Self-Perceptions of Unpopularity in Adolescence: Links to Past and Current Adjustment

Elaine Cohen, Ph.D., Helen Z. Reinherz, Sc.D., and Abbie K. Frost, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT: Self-perceptions of unpopularity in 404 high school students were found to reflect current emotional and behavioral distress. The authors studied these youths from ages 9 to 15 to examine early risks and current factors associated with perceptions of unpopularity. Feelings of unpopularity in middle childhood increased the risk of similar feelings in adolescence. However, self-reports of unpopularity at age 9 were not strong predictors of emotional and anti-social problems at age 15. Identification of unpopular adolescents and recommendations for future practice and research are proposed.

Background of the Study

In adolescence, peer relationships are extremely important for future adjustment. As part of their social and emotional development, adolescents characteristically turn from their families to peers as they strive for independence and autonomy. Adolescents who perceive themselves to be unpopular experience painful feelings of rejection, loneliness, isolation, and low self-esteem. They may also engage less in interactions with their peers, with the accompanying deficits in development. For it is through peers, and especially friends, that young people learn "to become interpersonally sensitive, how to han-
dle intimacy, and ways to achieve mutual understanding” (Youniss, 1980, p.1). With peers, youngsters learn that social rules and expectations are created through mutual consensual validation with others, and that these social systems can be modified (Piaget, 1965). Through encounters with peers, a new concept of self and other develops, and youngsters learn reciprocity (Youniss, 1980).

In their clinical practice with adolescents who feel disliked and rejected, social workers are keenly aware of youngsters' needs and desires for inclusion among peers for support, validation, and information as they progress in forming identities as mature adults. Therefore, social workers continually seek understanding of the bases of unpopularity and strategies to help these youngsters gain acceptance.

Despite theories and studies attesting to the importance of peer relationships, there is little literature on self-perceptions of unpopularity among teen-agers. Self-perceived unpopularity refers to beliefs held by adolescents that they are rejected or excluded from peer interactions. Most prior studies have identified unpopular youth by ratings of teachers, researchers, or by sociometric choices of peers. Since interactions of adolescents with their peers are not often fully observed or correctly interpreted by others, adolescents' own self-ratings or perceptions may provide a fuller understanding of the associations between peer relations and later maladjustment (Hymel & Franke, 1985).

Although several characteristics have been related to low peer status or unpopularity in earlier research, there is no clearly developed profile of the unpopular adolescent. Giammarino, Wright, and Parad (1986) note that the literature on personality assessment and social status has not led to trait measures that consistently predict social behavior or sociometric status. Therefore, it is important that unpopularity should be studied as a separate entity, since it may not be a pole in the continuum from popularity to unpopularity (Giammarino et al., 1986; Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1967).

**Peer Status Related to Poor Functioning**

A number of negative concomitants and outcomes have been found to be related to low peer status. Among studies generally based on observations of others, unpopularity or low peer status has been associated with negative emotional, behavioral, and social characteristics