Peer Status and Self-Perception among Early Elementary School Children: The Case of the Rejected Children

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BOIVIN, MICHEL, and BÉGIN, GUY. *Peer Status and Self-Perception among Early Elementary School Children: The Case of the Rejected Children.* CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1989, **60**, 591–596. The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the relations among peer status, self-, and other-perceptions of social competence among 9- and 11-year-old children. Self-esteem, self-perception in different domains (academic, social acceptance, athletic, physical appearance, and behavior/conduct), and teacher's assessments were assessed along with peer status. A cluster analysis revealed that rejected children could be assigned to 1 of 2 groups with respect to self-perceptions, the first displaying high self-perceptions and the second, low self-perceptions. In contrast, popular children showed generally positive self-perceptions. No difference was found between the self-perception scores of neglected and average children, whereas controversial children displayed lower self-esteem and perceived competence on the academic and behavior/conduct dimensions. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for the etiology of "at-risk" children.

Until recently, little was known about the self-perceptions associated with problematic peer relations. Thus far, the evidence suggests that children experiencing peer difficulties tend to display a generally negative pattern of self-perceptions, including low perceived social competence, low self-efficacy, and low expectations for social outcomes and peer evaluations (see Hymel & Franke, 1985). In these studies however, no distinctions were drawn between different peer status groups. Consequently, rejected children, a group thought to be at risk for future social maladjustment, could not be specifically identified (see Parker & Asher, 1987, for a review). Such distinctions were made by Rubin, Hymel, LeMare, and Rowden (in press), who recently examined the loneliness and perceived social competence of sociometrically popular, average, rejected, and neglected children, but significant group differences were not found.

Rejected children are not a homogeneous population (Coie, 1985; French, in press; Williams & Asher, 1987), and Hymel and Franke (1985) have suggested that not all of these children display negative self-perceptions. Accordingly, the first goal of this study was to evaluate by means of cluster analysis whether meaningful subgroups of rejected children could be identified on the basis of self-perceptions. Given that the relation between perceived and actual competence is at best low to moderate (Ladd & Price, 1986; Wheeler & Ladd, 1982) and that some children tend to be positively biased in their self-evaluations (Kagan, Hans, Markowitz, Lopez, & Sigal, 1982), it was hypothesized that two types of rejected children would be identified, one showing lower perceived competence and self-esteem than average children, and one showing opposite results.

The self-concept scores of several other groups were also compared to average children in this investigation. It was hypothesized that: (*a*) popular children would perceive themselves more positively than average children, and (*b*) neglected children would

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not differ from average children, since many studies suggest that these children are not at risk for social maladjustment (Asher & Wheeler, 1985; French & Waas, 1985; Rubin et al., in press). The present investigation also tested the hypothesis that controversial children (Coie & Dodge, 1983) would display a negative pattern of self-perceptions and self-esteem when compared to average children. Finally, teachers' assessments of the children's social competence were used to evaluate differences between status groups and the relation between status and self-perceptions.

Method

Subjects.—Two-hundred twenty-two 9–11-year-old French-Canadian children participated in this study. These children, 102 girls and 120 boys, attended seven third-grade (n = 152; mean age = 106.84 months, σ = 5.56) and three fourth-grade (n = 70; mean age = 118.52 months, σ = 4.36) classes in six different elementary schools in Quebec city. In general, the classes were balanced with respect to gender. The composition of each class was stable throughout the academic year, and children had at least 5 months of social experience in their class prior to the study assessments. The children's families covered a broad spectrum of both white- and blue-collar workers.

Procedure.—The study was conducted during the spring term. The research procedure entailed individual sociometric evaluations, group administration of Harter's Perceived Competence Scale to the children, and teachers' evaluations of the child's actual competence. The sociometric evaluations followed McCandless and Marshall's (1957) picture nomination technique. The questions covered three contexts salient to the third or fourth grade: (*a*) play, (*b*) invitation to a birthday party, (*c*) sit next to in the bus on an excursion day. The child made three "liked most" (LM) and "liked least" (LL) choices on each question. The LM and LL scores were obtained by summing the choices each child received from all classmates on all three questions. An earlier study showed that the correlations between the three single criterion nomination scores are high for both LM and LL and therefore yield good internal consistency when the multiple criterion scores are considered (Boivin & Bégin, 1986; α = 0.77 and 0.79 for LM and α = 0.86 and 0.82 for LL).

Peer status was determined using Coie and Dodge's (1983) procedure. First, LM and LL scores were standardized within each class. Social preference (SP) was obtained by the subtraction of LL score from the LM score, whereas social impact (SI) was computed by the addition of LM and LL scores. Finally, five sociometric status groups were formed according to these criteria: populars (SP > 1.0, LM > 0, LL < 0); rejectees (SP < −1.0, LM < 0, LL > 0); neglectees (SI < −1.0, LM < 0, LL < 0); controversials (SI > 1.0, LM > 0, LL > 0); and averages (−1.0 < SP and SI < 1.0).

Social competence.—The Perceived Competence Scale (PCS; Harter, 1983) evaluates the children's sense of competence across five different domains as well as general self-esteem: academic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, behavior/conduct, and self-esteem. This scale has good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and factorial and convergent validity (see Harter, 1983). It was administered to the children in group sessions between 2 weeks and a month following the sociometric interviews.

Four teachers, two for third graders (n = 48) and two for fourth graders (n = 41), volunteered to fill out the Teacher's Rating Scale of Child's Actual Behavior (TRS) for all the children in their classrooms. This 15-item scale was developed by Harter (1983) and parallels the competence scales of the PCS (with the exception of self-esteem). In the present study, a principal component analysis of the scale (varimax rotation) revealed a four-factor structure accounting for 84.3% of the item variance. Factorial validity was evidenced for the academic, athletic, and behavior/conduct dimensions. The items designed to tap the academic dimension showed high loadings on a unique factor (0.89, 0.89, 0.89, respectively) and low coefficients on the other factors (all < 0.30). Unidimensionality was also confirmed for the athletic (0.84, 0.86, 0.87) and the behavior/conduct (0.91, 0.89, 0.92) dimensions. On the other hand, the physical appearance and social acceptance items loaded on the same factor, thus suggesting a strong overlap between these two dimensions (0.91, 0.94, 0.90 for the physical appearance items and 0.58, 0.66, and 0.64 for the social acceptance items). In light of these results, only the raw scores on the academic, athletic, and behavior/conduct subscales were used in the analyses. High levels of internal consistency were obtained for each of these three subscales (α's = 0.92, 0.89, and 0.95, respectively).

TABLE 1

MEANS (and Standard Deviations) OF SELF-PERCEPTION AND ACTUAL COMPETENCE SCORES (Z Scores) FOR EACH STATUS GROUP

	Popular (n = 58)	Rejected Cluster A (n = 29)	Rejected Cluster B (n = 28)	Neglected (n = 21)	Controversial (n = 11)	Average (n = 75)
Self-perceptions:						
Academic	.40	.17	−1.02***	−.11	−.59**	.12
	(1.04)	(.75)	(.81)	(.86)	(.52)	(.86)
Social acceptance	.47**	.29	−1.06***	−.17	−.10	−.01
	(.73)	(.80)	(.83)	(1.02)	(.98)	(.95)
Athletic	.44**	.32	−.96***	−.30	.07	−.02
	(.73)	(.97)	(.76)	(.90)	(.85)	(1.01)
Physical appearance	.25	.45*	−1.02***	.07	−.25	.05
	(.89)	(.53)	(.81)	(.76)	(1.26)	(1.00)
Behavior/conduct	.28	.27	−1.09***	.36	−.53*	.06
	(.92)	(.83)	(.80)	(.69)	(.95)	(.92)
Self-esteem	.40**	.53**	−1.24***	.09	−.54*	.00
	(.70)	(.39)	(.86)	(.71)	(1.14)	(.99)
Actual competence:	(n = 21)	(n = 12)	(n = 10)	(n = 10)	(n = 6)	(n = 30)
Academic	.06	−.52	−.07	.46	−.02	.04
	(.97)	(.99)	(.95)	(.78)	(1.15)	(1.01)
Athletic	.50*	−.40	−.23	−.45	.42	−.05
	(.70)	(.98)	(1.12)	(1.17)	(1.01)	(.93)
Behavior/conduct	.25	−.30	−.56*	.60	−1.00*	.13
	(.71)	(1.24)	(1.04)	(.28)	(1.70)	(.77)

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

Results

Preliminary one-way analyses of variance were conducted on the perceived competence and self-esteem scores to determine whether significant variations occurred among the 10 classes. Separate ANOVAs on each of these self-concept scores revealed significant differences on three dimensions: academic, $F(9,212) = 2.66$, $p < .01$; physical appearance, $F(9,212) = 3.01$, $p < .01$; behavior/conduct, $F(9,212) = 2.64$, $p < .01$. Consequently, the self-concept scores were standardized within each class.

Self-concept and rejection.—The self-perception scores of the rejected children (n = 57) were submitted to a hierarchical cluster analysis using the average linkage between groups method based on the squared euclidian distances. According to this procedure, clusters are formed by grouping cases into larger and larger clusters until all cases are members of a single cluster. The gain in distance showed a marked increase in the last step of the clustering schedule where the two clusters were being merged in a one cluster solution (the distance coefficient jumped from 11.85 to 18.98 for 38% of the gain in total distance). This pattern suggests that the rejected children could be split in two relatively homogeneous subgroups in terms of their self-perceptions (Cluster A: n = 29, 10 females, 19 males; Cluster B: n = 28, 10 females, 18 males). The self-perception scores of these two clusters and the other status groups are presented in Table 1.

These scores were submitted to a 6 (status) × 2 (sex) MANOVA. Only one source of variance, *status*, showed significant differences (Hotelling's $F = 4.89$, $p < .001$). Separate univariate F's revealed that all variables contributed significantly to the differences among status groups: academic, $F(5,217) = 11.47$, $p < .001$; social acceptance, $F(5,217) = 12.38$, $p < .001$; athletic, $F(5,217) = 10.35$, $p < .001$; physical appearance, $F(5,217) = 9.77$, $p < .001$; behavior/conduct, $F(5,217) = 12.08$, $p < .001$; self-esteem, $F(5,217) = 18.78$, $p < .001$.

Planned comparisons, contrasting the various sociometric groups with the average group, were made with each competence variable (t ratio using pooled variance esti-

mate and one-tailed probability). These comparisons revealed that the self-perceptions of popular children were significantly more positive than the average children on the academic ($t = 1.79$, $p < .07$), social acceptance ($t = 3.12$, $p < .002$), athletic ($t = 2.81$, $p < .005$), and self-esteem ($t = 2.78$, $p < .006$) dimensions. Cluster A rejectees showed *higher* perceived physical appearance ($t = 2.03$, $p < .04$) and self-esteem ($t = 2.92$, $p < .004$) than the average children but did not differ from them on the other dimensions. Cluster B rejectees were significantly more negative about themselves than the average children on all dimensions (academic: $t = -5.87$, $p < .001$; social acceptance: $t = -5.43$, $p < .001$; athletic: $t = -4.79$, $p < .001$; physical appearance: $t = -5.40$, $p < .001$; behavior/conduct: $t = -5.95$, $p < .001$; self-esteem: $t = -6.80$, $p < .001$. Finally, the self-perceptions of controversial children were significantly more negative than those of the average children on the academic ($t = -2.51$, $p < .01$), behavior/conduct ($t = -2.09$, $p < .04$), and self-esteem ($t = -2.03$, $p < .04$) dimensions. No significant differences were found between the neglected and average children.

Peer status and actual competence.—The three teacher-rated competence scores (see Table 1) were also standardized within each class. These scores were submitted to a 6 (status) × 2 (sex) MANOVA similar to the one used for the self-ratings. Again, only one source of variance, *status*, revealed significant differences (Hotelling's $F = 2.05$, $p < .01$). Inspection of the univariate F's showed that two of the three variables significantly contributed to the differences between status: athletic, $F(5,83) = 3.75$, $p < .004$, and behavior/conduct, $F(5,83) = 3.75$, $p < .004$. Planned comparisons revealed that popular children were evaluated as significantly more competent athletically than average children ($t = 2.31$, $p < .02$), and that both Cluster B rejectees ($t = -2.08$, $p < .04$) and controversials ($t = -2.77$, $p < .007$) were evaluated as significantly less competent than the average children on the behavior/conduct dimension. Cluster A rejectees and neglectees did not differ from the average children on any dimension. Finally, a series of post hoc ANOVAs were performed comparing Cluster A to Cluster B rejectees on the three competence dimensions. No significant differences were found.

Peer status and perceived competence with actual competence partialed out.—In order to determine whether the relations between peer status and perceived competence could be accounted by actual competence, separate one-way ANCOVAs were performed on three of the perceived competence dimensions (academic, athletic, and behavior/conduct) using the teacher ratings of these same dimensions as covariates. All three dimensions yielded significant differences between status in these analyses: academic, $F(5,81) = 4.47$, $p < .003$; athletic, $F(5,81) = 4.64$, $p < .001$; behavior/conduct, $F(5,81) = 4.66$, $p < .001$. Five specific contrasts were then performed comparing each status group to the average children on each dimension. These comparisons revealed that the self-perceptions of Cluster B Rejectees were still more negative than average children on all three dimensions: academic, $F(1,81) = 28.46$, $p < .001$; athletic, $F(1,81) = 9.17$, $p < .003$; behavior/conduct, $F(1,81) = 14.73$, $p < .001$. Similar results were found on academic competence for neglected, $F(1,81) = 17.17$, $p < .001$, and controversial children, $F(1,81) = 3.75$, $p < .06$. Cluster A rejectees perceived themselves to be more competent athletically than average children when athletic competence was controlled. No difference was found between popular and average children on perceived competence when actual competence was partialed out.

Discussion

The results clearly indicate that differences in self-perceptions are related to the social preference dimension of peer status. Popular children were more positive about themselves on a variety of dimensions, and also evidenced higher self-esteem, than average children. It is interesting to note that both self-perception and actual competence scores indicate that these children are not more competent behaviorally than the average children. These results, along with the differences on the athletic dimension, support the view that athletic skills may be more central to popularity than social competence (Hops & Finch, 1985).

As expected, not all rejected children displayed negative self-perceptions. About half of the rejectees (Cluster B) showed negative self-perceptions in each of the competence domains, as well as low self-esteem. These children tend to underevaluate their actual competence, a pattern that might forecast internalizing problems (Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, in press). The other half (Cluster A) had a rather positive view of themselves, and their figures parallel the results for both the average and popular children.

These results may indicate that some unpopular children inaccurately report high perceived competence (Kagan et al., 1982). High self-concept rejectees may willfully refuse to admit their lower competence or unconsciously exhibit a self-serving bias (Heider, 1958), perceiving events so that their self-esteem is protected and enhanced. Behavioral distinctions among rejected children might be relevant to consider here. Both aggressive and withdrawn children may be rejected by their peers (Williams & Asher, 1987). Withdrawn children tend to underestimate their social competence (Rubin, 1985; Rubin et al., in press) whereas aggressive children display distorted social perceptions such as negative social attributions and social skills deficits (Dodge, 1980). Withdrawn/rejected children are more lonely and socially dissatisfied than aggressive/rejected children (Williams & Asher, 1987). Consequently, it might be that anxious/withdrawn rejected children experience negative self-perceptions, whereas aggressive rejected children tend to have a rather positive but distorted view of themselves. On the other hand, it should be noted that aggression and withdrawal are not necessarily orthogonal dimensions. French (in press) found that a substantial proportion of rejected children exhibit multiple problems, namely, anxiety, poor self-control, aggression, and social withdrawal, whereas a second group exhibited only social withdrawal. Unfortunately, aggression and withdrawal were not specifically evaluated in our study. Further research is thus needed to clarify the relation between the behavioral style and self-perceptions among rejected children.

Finally, there is also the possibility that some high self-concept rejectees experience positive peer relations outside the class (in the family and the neighborhood), and that the source of their rejection has not been identified. Indeed, the convergence of status in different social environments is only low to moderate (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983). There is also evidence that intragroup factors like negative social reputations (see Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, in press) perpetuate the social rejection, and that the correlates of rejection vary across peer groups (Wright, Giammarino, & Parad, 1986). That is, a significant proportion of peer status variance may be contextually specific and cannot be completely generalized to different environments.

Some support was found for the hypothesis that the controversial children also experience negative self-perceptions and self-esteem. Although the controversials differed only on the academic and behavior/conduct self-perception dimensions, these domains of competence are central to school adjustment. Interestingly, these negative self-perceptions are consistent with similar negative reputations evidenced in Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli's (1982) study. Dodge (1983) has stated that the behavior of controversial children is especially unpredictable, and Newcomb and Bukowski (1985) have argued that these children are affected by self-control problems. Perhaps the self-perceptions these children displayed in this study simply reflect their sensitivity to this problem.

Our data provide little support for distinguishing conceptually between average and neglected children. These results are congruent with those of Asher and Wheeler (1985) and more recently of Rubin et al. (in press), and confirm that neglected children are no more at risk than average children.

Longitudinal research is needed to determine if self-perceptions are the antecedents or the consequences of status. This study suggests, however, that such investigations should focus on the relation between the behavioral style and self-perceptions among rejected children, since these dimensions may forecast different trajectories to maladjustment.

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