

Young Children's Attention to Dyadic Conversation as Modified by Sociometric Status

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ABSTRACT. Forty-eight American children, 12 popular and 12 rejected children from Grades 3 and 6, were paired with same-sex friends and nonfriends on an interactive task. Children were videotaped and their interactions judged for the amount and type of attention each child in the dyad gave to each other and the conversation. Main dependent measures included mutual engagements, acknowledgement of the partner, getting the attention of the partner, attention to the conversation, and social impact of the utterances. Both rejected and popular children attended to the conversation and the partner, but rejected children appeared to overattend in several ways. The interactions of rejected children and their matches involved more mutual engagements, conversational initiators, facilitators, terminators, and nonverbal attention-getting devices. Sex and development effects were also found.

WHEN THE INTERACTIONS of popular and rejected American children are considered, researchers often assume that any differences found between these sociometric groups indicate a lack of social skills on the part of the rejected child and hence are one reason for the rejection itself. Ladd (1983), however, has argued that rejected children form friendships just as popular children do, but the way in which they interact with their friends differs significantly from the way popular children interact with friends. Thus, the interactional styles of a rejected child may not necessarily be dysfunctional within the child's own social group, although they may not be universal either; that is, they may not transfer well when the child interacts with someone from another social network.

If we assume that this theory is true, then we need to examine evidence for its viability, that rejected children effectively participate and cooperate in social interactions with other unpopular children but may be dysfunctional with popular peers. A question such as this is critical because,

as Blyth (1983) noted, it is important to determine whether rejected children can form social relations and how functional those relations are to survivability outside their own unique social system. Nonetheless, before interactional evidence may be weighed, the conditions that define the existence of an interaction in the first place must be established.

Discourse theories, liberally applied to verbal and interactional exchanges, may offer an explanation of the requirements of a cooperative interaction. Discourses, or "talk exchanges" as Grice (1975) called them, are semantic and interactionally cooperative ventures, during which there is agreement, usually tacit, on the common direction of that exchange (Grice, 1975; Keenan, 1974). According to Grice, concomitant with the agreement of direction is another assumption during conversation, also generally tacit, that each discourse partner will work together to move the talk exchange in a mutually accepted direction.

Discourse theorists further argue that even after conversation begins and proceeds with a common purpose, it does not exist idiosyncratically from the social milieu in which it is uttered. Rather, social context and uttered speech are inextricable because each contributes to the definition and character of the other (Austin, 1975; Bates, 1976; Bernstein, 1966; Searle, 1970). Likewise, Bates has indicated that individuals may use conversation to establish their identity with a social community or to distance themselves from it. Thus, if we use discourse theory to determine whether rejected children can and do formulate friendship networks of their own, at least two conditions may be apparent with regard to their verbal and nonverbal interactions: They reflect the character of the social matrix in which they occur, and they proceed as discourse partners cooperate to move the dialogue toward a common end.

Research has indicated that separate social systems operate for popular children and unpopular children, with popular children interacting predominantly with popular and average-status children and unpopular children interacting predominantly with other unpopular children (Benson & Gottman, 1975; Ladd, 1983; Putallaz & Gottman, 1979). Although these studies addressed a more global notion of social interaction than just discourse, it may be argued that children's conversations seem to be linked in many cases to a milieu prescribed by social status. In support of Condition 1, that speech reflects the character of the social matrix in which it is imbedded, research has indicated that the conversations and interactions of sociometrically defined youngsters are different from each other.

Although few studies have explicitly addressed the conversational elements of popular and rejected children, global measures of their interactions are available and may be applicable. For example, popular children

engaged in more positive conversations and cooperative interactions with their peers than unpopular children (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Dodge, 1983; Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975; Renshaw & Asher, 1983). They received more positive input from others and were involved in longer lasting interactions (Dodge, 1983). Unpopular children, on the other hand, exhibited more aggressive behaviors, emitted more hostile vocalization, and engaged in less social conversation and positive interactions than their more socially accepted peers (Dodge, 1983; Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975). In addition, Austin and Draper (1982) found that rejected children reacted to even benign commands from peers with more hostility and defiance than popular children.

Considering interactional strategies, Dodge (1983) found that popular children approached their peers less often per play session but were more often approached by peers than any other status group. Neglected and rejected children, on the other hand, approached peers with great frequency during initial get-acquainted play sessions, but tried to initiate social interactions much less frequently during later involvements. Children with high peer status also tended more often to make comments directly related to ongoing group activities when attempting to enter a peer group and were more likely to try to mesh conversationally with the play theme of the group (Putallaz, 1983). Thus, with regard to the affective tone of an interaction, length of interactive bouts, and approach and entry strategies, children's communications seem to reflect a child's sociometric status and thus may color the social matrix in which the child typically interacts.

The second issue as related to sociometric status, that discourse implies cooperation between conversational partners, has received less attention. Ladd (1983) wrote that unpopular children are not necessarily without peer contacts or the ability to interact with peers, which implies some cooperative efforts between rejected children and their peers, but their interactions differ from those involving children with higher social status. Rejected children, for example, tend to be involved more often in parallel play with their peers than popular children, and they interact more often in small rather than large groups, forming what Ladd termed intensive rather than extensive networks.

If Ladd's (1983) data even tentatively suggest tacit mutual agreement between popular and rejected children and their respective peers regarding play style and extent of peer social systems, then the theory that social communication implies cooperation between communicative partners may receive some support as it is related to the interactions of sociometrically different children. Nonetheless, Ladd's data suggest that although within-group cooperation may be found, it varies significantly

between groups. The present investigation sought to explore Condition 2 further to determine whether interactional cooperation does occur as rejected children interact with their friends and, if this is found to be true, how this cooperation varies from the interactions popular children have with their peers. The analyses also considered discourse between the target child and an age mate, called the nonfriend. This interaction may approximate an exchange outside the child's immediate network, but because extensive analyses of the children's immediate and nonimmediate networks were not conducted, such a possibility remains only a possibility. A reciprocal issue, not often addressed in the literature, was also part of the analysis: The study also explored the involvement and attention that friends and nonfriends, paired with the popular and rejected target children, gave to the talk exchange as well.

Method

Subjects

Third and sixth graders ($N = 240$), consisting of all the children who had obtained parental permission in both grades at two elementary schools, were used as the initial sampling group. The children attending these schools were predominantly white, with some Chicanos and native Americans. The children were administered the Peery (1979) sociometric measure, an instrument designed to separate children into the categories of popularity, amiability, isolation, or rejection. Forty-eight children were selected from this group for further study: 12 popular children (6 boys and 6 girls) and 12 rejected children (6 boys and 6 girls) from both grades, with third graders ranging in age from 8.3 years to 10.2 years ($M = 9$ years) and sixth graders from 10.3 years to 13.1 years ($M = 11.3$ years).

Instrument

The sociometric measure consists of six questions: "Whom do you like to play with? With whom don't you play? Whom do you like to sit by? By whom don't you sit? Whom do you play with outside? Whom don't you play with outside?" The children provided written answers to these questions but were asked to nominate only same-sex peers. Although there is some discussion in the literature regarding the appropriateness of using positive and negative peer rating, Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982) have emphasized the importance of this convention of clear status delineation.

After the sociometric measure was tallied, each child received a visibility and an acceptance score placing him or her in one of the four previously mentioned categories on the sociometric circumplex. A visibility score was obtained by summing the number of times a child was mentioned both positively and negatively on the sociometric measure. An acceptance score was obtained by subtracting the negative mentions from the positive ones. Both visibility and acceptance scores for each classroom were divided by the total number of children participating in that classroom. When circumplex placement was considered, a popular child had high visibility and high acceptance; an isolated child, low visibility and low acceptance; and an amiable child, low visibility and high acceptance. In addition, children who placed on the ordinate of the circumplex rather than in one clear sociometric category or another were classified as neutral, a category not present in Peery's (1979) original model. Preliminary attempts to validate Peery's model have indicated significant differences in social comprehension between children in each of the four categories, $F(3, 21) = 8.187, p < .001$.

Procedure

The 48 target children were paired with same-sex children who were matched for achievement on the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). One pairing involved a match of all target children with one of their positive choices on the sociometric form. This dyad was labeled the *friend match* and involved mutual choices almost entirely because children were matched with those who had mentioned each other on the sociometric instrument. It was not possible, however, to match any of the sixth-grade rejected boys or any of the sixth-grade rejected girls with mutual choices because they were not chosen by anyone else. Instead, they were matched for achievement with one of their friendship choices who in turn had not rejected the target child on his or her own sociometric form. These matches were made in consultation with the child's classroom teacher. In addition, one sixth-grade boy named no positive choices on his sociometric schedule. Through consultation with his teacher, he was matched with a child with whom the teacher believed he had a close relationship; he had not rejected the boy on the sociometric schedule.

The subjects were then matched for CTBS achievement scores with an amiable or neutral child who had not been mentioned either positively or negatively on the sociometric form of the target child. This child was designated the nonfriend. Achievement was used as a matching device to minimize any differences verbal facility might make in conversation. The order of the target child's involvement with the two partners was random.

As described in Austin and Draper (1982), the dyads were taken to a carpeted workroom in the school media center where they sat on a large mat on the floor. Both wore lapel microphones that recorded onto a cassette tape recorder. A third microphone placed on the floor recorded onto a reel-to-reel Sony video recorder. All interactions were videotaped. The children were given an interest basket and told that they could look through it and provide feedback about those items they liked the most. There were two versions of the interest basket so that the target child used a different version in each pairing. The order of exposure to the baskets was alternated. The baskets contained parallel forms of over 20 small items. Each session was 5 min long. The children received instructions from the experimenter after which the experimenter left the children alone in the room.

Data Analysis

All utterances of both children during the 5-min sessions were transcribed and analyzed. Two judges, naive to the research design, analyzed these data through a simultaneous examination of utterance transcriptions and videotapes. To assess the child's attention to the conversation and to the peer, four general categories were used for analysis.

Mutual engagements or instances when both partners verbally or nonverbally cooperated in the same play or conversational theme was scored by noting the frequency with which the children moved into or out of mutual engagements for each dyad. The bouts of mutual engagements were timed and divided by total session time.

Acknowledgement of the partner included all instances when a child, target or match, directed verbal or nonverbal reinforcers toward something the other peer said, did, knew, or did not say, do, or know. Reinforcements were generally acknowledgements of a child's action, vocalization, or state, and were categorized as positive, negative, or neutral. To measure reinforcers, frequency counts were taken of positive, negative, and neutral reinforcers uttered by both children. Data included raw measures of reinforcers, number of positive and negative reinforcers for each child in proportion to the total utterances for the dyad; and total number number of reinforcers for each child in proportion to the total utterances for the dyad.

Getting the attention of the partner included all verbal and nonverbal attention-getting devices, including such verbalizations as "Hey, look at this," "Watch me," or nonverbal devices such as touching or shoving with the obvious goal of soliciting the partner's attention. Measurement

included verbal, nonverbal, and total attention-getting devices of both participants divided by total utterances in the session.

Speech interruptors were also considered attention-getting devices and were defined as occasions when one partner who did not have the conversational floor initiated speech. Total interruptors were measured as well as successful and unsuccessful speech interruptors. A successful interruption was defined as one which resulted in a change of the conversational floor in favor of the person who interrupted. Successful and unsuccessful interruptions were calculated for both children and divided by the number of utterances in the session.

Attention to the conversation included conversational initiators, facilitators, redirectors, and terminators. Initiators were defined as remarks which began a conversation or initiated another one after a 5-s lapse of conversation. Facilitators were utterances which corroborated what the other child was saying, followed up on a play or conversational theme previously introduced, or otherwise continued the ongoing theme. Terminators explicitly ended the interactions. All conversational attendors were figured separately for both children in the dyad and divided by total utterances in the session.

Social impact of the utterances determined the impact of one person's speech on the other person. This was measured in terms of which child's speech elicited the most mutual engagements, successful speech interruptors, and initiators, facilitators, redirectors, and terminators.

Inter- and Intrajudge Reliability

Two judges naive to the research design analyzed all of the data. An analysis of variance indicated no significant difference between judged ratings for all the independent variables and on all the dependent measures except the successful and unsuccessful interruptors of both target and match. For this reason, the occurrence of successful and unsuccessful interruptors will not be further discussed. Intrajudge reliabilities computed on three randomly selected pairs ranged from 88% to 100% agreement for the separate dependent measures.

Results

Data analysis involved a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Grade \times Sex \times Social Status \times Friend or Nonfriend \times Judge) split, split plot, with separate univariate analyses performed for each variable. To equalize the relationships, the total occurrences of each variable for each dyad was divided by the total number of utterances the dyad emitted during the ses-

sion. Significant relationships involved variables within the categories of mutual engagements, acknowledgement of the partner, getting the attention of the partner, attention to the conversation, and social impact of the utterance.

The number of mutual engagements was significant for the main effects of sex, status, and match, for the two-way interactions of Grade \times Sex and Status \times Match, and for the three-way interaction Grade \times Sex \times Match. Boys ($M = 1.938$) changed mutual engagements more frequently, $F(1, 40) = 13.02$, $p \leq .001$, than girls ($M = .9557$). Rejected children ($M = 1.778$) also changed mutual engagements more rapidly, $F(1, 40) = 5.949$, $p \leq .025$, than popular children ($M = 1.1159$). Interactions with friends ($M = 1.7509$) involved more changes than interactions with nonfriends ($M = 1.427$), $F(1, 40) = 5.111$, $p \leq .05$. When the Grade \times Sex interaction was considered, third-grade girls had the least change in mutual engagements and third-grade boys the most, $F(1, 40) = 6.258$, $p \leq .025$. Regarding the two-way interaction of status and match, $F(1, 40) = 4.136$, $p < .05$, rejected children and their friends initiated the most mutual engagements of all. The three-way interaction of grade, sex, and match, $F(1, 40) = 7.120$, $p \leq .025$, indicated that the number of mutual engagements tended to increase from third to sixth grade for girls and their friends and nonfriends and for boys and their nonfriends; however, from third to sixth grade, the number of mutual engagements for boys and their friends dropped substantially. There were no differences for the main effects or interactions with regard to the length of mutual engagements.

Acknowledgement of the partner included the reinforcement variables for target and match. The utterance of reinforcements was a significant occurrence for the main effects of grade and sex and the interactions of Grade \times Sex and Grade \times Sex \times Status. Grade effects were significant for the reinforcers the target extended to the match, $F(1, 40) = 4.86$, $p \leq .05$, with sixth-grade target children using reinforcers more ($M = 27.906$) than third-grade target children ($M = 23.240$). Grade effects were also significant for the reinforcers the match uttered to the target, $F(1, 48) = 17.58$, $p \leq .0005$, with sixth-grade matches also reinforcing the partner more ($M = 29.990$) than third-grade matches ($M = 22.458$). Total reinforcers, $F(1, 40) = 10.2293$, $p < .005$, were also significant for sixth graders ($M = 56.990$) compared to third graders ($M = 46.073$).

With regard to sex effects, female target children ($M = 92.063$) used more total reinforcers than male target children ($M = 72.438$), $F(1, 40) = 5.149$, $p \leq .05$. When Grade \times Sex was considered, sixth-grade female matches, both friends and nonfriends, were the most positively and negatively reinforcing in the conversation, $F(4, 40) = 11.198$, $p \leq$

.005. When positive and negative reinforcers were considered separately, no significant effects were noted.

Regarding the three-way interaction of Grade \times Sex \times Status for the number of positive reinforcers the match, either friend or nonfriend, directed to the target child, $F(1, 48) = 6.758, p < .025$, the number of positive reinforcers matches gave popular children, both boys and girls, changed little from third grade to sixth grade. Rejected third-grade girls, on the other hand, received the fewest positive reinforcers, but for rejected sixth-grade girls, the number of positive reinforcers received increased significantly. On the other hand, rejected third-grade boys received a high number of positive reinforcers from the match, but this decreased significantly for rejected sixth-grade boys, who received the fewest positive reinforcers of all.

The overall category of Getting the Attention of the Partner was significant for the main effects of sex, status, and match. When the main effect of sex was considered, male target children ($M = .145$) more often used nonverbal attention-getting devices than did female target children ($M = .098$), $F(1, 40) = 4.8554, p \leq .05$, and total verbal and nonverbal attention-getting devices ($M = .617$), $F(1, 40) = 9.530, p \leq .005$, than female target children ($M = .432$). Likewise, the matches, friends or nonfriends, of male target children more often used nonverbal attention-getting devices ($M = .135$), $F(1, 40) = 7.2216, p \leq .025$, and verbal attention-getting devices ($M = .156$), $F(1, 40) = 9.0644, p \leq .005$, than the matches of female target children ($M = .088$ and $.103$).

When status was considered, the friends and nonfriends of rejected children more often used nonverbal attention-getting devices ($M = .130$) than the friends and nonfriends of popular children ($M = .092$), $F(1, 40) = 4.650, p \leq .05$. Match was a significant main effect for the occurrence of nonverbal attention-getting devices presented by the match, $F(1, 40) = 5.864, p \leq .025$, with the friend trying to get the attention of the partner ($M = .131$) more often in nonverbal ways than the nonfriend ($M = .092$). Components in the overall category of attention to the conversation, including conversational initiators, facilitators, and terminators, were significant for the main effects of sex and status and the interactions of Grade \times Status, Sex \times Status, and Grade \times Sex \times Match.

Conversational initiators were used more often by the friends and nonfriends of boys ($M = .067$) than the friends and nonfriends of girls ($M = .039$), $F(1, 40) = 6.303, p \leq .025$. Total initiators were used more often by boys ($M = .132$) than by girls ($M = .0897$) in their conversations, $F(1, 40) = 4.968, p \leq .05$. Initiators were used more often by the matches of rejected children ($M = .064$) in their interactions, $F(1, 40) = 4.33, p \leq .05$, than by the matches of popular children ($M = .041$). Remarks which

facilitated or continued the conversation were successful for the interaction of grade and status, $F(1, 40) = 6.857, p \leq .025$, with sixth-grade rejected children more often using this device. Remarks which terminated a mutual engagement were significant for the interaction of Sex \times Status, $F(1, 40) = 5.869, p \leq .025$. Rejected girls and popular boys of both grades were more often responsible for issuing terminating remarks than any other children. Terminating remarks uttered by the target child were also significant for the three-way interaction of Grade \times Sex \times Match, $F(1, 40) = 7.780, p \leq .01$. From third to sixth grade, girls with their friends decreased the use of terminators in a conversation while boys and their friends increased the use of terminators.

Discussion

The data offer tentative support for the discourse condition that both popular and rejected children cooperate with their peers to carry on conversation. Nonetheless, differences also appeared between social status, thus supporting Ladd's (1983) contention that rejected as well as popular children can maintain social interactions but these interactions differ in quality and type of behavior. The data also suggest developmental differences in children's interactions as well as differences between gender and friend/nonfriend matches.

It seems appropriate to conclude that in this study both popular and rejected children and their peers worked cooperatively with each other to elicit conversation. For example, there were no main effect differences in the amount of conversational facilitators the children used with each other. Keenan (1974) has argued that a speaker expects some sort of acknowledgement to his or her comments. If an appropriate acknowledgement is forthcoming from the listener, then Keenan calls the dialogue a "happy one." From these data it seems that despite conditions of social status, gender, match, and grade, both target child and match equally acknowledged the other's comments which facilitated the talk exchange.

When two-way interactions are considered, an important exception is that of rejected sixth graders, who uttered the most facilitating comments of all. An explanation for this could be that it was not possible to pair any of the sixth-grade boys nor one of the sixth-grade girls with a mutual friendship choice since no one had selected them as a friend on the sociometric form. Their interactions with the friendship match may not have been typical of the same kind of friendship network represented by most other pairings of target child and friend. Nonetheless, this explanation becomes more problematic when it is realized that for third-grade popular and rejected children no differences in the amount of facilitating

devices were found even with their nonfriend matches. It is possible, then, that we may be seeing an important beginning of network differences between popular and rejected children with sixth graders beginning to overcompensate during discourse with devices they know are important in maintaining conversation.

A similar explanation may be viable when considering the number of mutual engagements the children initiated. Mutual engagements did not differ in length between groups, but they did differ in number. Rejected children initiated more mutual engagements than popular children and the engagements were more often with the friend than with the nonfriend. Again, this signals heavy attention or perhaps even overattention to the conversation. It may be that rejected children are very aware of the discourse requirement to engage mutually and cooperatively in the conversation to the extent that they overinvest in their intentions to follow the requirement.

Dodge (1983) also found that rejected children approach peers with greater frequency than popular children during initial sessions with youngsters they had not previously known. Rejected children seemed to understand interactional requirements and worked concentratedly to fulfill these requirements, at least during Dodge's initial sessions as well as in our sampling periods. Blyth (1983) has emphasized the importance of examining the interactional strategies sociometrically different children employ. The present study suggests one differential use of strategies between popular and rejected children; namely, that rejected children pay more specific attention to the interaction through verbal acknowledgement of the partner and initiation of mutual engagements than popular children, at least during short play periods or get-acquainted sessions such as those used by Dodge.

Ladd (1983) has called the networks of rejected children intensive rather than extensive. These data imply an intensive relationship between a rejected child and a peer in terms of the number of cooperative exchanges initiated by the child in the course of the interaction.

As indicated, status differences were apparent between target children. They were also present in the matches of the target children. When interactions involved the friend, the children were more often mutually engaged than when interactions involved the nonfriend, suggesting that intensive social interactions are found not only between rejected children and their matches but also between both popular and rejected children when paired with their friends. Perhaps the rejected child, understanding that mutual engagements are part of an interaction between friends, multiplies this phenomenon when interacting with friends and hence forms a more intensive or perhaps overly compensating relationship.

Another interactional convention which seems to distinguish the networks of popular and rejected children may be the manner in which peers solicit each other's attention. In this study the matches of rejected children elicited attention more often in nonverbal, rather than verbal, ways. Although these nonverbal behaviors were emitted by the match of the rejected child, their occurrence suggests that different interactional styles exist between sociometric status groups, and when individuals interact with a member of a given group, their interactions reflect discourse conventions of that group regardless of the interactant's own social status.

Nonverbal means of getting attention was also a significant dependent variable for the main effect of match with the friend more often than the nonfriend. Again, it is possible that an intensity effect is operating. Nonverbal attention-getting devices are a phenomena found among friends, and they are also used significantly more often by age mates who interact with rejected children, again suggesting that interactions involving rejected children and their peers may be characterized by an exaggeration of interactive strategies found in the relationship of popular children regardless of whether they are initiated by the rejected child or by the interactional partner.

Other findings suggest that during interactions with rejected children, the peer was more likely to take an active role in initiating new conversational topics than with interactions involving popular children, suggesting that more conversational control is either relinquished by the rejected child or assumed by the peer participant in order to mobilize the interaction. From other findings in this study it is apparent that rejected children were able to engage the peer in conversational mutuality and offer comments which kept the conversation alive once it had been initiated, but seemed less likely to initiate conversations themselves. Putallaz and Gottman (1979) also found that rejected children had difficulty initiating interactions when attempting to enter peer groups, although they may be able to maintain an interaction once it begins. If rejected children have a difficult time initiating conversation, they seemed to be faced with a different problem in terminating them; at least rejected girls were more likely to terminate mutual engagements than popular girls or the peer matches of either groups of girls.

The results offer tentative support for the discourse theory that rejected children as well as popular children have the ability to engage in conversation with a peer and to create a happy interaction or one characterized by mutual interest in the movement of the dialogue. How well the happy exchanges endure as the interaction matures across longer play periods or across time is an issue for further study. It seems clear that

although rejected children are able to cooperate with a peer to keep a conversation alive, they are less able to initiate dialogue.

The data also offer some support for the proposition espoused by Ladd (1983) that rejected children form relationships that are more intensive than popular children's, or intensive in the sense that certain interactional strategies are used more heavily in the interactions of rejected children. Although it seems that rejected children can form friendships, the issue of universality is still an important question. As Blyth (1983) wrote, we must determine whether the rejected child's skills are functional enough to enable survivability in other social networks.

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NOTE

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