

Social identity, peer group rejection, and young children's reactive, displaced, and proactive aggression

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Published

2011

Journal Title

British Journal of Developmental Psychology

DOI

[10.1111/j.2044-835X.2010.02012.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-835X.2010.02012.x)

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Keywords: social identity, social group, rejection, reactive aggression, displaced aggression, proactive aggression.

Abstract

The effects of peer group rejection on 7 and 9-year old children's ($N = 192$) reactive, displaced and proactive aggression were examined in a group simulation study. Children were assigned membership in a pretend social group for a drawing competition, and were then rejected or accepted by their group. Their direct and indirect aggressive intentions towards either the ingroup or outgroup were assessed. Analysis of their aggressive intentions revealed enhanced indirect aggression, but less direct aggression. Peer group rejection, in comparison with acceptance, instigated reactive aggression towards the ingroup, and displaced reactive aggression towards the outgroup. Accepted children displayed proactive aggression towards the outgroup, but not the ingroup. The implications of the findings for peer group rejection and aggression research are discussed.

Social identity, peer group rejection and young children's reactive, displaced, and proactive aggression.

The negative effects of peer rejection are now widely acknowledged. Research has revealed that peer rejection is typically associated with a number of indicators of internal distress, including negative mood, anger, anxiety, unhappiness, depressive symptoms, and low self-esteem (see Bierman, 2004; Sandstrom & Zakriski, 2004), as well as decreased performance on a range of cognitive tasks (Dodge & Feldman, 1990; Jones, Abbey, & Cumberland, 1998; Nelson & Crick, 1999). Rejected children also frequently display socially maladaptive behaviours, including being argumentative, disruptive, and aggressive, more socially awkward and insensitive, less skilful in engaging in pro-social play, and having more negative interactions with teachers (see Bierman, 2004; Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990).

However, while our understanding of peer rejection and its effects is well-advanced, there are still a range of issues that require further attention. These include the impacts of different sources of rejection, the effects of different rejection experiences, the immediate versus short- versus long-term effects of rejection, the effects of different causes of rejection, as well as the frequency of the rejection experience.

The present research sought to address some of these issues. It examined the immediate effects on children of their explicit rejection (or acceptance) by their peer group (or, ingroup, or clique) on their intentions to engage in aggression towards the peer group members (i.e., reactive aggression). In addition, the research assessed the possibility of aggression being instigated towards the members of an outgroup by the rejected children who were unable to retaliate against the rejecting peer group (i.e., displaced reactive aggression). Finally, the research assessed the extent to which children who were not instigated to

aggression (i.e., accepted children) would nevertheless engage in aggression towards outgroup members, for an extraneous purpose, such as furthering the interests of the ingroup (i.e., proactive or instrumental aggression).

Source of children's rejection

Much of the research on children's peer rejection and its effects has measured the attitudes of the members of a school class towards each individual member (Sandstrom & Zakriski, 2004). However, whereas the cause and effects of rejection by a class require more systematic attention (e.g., compared with rejection by individuals, dyads), it is also noteworthy that middle childhood is actually marked by children's involvement in stable social groups or cliques and that their social interaction during this period increasingly takes place in the context of these peer or social groups (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). This research indicates that such groups are voluntary, friendship-based, and are typically comprised of 3-9 children who share the same age, gender and race. These findings accord with the assumption that children's increasing involvement in social groups reflects a fundamental need to be accepted and to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), a concern that rises sharply during the middle childhood period (Rubin et al., 1998).

Consistent with this are other findings indicating that by school age, children like, and see themselves as similar to, their ingroup compared with outgroup members (Bigler, 1995; Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997; Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005), that they derive at least some of their sense of self-worth from their social group memberships (Verkuyten, 2001, 2007), and that they prefer to be members of higher rather than lower status social groups (Nesdale & Flessner, 2001). There is also evidence that children reveal a strong bias towards their ingroup when they are required to make choices, indicate preferences, or allocate rewards between the ingroup and an outgroup (see Aboud, 1988). Children also endorse, and are influenced by, their social group's norms relating to appropriate intra- and

intergroup attitudes and behaviours (Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Ferrell, 2009; Abrams, Rutland, Ferrell, & Pelletier, 2008; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), and they show less and less liking for ingroup members who do not conform to ingroup norms (e.g. Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Marques, 2003; Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2004).

One straightforward implication of these findings is that rejection by their social group, or even the threat of rejection, should have the potential to exert a considerable impact on children's attitudes and behaviours, perhaps including their interpersonal aggression.

Assessing peer rejection and its effects

Whereas 'rejection' might be considered to be revealed in varying degrees of exclusion, victimization, or intentional isolation from peer activities, such is not the case in much of the extant research. Rather, a child's designation as 'rejected' is typically based on a nomination or rating task in which other children covertly disclose their dislike for that child (Rubin et al., 1998; Sandstrom & Zakriski, 2004). On this basis, rejected children are those who receive few like responses and many dislike responses from other children.

Beyond this, however, comparatively little is actually known about the everyday experience of rejection endured by children, and whether these events differ for different rejected children. According to Sandstrom and Zakriski (2004), the public manifestation of private dislike might encompass any one of an array of responses, ranging from blatant rejection (e.g., direct exclusion), to overt victimization (e.g., teasing), to tolerance (e.g., selecting a disliked child, who happens to be a good athlete, for a team), to inadvertent reward (e.g., submitting to a bully), or it might not entail any response at all (i.e., not all rejected children are victimized). However, there has been little exploration of when these varieties of response are displayed, why, and to whom.

Consequently, a second aim of the present study was to assess the impact on children of at least one manifestation of peer rejection; specifically, their explicit rejection (i.e.,

unambiguous exclusion) versus acceptance, by a peer group. Further, whereas research has tended to focus on selected samples of children who have experienced much prior rejection by their peers (i.e., the chronically rejected), the participants in the present study were a randomly selected group of (typical) children who were randomly assigned to the rejection or acceptance conditions. Thus, the present study sought to examine the causal effect of peer group rejection versus acceptance on the aggression of children who might, or might not, have had a previous rejection experience.

Peer rejection and children's aggression

Although a linkage between rejection and aggression has been reported in a number of studies (see Bierman, 2004; Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990), the causal direction of such findings is not unambiguous because they have commonly been obtained in correlational studies, including observational and longitudinal follow-forward studies (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Dodge, Lansford, Burks, Bates, & Pettit, 2003; Sandstrom & Zakriski, 2004).

In addition, whereas research reveals a strong association between chronic rejection and aggression, little is known concerning the *immediate* effects of peer group rejection on the interpersonal aggression of children who are not chronically rejected. Moreover, if children are instigated to aggression by peer group rejection, to what extent might it be directed towards members of the rejecting ingroup (i.e., reactive aggression). In addition, to what extent might it be expressed towards members of other groups or individuals if, for some reason, the rejected child is unable to retaliate against members of the rejecting group (i.e., displaced reactive aggression)? Further, whereas it might be anticipated that peer group accepted children would not be motivated to aggress against the ingroup (presumably because they would wish to continue to belong and to be accepted), to what extent might they be motivated to engage in aggression designed to achieve a non-retaliatory (i.e., proactive or

instrumental) goal (Dodge & Coie, 1987)? Whereas the possibility of such effects has been discussed (e.g., Dodge et al., 2003), they have not been explicitly examined in research with children.

However, of relevance to the foregoing issue are findings indicating that social group rejection versus acceptance significantly increased children's negative affect (i.e., anger, hurt, upset), and their tendencies towards risk-taking (Nesdale & Lambert, 2007, 2008). More directly, Nesdale and Lambert (2007) reported that social group rejection significantly increased children's tendencies towards engaging in anti-social behaviours (e.g., arguing with others, talking when the teacher is talking, using other people's things, interrupting others), and that the rejection effect was mediated by the negative affect arising from the rejection experience. The present research sought to extend these findings by examining the possibility of a direct causal linkage between peer group rejection/acceptance and reactive aggression, displaced reactive aggression, as well as proactive aggression.

Consistent with the common conceptualization of reactive or retaliatory aggression (e.g., Dodge & Crick, 1990; Dodge & Coie, 1987), it was expected that rejected children would be instigated to react with aggression towards the rejecting group (i.e., reactive aggression) because the rejection would be perceived as intentional, it would cause distress and anger, and hence would effectively instigate the child to retaliate aggressively. Although little research has examined the direct causal effect of social group rejection on children's reactive aggression, this prediction is certainly consistent with findings indicating that aggression is more likely when provocation is intentional and foreseeable, rather than accidental and unforeseeable (Dyck & Rule, 1978; Rule & Duker, 1973).

In addition to examining the participants' aggressive responses to the ingroup, the present study also examined the effect of social group rejection versus acceptance on children's aggression towards the members of an outgroup. The question here is whether

rejected versus accepted children, who are unable to retaliate against the ingroup members who rejected them, would displace their instigation to aggression onto members of an outgroup who had actually had nothing to do with the children's rejection by the ingroup (i.e., displaced reactive aggression).

One possibility is that, regardless of their negative affective state following their rejection experience, the rejected participants would not display aggression towards the outgroup members simply because the latter were not responsible for the rejected participants' negative affective state. In contrast, another more plausible possibility is that rejected children might simply displace their instigation to aggression on to the outgroup members. According to this view, which is consistent with the reformulated frustration-aggression hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1989), the tendency towards aggression displacement would be enhanced by three considerations. These include, first, that the possibility of retaliation towards the rejecting ingroup was completely thwarted, second, that there would be a perception of similarity between the rejecting ingroup and the outgroup (i.e., same age, gender, ethnicity, and level of attractiveness) and, third, that there would be little fear of punishment for displaying displaced aggression intentions (Miller, 1948). Since these conditions actually applied in the present study, it seemed plausible that the rejected children's instigation to aggression would be displaced on to members of the outgroup.

Finally, while it was anticipated that the participants who were accepted by their social group would not display aggression towards their ingroup, it was less clear how the accepted participants would respond to the outgroup. Again, one prediction might be that the accepted participants would not display aggression towards the outgroup (or the ingroup) since they would not have been provoked by intentional and foreseeable rejection by their ingroup. Against this, however, there was a stronger possibility that the participant might actually display enhanced proactive or instrumental aggression; that is, aggression designed

to achieve a particular goal, other than retaliation (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Thus, given that the participant was a new and, presumably, somewhat uncertain, member of the ingroup, a social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) would predict that the participant would be motivated to display outgroup negativity (i.e., aggression) in order to contribute to the ingroup's status, as well as to strengthen their own acceptability to the other group members. Although this prediction has not been tested, consistent with it is research showing increased prejudice and discrimination being expressed towards outgroups by both children (Nesdale et al., 2007, 2009), and adults (Jetten, Branscombe, & Spears, 2002; Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995), despite the absence of any provocation by the outgroup. The present study sought to evaluate the proactive aggression prediction in relation to children.

Present study

In the present research, 7 and 9-year-old boys and girls participated in a group simulation study in which they were first assigned membership in a group, and then learned that they had been rejected or accepted by that group, prior to a drawing competition that was to involve a competitor outgroup. The children's intentions to aggress directly (e.g., hitting, pushing, taking things, verbal abuse) and indirectly (e.g., deception, ostracism, manipulation, and gossip) against members of the ingroup *or* the outgroup were then measured on a set of aggression vignettes. Children's *aggressive intentions*, rather than their *actual aggression*, were measured because a central issue addressed in the study was the potential causal effect of social group rejection on children's aggression, and it would have been extremely difficult, as well as ethically irresponsible, to allow children to engage in real acts of aggression in an experimental study.

It was anticipated that peer group rejected children would be motivated to retaliate and hence would display *reactive aggression*; that is, greater aggressive intentions would be expressed towards the ingroup following rejection, in comparison to acceptance. In addition,

if rejected children were unable to retaliate, it was anticipated that they would reveal *displaced reactive aggression*; that is, they would reveal a similar level of aggressive intentions towards outgroup members as would be shown by the rejected children who displayed reactive aggression, but greater aggressive intentions than would be shown by the accepted children towards the ingroup. Finally, it was expected that accepted children would display *proactive or instrumental aggression*; that is, they would reveal greater aggressive intentions towards the outgroup than accepted children would display towards the ingroup.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 192 boys and girls, with 96 from grades 1-3 ($M = 7.65$ years, *range*: 6.00 to 8.10 years) and 96 from grades 4-6 ($M = 9.80$ years, *range*: 8.21 to 11.58 years), with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls at each age level. The children attended two primary schools serving the same lower-middle class community and participated with their parents' approval, together with their own assent.

Design

The study had a 2 (age: 7 versus 9) x 2 (gender: boys versus girls) x 2 (peer group status: accepted versus rejected) x 2 (aggression target: ingroup target vs outgroup target) x 2 (aggression type: direct vs indirect) factorial design, with the last factor within subjects. Within age and gender, the children were randomly allocated into the social group status x aggression target conditions.

Materials

Photos. A set of head-and-shoulder colour photos of children was used to display the members of the ingroup and the outgroup to the participants. The photos were randomly drawn from a large pool of photos that has been developed and pre-tested by Nesdale and colleagues (Nesdale et al., 2005). Within age and gender, photos selected were matched for

expression (not smiling) and attractiveness (moderate) and were displayed on a board (initially covered).

Response booklets were prepared containing a randomly ordered series of questions, each with an accompanying 5-point unipolar or bipolar scale, with each point labelled.

Manipulation check items.

To check the effectiveness of the peer group status manipulation, participants completed two measures. First, their *ingroup and outgroup attitudes* were measured by summing their responses on three separate scales relating to the members of the ingroup, as well as to the members of the outgroup. Participants indicated how much they **liked** the members of their own team, (*How much do you like the children in your team?*), as well as the members of the other team (*How much do you like the children in the other team?*), on separate bi-polar scales ranging from 1 (*I don't like them at all*) to 5 (*I like them a lot*). Similarly, the participants indicated how much they **trusted** the members of their own team (*How much do you trust the other children in your team?*), and the other team (*How much do you trust the children in the other team?*), on separate bi-polar scales ranging from 1 (*I don't trust them at all*) to 5 (*I trust them a lot*). Finally, the children rated how much they would like to **play** with the members of their own team (*How much would you like to play with the children in your team?*), as well as the other team (*How much would you like to play with the children in the other team?*), on separate bi-polar scales ranging from 1 (*I wouldn't like to play with them at all*) to 5 (*I would like to play with them a lot*). Thus, each participant received two summed scores, one for the ingroup and one for the outgroup, with each score ranging from 3 to 15. The summed scales (i.e., liking, trust, play) had a Cronbach's alpha of .78 for the ingroup and .82 for the outgroup.

Some additional questions were also asked to assess whether participants wanted to change teams. However, since the analysis of responses on these measures showed essentially the same pattern as on the attitude measures, the results on these measures have been omitted.

Main dependent measure.

Aggressive Intentions. The participants' direct and indirect aggressive intentions were measured on a scale devised by the authors (Duffy & Nesdale, 2010, Nesdale, Maass, Kiesner, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2008). Participants responded to four vignettes, each describing an incident that happened one day at school (see Procedure below). The purpose of the vignettes was to provide participants with hypothetical situations which would allow them to give a direct and/or indirect aggression response, if this was their intention. For example, one vignette described the following situation,

One day you arrive at school early and you sit down at one of the tables in the outdoor area, with another kid from your class. No-one else is there yet. After a while, you see one of the members from the team/ the other team (Researcher points to photo of one member of ingroup/outgroup.) After sitting alone for a few minutes, the kid from the other team looks at you and says, 'hullo'.

The remaining three vignettes focused on a likely response given to an ingroup/outgroup member who: was upset about their drawing, spilled all the pencils over the floor, and asked to join in a game. Each vignette was accompanied by four responses. One of the responses was consistent with the earlier characterization of direct aggression (e.g., name-calling, taking things from another, hitting, pushing or teasing another); another response was consistent with the earlier characterization of indirect aggression (e.g., ignoring, gossiping about, deceiving, rejecting or excluding another). For example, the direct aggression response to the vignette above specified: *Say something mean about that person*, while the indirect aggression response specified: *Ignore the person who said hullo and keep talking to your group members*. The other two responses were filler items that were not designated as aggressive actions, instead describing mildly prosocial acts. Each response was accompanied by a 5-point bipolar scale, ranging from 1 (*Very unlikely I would do this*) to 5 (*Very likely I would do this*).

The participant responded to the 4 vignettes in turn, each of which had a different set of 4 responses, but each of which included a direct aggression response, an indirect aggression response, and 2 filler items, each of which related to the content of the particular vignette. Participants' scores on Direct and Indirect Aggression were the sum of their responses to the relevant item on each of the four vignettes. Thus, each participant received two summed scores, one for Direct Aggression and one for Indirect Aggression, each score occurring in the range from 4 to 20.

Categorization of the direct versus indirect aggression response items was based on an earlier study in which a factor analysis of the items revealed two factors, labelled Direct Aggression, and Indirect Aggression, accounting for 64.73% of the total variance (Duffy & Nesdale, 2010). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the Direct Aggression and Indirect Aggression scales were .85 and .74, respectively. The aggression intentions scale has yielded predictable findings in samples of children in middle childhood (e.g., Duffy & Nesdale, 2010; Nesdale et al., 2008; Nesdale, Milliner, Duffy, Griffiths, 2009; Nipedal, Nesdale, & Killen, in press).

Procedure

All students in grades 1 to 6 from the participating schools were asked by their teachers to do a drawing of themselves on a 145mm X 210mm piece of paper. They were told that some visitors would look at their drawings, if their parents had given permission for them to participate. One week later, the children with parental permission were tested individually and away from the classroom. With the child's permission, an instant head-and-shoulders photo was taken at the start of the session. The child was then asked to pretend that s/he was going to participate in an intergroup drawing competition that would involve children from other schools in the area. They were asked to pretend that all the children's

drawings had been judged by an artist and they had been put into a team of drawers “just like you”.

The child was then shown the photos of the other two same-aged, same gender, and same ethnicity members of their team, displayed on a board. To enhance their ingroup categorization and identification, they were asked to pin their photograph on the board between the photos of the other two team members (ingroup), and to have a good look at their other team members.

To manipulate *peer group status*, the researcher suddenly ‘remembered’ to say to a child in the *acceptance* condition *that the other members of their team really liked their drawing and really wanted them to be in the team, rather than any of the other children*. The child was also told that the other members had given him/her the opportunity to select a colour name for the team, and this was written beside their team photos. In contrast, in the *rejection* condition, the researcher suddenly ‘remembered’ to say *that the other team members actually did not like the child’s drawings and did not want the child in their team, preferring another child to be the member*. The researcher then showed some uncertainty about what to do, before finally saying, *until I get this sorted out, let’s just leave your photo over here*, and the child’s photo was removed from the ingroup and was placed in a separate location from that group (and, as it emerged, from the other team also). To emphasize the pretend rejection, the child was told that the other team members had chosen the team colour, without asking that particular child. In the interests of descriptive simplicity, although half the children were thus rejected by the group to which they had been assigned, and thereafter had no group, we shall nevertheless refer to that group as the ingroup (regardless of whether the child was accepted or rejected).

A sheet of paper covering half of the board was then removed to reveal the members of the other (outgroup) team and the experimenter advised the child of the other team’s

chosen colour name. As with the ingroup, the children were asked to have a good look at the photos of the members of the outgroup.

To assess the effectiveness of the peer group status manipulation, the child was then directed to the response booklet and completed several practice questions, before completing the measures of their attitudes towards the ingroup and the outgroup, as well as the measures of the extent to which they, or members of the other group, would wish to change groups.

The researcher then directed the child to the aggression measure and carried out the *aggression target* manipulation. Thus, in reading the first vignette to the child, and depending on the child's assigned condition, the researcher either pointed to a photo of a member of the ingroup (*ingroup target*) or a photo of a member of the outgroup (*outgroup target*). In reading the successive vignettes, the researcher pointed to the photos of other members of the ingroup or the outgroup, so that the designated ingroup and outgroup targets were systematically varied, in order to control for the possible effects of particular faces. Thus, the participant revealed his/her aggressive intentions towards members of the ingroup *or* members of the outgroup.

When the participants had completed the aggression vignettes, those who had experienced the rejection manipulation were asked to role play the complete acceptance manipulation to ensure that all participants fully appreciated that they had participated in a pretend game. The researcher then answered any questions, the child was given his/her own photo, thanked for participating in the pretend game, and was returned to the classroom.

Results

Manipulation check data

Ingroup and Outgroup Attitudes.

Participants' summed attitude ratings for the ingroup and outgroup were analyzed in a 2 (age: 7- versus 9- years) x 2 (gender: boys versus girls) x 2 (peer group status: accepted versus rejected) x 2 (target group: ingroup versus outgroup) ANOVA, with the last factor

within subjects. Of central relevance to the present study, this analysis revealed significant main effects for *peer group status*, $F(1, 184) = 39.17, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$, and for *target group*, $F(1, 184) = 39.06, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$, each of which were qualified by a significant *peer group status x target group* interaction effect, $F(1, 184) = 28.18, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. Comparisons of the cell means using Duncan's Multiple Range Test ($p < .05$) revealed that children were significantly more negative towards the ingroup when they were rejected ($M = 9.09, SD = 2.92$) rather than accepted by the ingroup ($M = 12.35, SD = 1.81$), whereas their ratings of the outgroup were unaffected by whether they had been rejected ($M = 8.94, SD = 3.05$) or accepted by the ingroup ($M = 9.51, SD = 2.87$). From another perspective, when children were rejected by the ingroup, they were as negative towards the ingroup ($M = 9.09, SD = 2.92$) as they were to the outgroup ($M = 8.94, SD = 3.05$). These findings were consistent with the intent of the peer group status manipulation.

Main findings

Direct and indirect aggression intentions.

The participants' direct and indirect aggression intention scores were analyzed in a 2 (participant age: 7 versus 9 years) x 2 (gender: boys versus girls) x 2 (peer group status: accepted vs rejected) x 2 (aggression target: ingroup target vs outgroup target) x 2 (aggression type: direct vs indirect) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the last factor. This analysis revealed five significant effects. However, since there was skewness revealed in these findings, the data were transformed to correct for skewness before being re-analysed in the foregoing ANOVA. This analysis did not change either the number or nature of the effects. Accordingly, the findings from the initial analysis are reported.

There was a significant main effect for *aggression type*, $F(1, 176) = 99.29, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .36$, which indicated that the participants expressed significantly greater indirect ($M = 7.27, SD = 3.13$) than direct aggression intentions ($M = 5.59, SD = 2.34$). However, this effect was qualified

by a significant *peer group status x aggression type* interaction effect, $F(1,176) = 5.51, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. Comparisons of the cell means using Duncan's Multiple Range Test ($p < .05$) revealed that the participants' direct aggression intentions did not differ according to whether they were rejected ($M = 5.66, SD = 2.23$) or accepted by the ingroup ($M = 5.52, SD = 2.44$), whereas their indirect aggression intentions were significantly greater when they were rejected ($M = 7.73, SD = 3.12$) rather than accepted by the ingroup ($M = 6.81, SD = 3.08$).

However, the preceding effect was qualified by a significant *peer group status x aggression type x aggression target* interaction effect, $F(1,176) = 3.88, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$. The cell means are displayed in Figure 1. As revealed in this figure, comparisons of the cell means using Duncan's Multiple Range Test ($p < .05$) revealed a different pattern of findings according to whether the participants' aggressive intentions were direct or indirect. Whereas the participants' direct aggressive intentions were not influenced by their accepted or rejected status and the aggression target (M s ranging from 5.38 to 5.79; SD s from 1.94 to 2.54), the participants' indirect aggressive intentions towards the ingroup and outgroup were significantly influenced by their accepted or rejected status. Moreover, the participants' indirect aggressive intentions revealed the patterns of cell means consistent with those that would be displayed by children displaying reactive, displaced, or proactive aggression.

Thus, consistent with *reactive aggression*, greater aggressive intentions were expressed by the participants towards the ingroup following peer group rejection ($M = 8.02, SD = 3.37$) rather than acceptance ($M = 6.21, SD = 2.51$).

In addition, consistent with *displaced reactive aggression*, if rejected children were unable to retaliate against the rejecting ingroup, they exhibited a similar level of aggressive intentions towards the outgroup ($M = 7.44, SD = 2.86$) as were shown by the rejected children who displayed reactive aggression towards the ingroup ($M = 8.02, SD = 3.37$), but greater

aggressive intentions than were shown by the accepted children towards the ingroup ($M = 6.21, SD = 2.51$).

Finally, consistent with *proactive aggression*, accepted children displayed greater aggressive intentions towards the outgroup ($M = 7.41, SD = 3.49$) than the accepted children displayed towards the ingroup ($M = 6.21, SD = 2.51$).

Insert Fig.1 about here.

The analysis also revealed two significant interaction effects involving participant age, including a significant *participant age x peer group status* interaction effect, $F(1, 176) = 4.49, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. This effect indicated that aggressive intentions following peer group rejection were greater at 9 years ($M = 7.16, SD = 2.65$) than at 7 years of age ($M = 6.18, SD = 2.63$), whereas there was little difference in aggressive intentions following peer group acceptance at 9 years ($M = 5.93, SD = 2.28$) versus 7 years of age ($M = 6.37, SD = 3.14$).

There was also a significant *participant age x gender* interaction effect, $F(1, 176) = 5.76, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. This effect indicated that the aggressive intentions of males were greater at 9 years ($M = 7.01, SD = 2.38$) than at 7 years ($M = 5.92, SD = 2.59$) whereas there was little difference in the aggressive intentions of females at 9 years ($M = 6.15, SD = 2.64$) versus 7 years of age ($M = 6.59, SD = 3.13$).

Discussion

The present study examined the immediate causal effects of social group rejection versus acceptance on children's direct and indirect aggressive intentions towards the ingroup versus an outgroup. Critical to this goal was the successful manipulation of the participants' peer group acceptance and rejection. To assess this manipulation, the participants were asked to indicate their attitudes towards the ingroup and the outgroup. As expected, children who

were rejected by the ingroup were considerably more negative towards the rejecting ingroup than were the accepted children. Moreover, whereas research has shown that accepted children typically strongly favour their ingroup over any outgroup (Nesdale & Lambert, 2007, 2008), as did the accepted children in this study, the present findings indicated that the rejected children were just as negative towards the rejecting ingroup as they were towards the outgroup. These findings were clearly consistent with the intent of the peer status manipulation.

Peer group rejection and reactive, displaced and proactive aggression

Of central interest in the present study was whether the participants' peer group status would have a direct causal impact on their aggressive intentions towards members of the rejecting ingroup, as well as towards the members of an uninvolved outgroup. Consistent with expectations, a significant *peer group status x aggression type x aggression target* interaction effect revealed that the influence of social group acceptance versus rejection differed according to the aggression target (i.e., ingroup or outgroup member) and whether the participants' aggressive intentions were direct or indirect.

Thus, the findings indicated that the participants' *direct aggressive intentions* were unaffected by whether the participant was rejected or accepted by the ingroup, or whether the participants' aggressive intentions were directed towards a member of the ingroup or the outgroup. In contrast, the findings showed that the participants' *indirect aggressive intentions* were significantly influenced by their peer group status, and that their intentions also differed according to whether the targets were members of the ingroup or the outgroup. Moreover, as anticipated, participants' indirect aggressive intentions revealed the patterns of cell means consistent with those that would be displayed by children displaying reactive, displaced, or proactive aggression.

Thus, consistent with *reactive aggression*, greater aggressive intentions were expressed by the participants towards the ingroup following peer group rejection rather than acceptance.

In addition, consistent with *displaced reactive aggression*, if rejected children were unable to retaliate against the rejecting ingroup, they revealed a similar level of aggressive intentions towards the outgroup as were shown by the rejected children who displayed reactive aggression towards the ingroup, as well as greater aggressive intentions than were shown by the accepted children towards the ingroup. Finally, consistent with *proactive aggression*, accepted children displayed greater aggressive intentions towards the outgroup than the accepted children displayed towards the ingroup.

These findings are noteworthy for several reasons. For example, it is noteworthy that peer group status interacted with the aggression target group to influence the participants' indirect but not their direct aggressive intentions. Presumably, this reflects the fact that direct aggressive intentions are more severe than indirect aggressive intentions, and that the participants were randomly selected from the normal population rather than being chronically aggressive children. That is, perhaps the present participants were simply less likely to engage in direct rather than indirect aggression because of the former's increased severity.

That said, whereas earlier research indicated that social group rejection increased children's negative affect (Nesdale & Lambert, 2007, 2008), the present findings indicated that rejected children disliked the members of the rejecting group and developed indirect aggressive intentions towards them. In addition, whereas follow-forward research has revealed, for example, that early peer rejection in Grades 1-3 predicted growth in aggression in Grades 5 to 7 (e.g., Dodge et al., 2003), the present study showed that a child's rejection by his/her social group caused an *immediate* increase in their intentions to engage in indirect aggression, but not direct aggression. Moreover, although research has shown the impact of peer provocation (e.g., frustration, teasing) on the aggression of aggressive children (e.g., Dodge, 1980), the present findings showed that peer group rejection caused a significant and immediate increase in the indirect aggressive intentions of ordinary children (i.e., those not

classified as being aggressive children) who were randomly assigned to the rejection versus acceptance conditions.

Importantly, the present findings are also consistent with Dodge and colleagues' conceptualization of reactive or retaliatory aggression (Dodge & Crick, 1990; Dodge & Coie, 1987). Thus, following ingroup rejection versus acceptance, the ingroup was disliked by the participant, and his/her indirect aggressive intentions were instigated. Interestingly, whereas the aggressive intentions displayed in the present study followed an episode of peer group rejection that was clearly intentional, it was at least accompanied by a justification to the effect that the rejected child was told that another child was preferred because his/her drawings were liked more. Given the negative response of the rejected children in the present study, it is plausible that the rejected child would have liked the ingroup even less, hence had an even greater effect on his/her tendency to aggress, if the rejection had been more arbitrary (e.g., no justification was provided, or the justification was completely irrelevant). Other research on the effects of social group rejection indicates that dislike for the ingroup is significantly influenced by the arbitrariness of the rejection justification (e.g., Nesdale et al., 2007), although its impact on aggression has not been addressed.

However, the effects of rejection versus acceptance on the participants' aggressive intentions differed when the target was a member of the *outgroup* rather than the ingroup. On the one hand, as noted above, when the rejected participant was unable to retaliate, the findings were consistent with the participant displacing his/her aggressive instigation on to the outgroup. According to the reformulated frustration-aggression hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1989), such an outcome is likely under three conditions: when the possibility of retaliation is thwarted, when there is a perceived similarity between members of the rejecting ingroup and other possible targets, and when there is little fear of punishment or retaliation (Miller, 1948). Since each of these conditions was met in the present study, the increased aggressive

intentions directed towards the outgroup would appear to be an instance of displaced reactive aggression.

On the other hand, the fact that indirect aggression intentions were also directed towards the outgroup members when participants were accepted by the ingroup indicates these aggressive intentions were an instance of proactive or instrumental aggression (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Consistent with this, according to a social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), given that the participant in the present study was a new and, perhaps, unconfident, member of the ingroup, it was plausible that s/he would display increased ingroup bias and outgroup negativity in order to contribute to the ingroup's status, as well as to strengthen their own acceptability to the group members. Moreover, as noted earlier, similar effects have been revealed in relation to prejudice expressed towards outgroups by both adults (Jetten et al., 2002; Noel et al., 1995) and children (Nesdale et al., 2007, 2009), while increased bullying has also been shown by children in order to achieve group acceptance (Sanders, Smith, & Cillessen, 2009). On this basis, in the absence of provocation (i.e., rejection from the ingroup or attack from the outgroup), there are good grounds for concluding that the participants' aggressive intentions under these conditions represent proactive or instrumental aggression (Dodge & Coie, 1987).

In sum, whereas previous research has indicated that peer group membership can instigate aggression and bullying, especially in accordance with group norms (e.g., Henry, 2001; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), the present research extends that literature, as well as the literature on peer rejection and its effects, by demonstrating that children's aggression can also be instigated by their rejection from their peer or social group. Moreover, this aggression may be directed at members of the rejecting group, or displaced on to another uninvolved target. In addition, social group accepted participants might also be motivated to display proactive aggression towards an otherwise uninvolved outgroup, in order to achieve another

outcome, such as greater acceptance by the ingroup. However, while the present findings appear to exhibit reactive, displaced reactive, and proactive aggression, one qualification should be noted. Specifically, although the present situation, and the participants' responses, appear to match the conditions typically specified for an instance of displaced reactive aggression (Berkowitz, 1989), it nevertheless must be acknowledged that the participants' responses might still have been initiated for proactive reasons. The present findings do not enable this differentiation to be made unambiguously.

Gender, age and children's aggressive intentions

The present study also assessed possible age and gender effects on the participants' aggressive intentions. The findings revealed a *participant age x peer group status* interaction effect indicating that aggressive intentions following peer group rejection were greater at 9 years than at 7 years of age, whereas there was little difference in aggressive intentions following peer group acceptance at 9 years versus 7 years of age. In addition, a significant *participant age x participant gender* interaction effect indicated that males exhibited greater aggressive intentions than females at 9, rather than 7 years of age.

These findings are consistent with other research that has revealed an increase in aggression during the middle childhood years (e.g., Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Estell, Cairns, Farmer, & Cairns, 2002), as well as greater aggression by boys than girls (e.g., Scheithauer, Hayer, Jugert & Petermann, 2006; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004). That said, the present findings did not reveal gender differences in type of aggression, as has been reported in some other studies (e.g., Cairns et al., 1989; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1994). That is, boys did not engage in more direct versus indirect aggression, with girls displaying more indirect versus direct aggression.

Although it is possible that the failure to find gender effects consistent with the foregoing simply reflects the measure of aggressive intentions used in the present study, it is

important to note that the present findings actually add to the growing number of studies that question the claim that there are clearcut gender differences in the types of aggression displayed by children (e.g., Little et al., 2003; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004). It seems that, on occasion, and in some situations, boys and girls *might* reveal differences in the types of aggression that they display, but that this is not a gender universal (see also Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004). Further research is needed to identify the conditions under which gender differences in aggression might be more consistently displayed.

Conclusions, limitations and implications

The present study revealed that peer group rejection instigated reactive aggression towards the rejecting ingroup, as well as displaced reactive aggression towards an uninvolved outgroup. In addition, peer group accepted children displayed proactive aggression towards members of the uninvolved outgroup, but not towards the ingroup.

These findings raise a number of issues. First, compared with much of the research that has assessed the relationship between peer rejection and aggression, the present study focused on children's memberships in peer groups or cliques, rather than their relationship status with the members of a class. It is clear from the accumulating evidence that social or peer groups are highly desirable to children and hence that they have a powerful impact on children's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours during middle childhood (Rubin et al., 1998). The straightforward implication is that research on children's social groups and their effects, including rejection, should therefore increase.

Second, the present study focused on the specific case of a member of a peer group being explicitly excluded from the group by the other group members, perhaps the most unambiguous instance of peer group rejection. Whereas the findings clearly shed light on the effects of such a circumstance, there are other episodes of social group rejection that also

warrant close examination, including verbal teasing and abuse, gossip, exclusion from particular group activities, and verbal isolation.

Third, the present study assessed the effectiveness of the peer group status manipulation by measuring the participants' attitudes towards the ingroup and the outgroup. However, to assess the participants' responses to their rejection versus acceptance experience directly, future research would benefit from also assessing the participants' affective state (e.g., hurt, upset, anger, frustration) directly. The direct linkage between their affective state and their subsequent aggression could then be assessed.

Fourth, in devoting more attention to children's social groups, it is evident that greater efforts need to be directed towards using paradigms that allow for a more fine-grained and causal analysis of their effects. The present paradigm sought to take a step in that direction by employing a peer group simulation that allowed for the manipulation of experimental variables (i.e., rejection versus acceptance, ingroup target versus outgroup target). However, the present peer group simulation is only an approximation of a real social group or clique. As Rubin et al (1998) pointed out, children's social groups typically include 3-9 children, are voluntary, friendship-based, and the members tend to be same-sex and same-race. In contrast, whereas the peer groups in the present study met the latter criteria, the participants were actually assigned to their group based on their drawing ability, and they didn't know, and never met, the other group members, or the outgroup members. Moreover, the study only included representatives from the dominant cultural group.

Viewed in this light, it might be considered surprising that the present study revealed such unequivocal peer group rejection versus acceptance effects. Against this, however, is research indicating that, from an early age, children are attracted to others who display a degree of similarity to themselves (Nesdale, 2007; Rubin et al., 1998) and that, in the present study, the participants shared similarities with the other members in terms of their age,

gender, ethnicity, physical attractiveness, and drawing ability. Apparently, this was sufficient to promote a sense of group membership and ingroup liking in the participants. In the present study, however, this sense of ingroup membership was shattered in those participants who were subsequently rejected by the group, resulting in their heightened reactive aggression. On this basis, it appears that social group simulations that allow for experimental manipulations hold considerable promise as research paradigms for studying social groups and their effects on aggression.

Fifth, compared with a real-world experience of rejection, participants in the present study did not have the option of choosing to aggress against the instigators (i.e., the rejecting peer group) versus aggressing against the uninvolved members of an outgroup or individual bystanders. Instead, the only option presented to them was that of indicating their level of aggressive intentions (or not) towards the ingroup *or* the outgroup. Future research should assess children's aggressive intentions following peer group rejection when both of these possible targets, as well as individual bystanders, are available to them.

Sixth, whereas much of the extant research has focused on children who suffer chronic rejection, the participants in the present study were randomly selected children who were randomly assigned to the social group rejection or acceptance conditions. Thus, any differences between the participants in their pre-existing status relationships with their peers (i.e., those who experienced little versus occasional versus chronic rejection) were experimentally controlled by the participants' random assignment to the experimental conditions. Consequently, the effects associated with peer group status in the present study were unambiguously due to the causal effect of the experimental manipulation of social group rejection versus acceptance. These findings indicate that ordinary children, not just those who suffer chronic rejection, react with negative affect to a peer group rejection

experience. Presumably, children who are chronically aggressive would react with even greater and more immediate intensity to such a peer group rejection episode.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the present study focused on children's aggressive intentions rather than their actual aggression. This choice of measure reflected the ethical issues inherent in measuring children's actual aggression, especially in an experimental study. Indeed, because of this problem, researchers have made recourse to a wide range of indicators of children's aggression, including hitting Bobo dolls and other soft toys (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963), thematic analyses of interview descriptions of conflicts (Cairns et al., 1989), self-, peer- and/or teacher-ratings of aggression (Crick et al., 1997; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004), and analyses of verbal, facial and gestural responses (Underwood, 2002).

Aggressive intentions were used in the present study as yet another index of children's instigation to aggression, following their preceding experience of peer group rejection or acceptance. Although the extent to which the children's aggressive intentions would predict their actual aggression is unknown, consistent with earlier findings (Dodge & Frame, 1982), the results indicated that neither the participants' indirect nor direct aggressive intentions were high in absolute terms (being in the bottom 30% of the range), suggesting that enacting indirect and direct aggressive behaviours are not automatic or high probability responses by most young children (Rubin et al., 1998). That said, as might be anticipated, the participants' indirect aggressive intentions were certainly higher than their direct aggressive intentions, and the peer group status manipulation produced explicable effects on their indirect aggressive intentions.

In sum, the present research indicates that peer group rejection has a direct, immediate and causal effect on young children's tendencies towards aggression, especially indirect aggression. In addition, the research indicates that, whereas such a provocation is most likely

to prompt a reactive aggressive response towards the instigators (in this case, the rejecting ingroup), it may be displaced on to uninvolved individuals or outgroup members if retaliation against the instigators is not possible. Finally, the research indicates that even newly accepted members of a group may display aggressive intentions towards uninvolved individuals or outgroup members, presumably with the intention of confirming their acceptability to, and cementing their place in, the ingroup.

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Author Notes

Copies of the full set of vignettes used in the study may be obtained from the first author at the School of Psychology, Gold Coast Campus, Griffith University, Southport 4222, Queensland Australia.

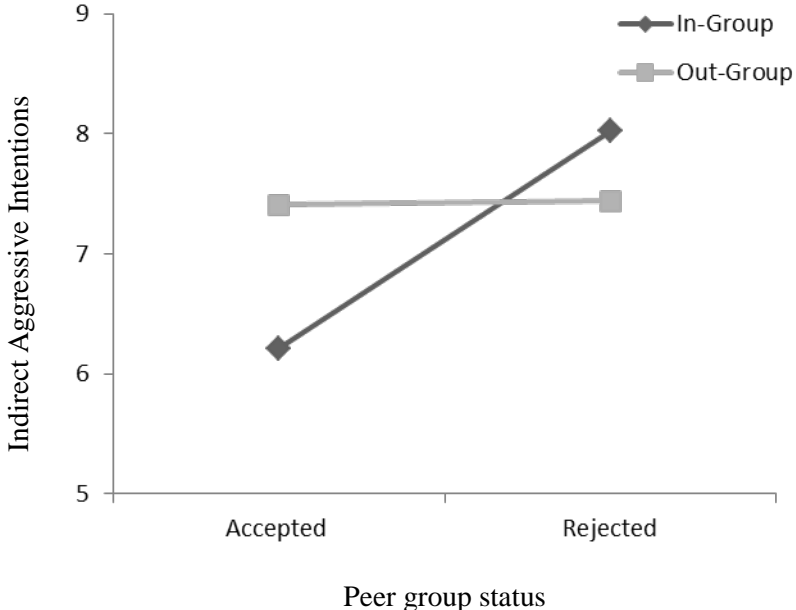
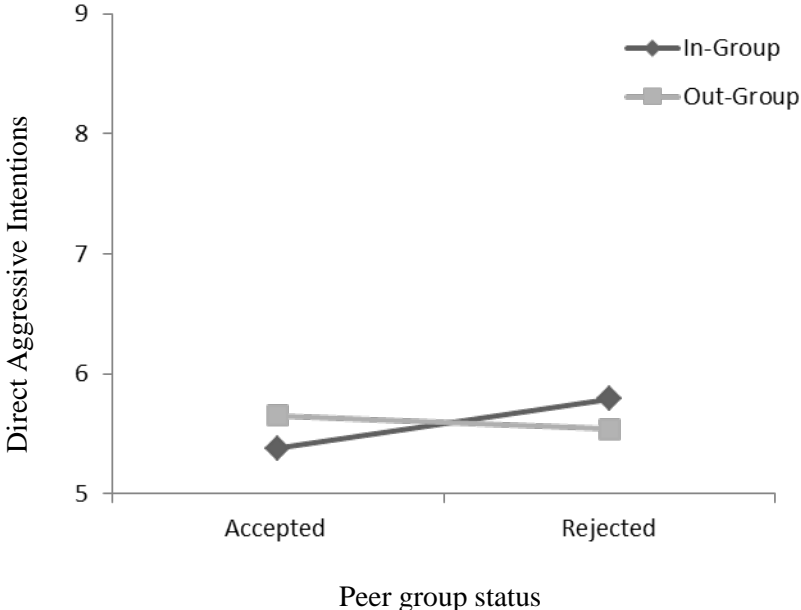


Figure 1. Aggression type x peer group status x aggression target interaction effect on participants' mean aggressive intentions.