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ABSTRACT

This study explored relational schemas in children's friendships. A total of 96 children (45 males and 51 females from grades 3, 4, and 5) from an urban elementary school in the northeast participated in both phases of the study. During phase 1, children completed a series of sociometric measures: (1) peer liking nominations; (2) peer disliking nominations; (3) peer ratings; and (4) friendship nominations. During phase 2 (the experimental condition), children completed an achievement motivation measure, engaged in a game task, and responded to a relational impressions questionnaire. Overall, relational schemas and targets' social status (popular, rejected) have an influence on a child's behavior. Generally, response times for children to decide to seek help or not are greatly influenced by relational expectancies (best friend, nonfriend), social status of the child (popular, rejected), and level of achievement motivation. This research highlights the complexity and importance of evaluating the social-cognitive processes, and the function of relational schemas and social status in children's relationships. (Author/SLD)

Relational Schemas in Children's Friendship Dyads as a Function of Peer Group Status

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Abstract

The present study explored relational schemas in children's friendships. A total of 96 children (45 males and 51 females from grades 3, 4, and 5) from an urban elementary school in the northeast participated in both phases of the study. During phase 1, children completed a series of sociometric measures: (1) peer liking nominations, (2) peer disliking nominations, (3) peer ratings, and (4) friendship nominations. During phase 2 (the experimental condition), children completed an achievement motivation measure, engaged in a game task, and responded to a relational impressions questionnaire. Overall, relational schemas and targets' social status (popular, rejected) have a influence on a child's behavior. Generally, response times, for children to decide to seek help or not, are greatly influenced by relational expectancies (best friend, non-friend), social status of the child (popular, rejected), and level of achievement motivation. This research highlights the complexity and importance of evaluating the social-cognitive processes, and the function of relational schemas and social status in children's relationships.

Purpose

The present study explores relational schemas in children's friendships. Relational schemas are "cognitive structures representing regularities in patterns of interpersonal relatedness" (Baldwin, 1992, p. 461), and are influential in children's person perception. Children are given the opportunity to seek help or to not seek help from a peer chosen by the experimenter in a manipulated need situation. The chosen peer is a friend or a non-friend (relational type) and is from the same or different social status group (dyad make-up). While the behavior (seeking help or not seeking help) is examined, the emphasis of this study is on the mental constructs and relational schemas children use to guide their behavior.

Relational Schemas

Although studies focusing on children's behavior in friendships and within peer groups are valuable, it is vital to understand the mental constructs and meanings of a relationship that children carry with them as they interact and behave in their social world. It is precisely this meaning that constitutes a large part of what a relationship symbolizes (Bigelow, 1977; Duck, 1994). When a child encounters a peer, it is assumed that child will then formulate inferences about that peer. Thus, these inferences are highly influential in subsequent interactions, and may be a powerful factor in the establishment of common ground, which is important to children's peer relationships, specifically friendships. However, research examining the roles of relational schemas of dyadic relationships is relatively scant.

Poster Presented at the annual Eastern Psychological Association Conference, March, 2000, Baltimore, MD. Correspondence should be addressed to James A. Graham, The College of New Jersey, Department of Psychology, P.O. Box 7718, Ewing, NJ 08628-0718. E-mail address: jgraham@tcnj.edu.

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Help Seeking, Peer Status, and Friendships

■ Help Seeking:

The ability and inclination to ask for help when it is needed is seen as a prosocial and developmentally beneficial behavior. It can be used as an important problem-solving skill and as a means to attain goals.

■ Peer Status

Specific behaviors have been correlated with popular, controversial, neglected, and rejected status children. Children perceive their popular peers to be more cooperative and less disruptive than their rejected peers. Likewise rejected children are perceived by their peers as more uncooperative, more physically aggressive, and more disruptive of the group.

■ Friendships

Friends have been shown to work on problems together more productively and collaboratively than non-friends. Children remember more about a recent task when it is performed with a friend as opposed to a non-friend. Friends exhibit more frequent conflict and freer expression of disagreement than non-friends, and show greater speed and ease in resolving conflicts.

Method

Phase 1

Participants

271 children in Grades 3, 4, and 5; Mean Age: 122.88 months (10.24 years); Males: 134, Females: 137; 229 (85.8%) African-American, 44 Caucasian (14.2%)

Materials

Group Administered

Peer liking nominations. Circle the names of the 3 peers you like the most. *Peer disliking nominations.* Circle the names of the 3 peers you dislike. *Peer ratings.* Rate each peer on a scale from 1 to 6. *Friendship nominations.* Circle the names of your friends

Phase 2: Experiment

Participants

96 children from Phase 1 in Grades 3, 4, and 5; Mean Age: 121.29 months (10.11 years); Males: 45, Females: 51; 84 (86.0%) African-American, 12 Caucasian (14.0%)

Materials

Individually Administered

Achievement-Related Affect Scale (Solomon and Yaeger). A 20 item paper-and-pencil measure assessing achievement motivation; *Help Seeking Task ("Gone Fishin' Game")* response times were recorded. Children were instructed to catch 15 fish in 3 minutes. Children were advised to make a decision (Done Working, Need Help) before the time ran out. Children were placed in 1 of 4 conditions (help from a friend/same social status, help from a friend/disparate social status, help from a non-friend/same social status, help from a non-friend/disparate social status). *Relational Schemas Questionnaire.* An 11 item paper-and-pencil measuring children's impressions of target peer.

Procedure

The present design includes the factorial combination of Relationship (Best Friend, Non-Friend), Social Status of the Subject (Popular, Rejected), Social Status of the Target (Popular, Rejected), and Decision (Done Working, Need Help) as independent variables. There were two phases to the study.

In Phase 1, children completed a series of dependent measures: sociometric liking nominations, disliking nominations, sociometric ratings, and friendship nominations. Based upon these instruments, each child was placed in a social status category (i.e., popular, rejected, controversial, neglected, and average) which was calculated using procedures based on Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982).

During Phase 2, only children from the popular and rejected social status categories ($n = 51$, and $n = 45$, respectively) were included. Each child completed an achievement motivation questionnaire, engaged in a game task, and completed a relational schema measure. For each instrument, children answered questions on a six-point Likert rating scale, ranging from 1 (very little) to 6 (very much). Dependent variable included the mean ratings for achievement motivation, response times to make a decision to seek help or not for a game task, and the impressions from the relational schema measure.

Results

Phase 1 (Social Status Categories)

Children were assigned to sociometric categories (see Table 1) using procedures using procedures by Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982). Liked-most (LM) and Liked-least (LL) nominations were summed for each child, and standardized within grade.

In addition, Social Preference ($Z_{LM} - Z_{LL}$) and Social Impact ($Z_{LM} + Z_{LL}$) scores were calculated for each child and standardized within grade.

Table 1. Number of children in each social status category.

Social Status	Popular	Rejected	Neglected	Controversial	Average
Male	27	37	15	6	51
Female	37	27	15	4	54

Phase 2: (Help-Seeking Situation with a Friend or Non-Friend)

A 2 (Relationship Expectancy: Best Friend, Non-friend) x 2 (Social Status of Evaluator: Popular, Rejected) X 2 (Social Status of Target : Popular, Rejected) x 2 (Decision: Done Working, Need Help) MANOVA was conducted on achievement motivation ratings, response times, and relational schema questions. The analysis on the mean ratings for Achievement Motivation revealed no significant differences attributable to any of the independent variables included in the study. Participants' response times for the Gone Fishin' game task were recorded. A 2 (Social Status of Evaluator) x 2 (Social Status of Target) x 2 (Relational Expectancy) x 2 (Decision) ANOVA for response times yielded significant main effects for targets' social status, $F(1, 81) = 4.03, p < .05$, and for Decision, $F(1, 81) = 8.99, p < .01$.

The response times to make a decision to ask for help or not were faster for children who were "potentially" paired with popular status children ($M = 63.06$ sec) compared to rejected status children ($M = 90.81$ sec). In addition, children response times were faster if they made the decision to ask for help ($M = 61.21$ sec) than done working ($M = 117.16$ sec).

Separate 2 (Social Status of Evaluator) x 2 (Social Status of Target) x 2 (Relational Expectancy) x 2 (Decision) ANOVAs were conducted on the response times for children who scored high and low on the achievement motivation measure.

High Achievement Motivation (Mean ≥ 4.25)

The response times for children in this category yielded significant main effects for relationship expectancy (best friend, non-friend), $F(1, 35) = 4.02, p < .05$, and for decision (done working, need help), $F(1, 35) = 8.51, p < .01$. The response times to make a decision to ask for help or not were faster for children who were "potentially" paired with a best friend ($M = 40.48$ sec) compared to a non-friend ($M = 90.20$ sec). In addition, children response times were faster if they made the decision to ask for help ($M = 50.58$ sec) than done working ($M = 116.50$ sec).

Low Achievement Motivation (Mean ≤ 4.24)

The response times for children in this category yielded significant main effects for social status (popular, rejected), $F(1, 34) = 6.23, p < .05$, and for decision (done working, need help), $F(1, 34) = 4.25, p < .05$. The response times to make a decision to ask for help or not were faster among popular status children ($M = 67.79$ sec) compared to rejected status children ($M = 96.14$ sec). In addition, response times were faster for children who decided to ask for help ($M = 71.27$ sec) than done working ($M = 117.94$ sec).

The ANOVA for the relational impression questions indicated a significant main effect for relationship expectancy $F(1, 96) = 7.66, p < .001$. Children in the best friend condition gave higher ratings of liking, sharing, others' liking, and helping to their "potential" partner than children in the non-friend condition.

In addition, the analysis revealed a significant social status of target x decision interaction, $F(1, 96) = 2.49, p < .05$, for impressions of helping, as shown in Figure 1. Among children who chose need help, popular targets were rated higher ($M = 4.93$) on helping than rejected targets ($M = 3.61$). No differences were found for targets' social status in ratings among children who chose done working.

Popular targets received higher ratings from children who chose need help ($M = 4.93$) versus done working ($M = 3.70$). Rejected targets received higher ratings from children who chose done working ($M = 4.36$) versus need help ($M = 3.61$).

Figure 2 indicates a significant social status of target x decision interaction, $F(1, 96) = 4.74, p < .05$, for impressions of targets' number of friends compared to evaluators'. Children who chose done working were more likely to rate a rejected target ($M = 4.93$) as having more friends than themselves, compared to popular targets ($M = 3.20$). No other significant differences were found.

Figure 1. Mean Impression Ratings for Helping as a Function of Target Social Status X Decision

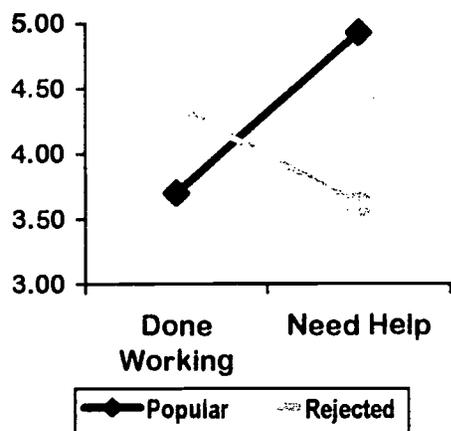
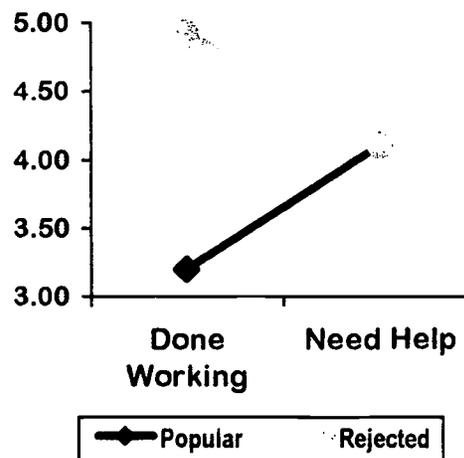


Figure 2. Mean Impression Ratings for Targets' Number of Friends as a Function of Target Social Status X Decision



Relational Impressions for Children with High versus Low Achievement Motivation

Separate 2 (Social Status of Evaluator) x 2 (Social Status of Target) x 2 (Relational Expectancy) x 2 (Decision) ANOVAs were conducted on the relational impressions for children who scored high and low on the achievement motivation measure. The analyses revealed significant main effects for relationship expectancy for both the high and low achievement motivation groups, $F(1, 35) = 2.35, p < .05$; and $F(1,$

34) = 4.01, $p < .05$, respectively. Across achievement motivation group levels, children in the best friend condition were more likely to attribute higher ratings of liking, sharing, other's liking, helping, and self-liking than children in the non-friend condition.

Conclusions

Relational-based processing utilized by children.

- * relationships are "strong" categories in person perception (i.e., best friend, non-friend).
- * relational schemas and social status have a influence on a child's behavior (as evidenced in the context of help-seeking).
- * generally, response times, for children to decide to seek help or not, are greatly influenced by relational expectancies (best friend, non-friend), child's own social status (popular, rejected), and level of achievement motivation.

The present study indicates relational information (type of relationship, social status) influences behavior within a classroom environment. More research examining these social-cognitive influences in varying environmental and/or cultural contexts, and types of cognitive processing utilized by children in the different settings is needed.

Future research needs to examine the roles of relational schemas, social status, and help seeking in terms of age, gender, and race.

The motivational implications of relational schemas also need to be explored. This will aid in the understanding of the goals as to why certain children may pursue certain types of relationships, or avoid others.

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