Examining the Impact of Social Behavior on Peer Status

Sharon L. Foster
West Virginia University

Scholars and practitioners have devoted considerable attention during the last decade to the creation of and evaluating programs for enhancing children's peer relations. These efforts are based on the assumption that peer acceptance and rejection are the direct results of how children interact with their peers. Assuming this hypothesis to be true, creating an effective social skills training program requires specifying those behaviors functionally related to peer status. In other words, investigators must isolate pivotal social behaviors which children of different ages need to acquire to function effectively with peers in situations they routinely encounter. This requires in turn that they develop methods for deciding which of the myriad of interpersonal behaviors cause fluctuations in peer acceptance.

In examining the functional effects of behavior on peer acceptance, several factors must be considered (Foster, 1983), each of which has been shown to relate to children's evaluations of and responses to social behavior. The first, of course, is the nature of the behavior itself. In addition, the situational context of the behavior must be examined, together with child characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race) that may influence the results of the behavior on others. The nature of the outcome produced by the behavior defines its function, and can be explored in terms of who the behavior effects, who judges its effects, and whether short or long-term impact is emphasized. Further, it is important to isolate behaviors that are causally (not merely correlationally) related to peer acceptance and rejection.

Various research methods have examined which behaviors exert greatest influence on peer status. Perhaps the earliest and most popular method involves correlational studies, in which numbers of positive and negative peer nominations received by children are correlated with rates of behavior (e.g., Vaughn & Waters, 1981). With a similar strategy, the known-group comparison, investigators compare the behavior of groups of accepted, rejected, average, and (sometimes) neglected and controversial children in naturalistic settings (e.g., Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982). The best of these studies compare behavior in different situations (e.g., Dodge et al., 1982), sometimes finding only minimal correlations in behavior across situations (Foster & Ritchey, 1985). Most of these studies have been limited, however, by their relatively molar categorizations of behaviors and situations, although a few recent studies have examined child behavior in more specific situations (e.g., a peer group entry task; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). Perhaps the most important limitation of correlational and known-group studies is that behaviors associated with peer status are only correlates: although behavior is a plausible cause of status, it is also possible that the experience of rejection or acceptance produced the child's behavior.

Deriving more precise information requires more specific examination of behaviors and situations using designs that permit stronger causal inferences. Short-term longitudinal play
Sharon Foster

Group studies, pioneered by Coie and Kupersmidt (1983) and Dodge (1983), examine behavior in a single situation: peer play. In Coie and Kupersmidt's study, boys interacted during a series of hour-long play sessions after school. Trained observers coded videotapes of boys' play session behavior. Research assistants drove each child home after each session and casually asked who the boy liked and did not like, thus gathering sociometric data. By observing the evolution of peer status among previously unacquainted children, stronger cause-effect statements about the relationship between behavior and peer status could be made than with known-groups comparisons. Indeed, even when placed in groups of unacquainted peers, boys who were rejected by classroom peers re-established their rejected status after about two group sessions. Concomitent with this, rejected boys displayed more aversive physical and verbal behavior than did boys who were popular with peers. Similarly, Dodge (1983) found that boys who became rejected displayed higher rates (relative to boys who attained average status) of inappropriate play, hostile verbalizations, hitting peers, and excluding others, while having lower rates of social conversation.

Despite the advances made possible by this methodology, the behavior of participants was still evaluated in the context of other behaviors. In the Dodge study, for example, rejected boys' high rates of aggression occurred in the context of lower social conversation, and it is unclear how these individual behaviors-- alone and in combination--influenced peer judgments. Furthermore, friendship and liking judgments in settings like schools are preceded by a history of interactions comprised of diverse positive and negative behaviors, again highlighting the potential importance of the social-behavioral context in evaluating the impact of a given response.

Experimental studies document that the behavioral context can influence the social impact of behavior. In some investigations of this kind (e.g., DiLorenzo & Foster, 1984), two children are videotaped following scripts that manipulate behavior (e.g., refusal of requests vs. compliance vs. neutral behavior) and contextual variables (e.g., provocative vs. cooperative initiation by a peer). Other children unfamiliar with the child actors view the videotapes and provide sociometric ratings of the actors. This method enables the investigator to control both behavior and situation, and to isolate causal relations between behavior and sociometric ratings. The results of these studies demonstrate the importance of the behavioral context: compliance with another's request, for example, leads to higher peer ratings than noncompliance, unless it is accompanied by critical remarks. In the behavioral context of criticism, compliance has no influence on peer ratings (Ritchey, 1981).

Experimental studies sacrifice external validity for experimental control, and thus the generalizability of these studies is questionable. A final method used to explore behaviors that influence liking borrows a strategy called the "critical incidents technique" from industrial-organizational psychology. With this strategy, interviewers ask children to describe recent incidents where a peer behaved in a way that made the subject like the peer more (or less) (see Foster, DeLawyer, & Guevremont, 1986). Content analyses of children's responses permit the investigator to examine responses that are salient and/or frequent for children. If situational descriptions are obtained, profiles of liked and disliked behaviors within particular situations can be derived (see Zarbatany, Rankin, & Hartmann, this volume). Despite high face validity of responses, however, the method leads to questions about whether children are able to verbalize those factors that actually cause shifts in liking and whether their reports are accurate. Furthermore, the fact that most children cite events (both positive and negative) involving friends leads to questions about whether the behaviors subjects describe would have the same effects if performed by disliked peers.

Despite different methodologies, none of which is flawless, the results of various studies show considerable convergence regarding the behaviors associated with peer rejection.