities (Bierman & Furman, 1984; Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008; Sasso & Rude, 1987). In some cases, the classroom teacher has been trained to orchestrate the cooperative interactions between students, in support of an intervention model that changing the teacher’s behavior can then influence the peer group to decrease rejection (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Mikami, Boucher, & Humphreys, 2005).

Another promising approach involves universal classroom interventions that build a positive group climate through tactics such as holding daily morning meetings, establishing a ritual of having all children greet one another, and using consensus to create shared group rules. Results from these interventions suggest improved peer relationships among participating children (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000; Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004). These procedures likely increase the cohesiveness and trust of the peer group, which, as found in both social and developmental psychology literature, may lower peers’ need to reject those who deviate from group norms (Garanleau & Gillessen, 2006; Hogg, Fielding, & Darley, 2005) and reduce the likelihood that negative stereotypes about deviant children will be adopted (Brewer, 2007). Such routines also encourage peers to recognize similarities among one another and to perceive rejected peers as individuals, which reduces cognitive biases against outgroups (Hogg, 1993). Finally, these interventions provide opportunity to set explicit policies that forbid exclusion, such as a rule “You can’t say you can’t play,” which may remove the tools that socially dominant youth use to reinforce the hierarchy in a peer group (Harrist & Bradley, 2003).

We conclude that promising interventions that target the social context in which rejection occurs do exist but that refinement is necessary to enhance their efficacy. We first note that the majority of aforementioned investigations on the effectiveness of these interventions have relied on observational and adult-informant ratings of social competence rather than on sociometric assessments of peer rejection, on which change is more valuable but is likely more difficult to achieve (Parker & Asher, 1987). Second, to date, classroom peers and teachers have been the targets of most interventions to change the social context of peer rejection. Consequently, there is a lack of knowledge about factors beyond the classroom, such as the home environment or neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which may also influence social context factors in the peer group that relate to rejection. Finally, similar social context factors that are targets for antibullying interventions (Espelage & Swearer, 2003) may potentially be harnessed in interventions to reduce peer rejection. Beginning with the work of Olweus (1992), many antibullying interventions attempt to disrupt the peer-group ecology that supports bullying, encouraging child bystanders to have empathy for victims and to stop victimization that they witness (Pellegrini & Long, 2004). Social psychology research reports that training ingroup members to take outgroup members’ perspectives reduces negative stereotypes about outgroups (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Interventions that directly instruct accepted peers in empathy for disliked children may reduce perceived differences and break down reputational biases about rejected children.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This article represents a call to action for developmental psychologists to attend to the understood contextual factors that affect peer rejection and to move beyond traditional models concentrated on deficits within rejected children. We also encourage the development of interventions placing the peer group, not the rejected child, as the target of treatment. Because consideration of the peer group may not be feasible in clinic-based treatment, school- or neighborhood-based interventions for peer rejection may best address this goal.

Teacher education and certification procedures might integrate training on how teachers can affect the peer-group social context in their classroom to reduce the likelihood of peer rejection. For example, teachers might learn the interpersonal and instructional practices that discourage the peer group from rejecting children who deviate from group norms, maintaining negative stereotypes against disliked children, and establishing a rigid social dominance hierarchy. Policies that support positive interaction between children, such as the creation of neighborhood play spaces and social leagues where children of diverse backgrounds can engage in cooperative activities, may also prevent peer rejection.

More broadly, considering social context factors that influence peer rejection represents a shift away from an individual-focused and stigmatizing model that blames those who do not conform and toward a collective model that places responsibility on us as a society to be inclusive. This shift in focus may ultimately promote public policies extending beyond children’s peer rejection that support equitable treatment. Social psychology research
suggests that individuals and peer groups with high “social dominance orientation”—defined as desiring status hierarchy in intergroup relations—are more likely to endorse ethnic and gender prejudice, antigay sentiments, and a belief that one’s country is superior (Potrafka, Espelage, & Greene, 2007; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). A collective philosophical shift toward inclusiveness of outgroups may reduce discriminatory practices in our society and foster harmony in a global community.

REFERENCES


Context of Peer Rejection


