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Being Left Out: Rejecting Outsiders and Communicating Group Boundaries in Childhood and Adolescent Peer Groups

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Although communication scholars have examined adult group processes, they have paid little attention to the peer group experiences of children and adolescents. Successfully gaining entry to peer groups is significant, in that rejection in childhood affects self-concept, social skills, and school successes. Guided by a bona fide groups perspective, this study collected over 600 adolescent accounts of group rejection. Narrative accounts revealed five strategies peer groups used to communicate rejection (Ignoring, Disqualifying, Insulting, Blaming, and Creating New Rules). Rejection was stressful for observers as well as rejectees, with females, Caucasians, and regularly-excluded students reporting highest levels. Females and those frequently rejected reported the most stress when observing the rejection of others. Specific interventions are discussed for primary and middle-school teachers to stimulate prosocial group inclusion.

Keywords: Peer Groups; Rejection; Adolescents; Children; Bona Fide Groups; Exclusion; Group Boundaries; Social Stress

> I have always had a passionate feeling about injustice and being excluded. I was the youngest of four sons and having skipped grades several times, I was the youngest in my classes throughout my school years. In many situations, I was excluded or was the underdog. As a result, I developed a strong identification with and empathy for the downtrodden in the world. (Morton Deutsch, founding social justice research scholar, 1995, p. 371)

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> I think that they excluded me because they just judge people by the outside, but those people are wrong. You should get to know people more. (Participant, 14-year-old Asian American female)

School days are anxiety-ridden and lonely for those children and adolescents who are frequently rejected by peer groups. Childhood is embedded in groups; children are born into a primary group, learn in classroom groups, socialize in play groups, compete in group athletics, identify territorially with neighborhood groups, worship in both peer and mixed-age groups, collaborate as youthful citizens in scout troops, and reproduce social structures in cliques. Yet, a hidden culture of social cruelty exists in peer groups, as evidenced by the rich anecdotal narratives collected by one writer about the culture of aggression and exclusion among teenage girls (Simmons, 2002). Describing the social phenomenon of the *odd girl out*, Simmons talked to both rejected and rejecting teens and uncovered painful behaviors in girls' cliques that teachers rarely notice. When young teenage girls appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to admit their ongoing roles in provoking painful group exclusion of others (Hudson, 2002), the audience and their parents were shocked. The manner in which social cruelty is perpetuated by peer groups was poignantly described by middle-school students, on ABC's 20/20 (Stossel, 2002), as children described their desperate goal of gaining access to the *in* crowd, even at the cost of hurting others.

A significant portion of any child or adolescent's life unfolds and develops in the context of small groups, and, in addition, adult attitudes towards group work are affected by childhood group experiences (Sinclair-James & Stohl, 1997; Socha & Socha, 1994), since individuals enter new groups carrying perceptual schemas shaped by previous groups (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991). Antecedent experiences with groups affect subsequent intragroup processes and member adjustments (Moreland, 1985). This may be related, in part, to the fact that rejection during social play may be the forerunner of all rejections later in life (Paley, 1992), so rejection effects are individually compounded. Some children and adolescents endure intense social pain but grow from it, whereas others report feeling socially paralyzed and crushed (Thompson & Grace, 2001).

At its terrible extreme, the rage of a rejected child has the potential to produce either other-directed violence or self-directed punishment. The National Institute of Mental Health (2000) reported that suicide continued to be the third leading cause of death among young people 15 to 24 years of age (following unintentional injuries and homicide), with a gender ratio of four males for every female death. This gender ratio continues in recent high profile school shootings, which are frequently accompanied by reports of peer exclusion. Group communication scholars have overlooked the unexpressed pain inflicted on children and adolescents by peer group rejection, despite strong lines of research from educational and developmental psychology confirming the dysfunctional effects of repeated group rejection (Asher & Coie, 1990; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). Keyton (1994) urged the communication discipline to take the lead in developing lines of research that

examine communication in children's groups, yet few studies have emerged from that call.

Group rejection is a silent social stress of childhood. Children and adolescents repeatedly rejected from participation and membership in groups spend more time isolated and consequently have fewer opportunities for social growth or the development of social skills (Hartup, 1995, 1996), increasing the probability of future rejection and antisocial behavior (Dodge et al., 2003). Classrooms increasingly rely on small learning groups; hence, rejected children have less opportunity for the development of instructional skills or access to resources. Ironically, the successful entry into childhood peer groups is a prerequisite for interpersonal interactions and constitutes a critical task of development (Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990).

Group scholars have been challenged to utilize a wider lens to view the expansive array of groups across the life span (Socha, 1999), and, in fact, dysfunctional group behavior scripts from childhood may resurface in adult groups (French & Stright, 1991). Keyton and Frey (2002) have recently called for further research conceptualizing the development of predispositions toward groups by potential members and the extent to which prior group experiences may affect member emotions relating to groups. Communication scholars, however, have largely failed to acknowledge and value the group experiences of children (Keyton, 1994; Socha & Socha, 1994) and have instead relied on adult groups for research.

The study reported here is a response to those calls to bring children into the group scholarship agenda. A review of the cross-disciplinary literature provides a foundation for this study. We then take a communication perspective on the peer group rejection message from the receiver's perspective. The analyses of 682 first-hand adolescent accounts of group exclusion events and the stress that accompanied group rejection are presented. Finally, we offer specific applied intervention strategies for primary and middle-school teachers to stimulate prosocial group inclusion.

Communication in Childhood Peer Groups

To provide a foundation for this study, we begin by reviewing the literature concerning communication in childhood groups and findings related to immediate and longer term effects of early peer group rejection. Our focus then turns to the research on peer group rejection in childhood and adolescence.

Communication in Childhood Groups

Research relating to childhood groups has emerged primarily from educational and developmental psychology and has generally involved observations of preschool or early elementary play groups, sociometric nominations, or hypothetic scenarios. Gigliotti (1988), for instance, examined task-group behavior in triads among chil-

dren ranging in age from 3 to 8. He observed no gender differences in verbal activities during the task (create and operate a grocery store) at this age, which suggests that later differences may be related to gender socialization norms. Gigliotti suggested children of this age are both ready for group interaction and capable of group skill training but lack sufficient prosocial behavioral models, but no suggestions has to how this might be specifically accomplished or with what effects were offered.

Consistent with this view are the findings of French and Stright (1991), who found that children favored leadership styles in task groups that could be characterized as either diplomacy or bullying, and frequently rejected formal leadership roles for members who dominated group discussions. More recently, Yamaguchi (2001) studied the emergence of leadership and group effectiveness in children's cooperative learning groups. Using a sample of 30 participants from fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classrooms, the investigation created three-member learning groups, in which a math task manipulated instructions either to "learn and improve" or "see who was best." The intragroup competitive condition affected the emergence of leadership: One member dominated or bullied and took over the group process. In the learning condition, prosocial leadership emerged, which tended to be shared and distributed throughout the performance of the task. Further, the learning condition groups were more effective in completing the math task (as measured by their arithmetical strategies and positive communications); competitive groups were less effective, ostensibly because of the friction created by dysfunctional communication and task strategies.

Young children reportedly demonstrate early gender preferences for play groups. For instance, Martin, Fabes, Evans, and Wyman (1999), in studying 92 girls and 92 boys ranging in age from 41 months to 82 months, determined that children believed that their own behavior was more likely to be approved of when they played with same-sex peer groups and reported strong same-sex play preferences. In addition, Socha and Socha (1994) investigated the kinds of children's behavior in formal task groups and the extent to which communication among members was encouraged. While utilizing an admittedly small sample (41 families, with a total of 57 children ages 5–9), they coded taped discussions using Bales's IPA. The results revealed that the children spent the majority of their time engaged in group activities directed toward individual rather than group skill development, with talk sometimes being discouraged within the groups. Observable group processes included uneven turn-taking, simultaneous talk, shouting suggestions, whispering and planning in dyads, marginalizing some group members, difficulties handling conflict and dividing tasks, and inability to efficiently use time.

These studies describe the lack of prosocial models for children in play groups, the leadership preferences of preschoolers, and early gender preferences in group members. None of these studies, however, provide much insight into naturally occurring childhood peer group processes in situations in which adults are not present and children are free to negotiate group membership.

Effects of Social Exclusion

Child development scholars agree that peer rejection is a significant factor in social and cognitive development—with outcomes that include poor school performance, delinquent behavior, depression, physical illnesses, and impaired adult relationships (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Prior studies have often focused on adult accounts of childhood traumas, sociograms that provoke forced-choice popularity poles among elementary children (Wood, Cowan, & Baker, 2002), or observer accounts of young children's playground behavior (Asher & Coie, 1990; Asher et al., 1990; Berndt, 1996; Greenspan, 1993; Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). Such studies have shown that rejected children may become less talkative and more aggressive (Matthews, 1996). Recently, Wood et al. (2002) described rejected preschool children as being more noncompliant, hyperactive, and socially withdrawn than other children. Similarly, Parker and Asher (1993) discovered that low peer group acceptance of fifth grade children predicted higher self-ratings of loneliness, though how group rejection is experienced or explained by the rejected child was not examined. At the same time, lower levels of preadolescent peer rejection appear to be predictive of overall life status adjustment, including general self-worth (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998)—though we know little about the cause-and-effect dynamics of this relationship. Prior research has largely focused on the left-out child as the problem, rather than the group, and assumes that poor social skills or aggressive behavior trigger exclusion (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Asher et al., 1990; Koeppl, 1990).

Describing the experiences of three children in elementary school, Matthews (1996) reported ineffective attempts by children at group inclusion, as well as their unique individual coping strategies (e.g., persisting in attempts to be included, playing alone, or demonstrating aggressive behavior). Matthews concluded that effects of group exclusion on individuals in the classroom are complex, with relevant variables including a child's independent desire for peer interaction, competence in critical learning abilities, and whether or not there exists at least one other child with whom the left-out child can interact. While these variables are important ones to suggest, no applied guidelines are offered as to how teachers in the classroom might more successfully manage the complexity of social exclusion. Hodges, Malone, and Perry (1997) studied 229 children in the third through seventh grades. Childhood behavior problems related more strongly to peer group rejection when a child had fewer friends and was not well liked, from which the authors also concluded that the particular effects of individual rejection risk variables depend on a complex social context. Again, however, caution is required in interpreting cause-and-effect dynamics; this study does not advance our knowledge about how the rejected child makes sense of peer group rejection.

Rejection histories affect the expectations and strategies of children and adolescents as they face future attempts at group inclusion and alter their interpretations of ambiguous social events. Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, and Freitas (1998), for example, investigated the sensitivity of children to rejection in a series of studies

involving urban minority (Hispanic and African American) fifth to seventh grade students. In hypothetical scenarios, children who angrily expected rejection demonstrated heightened distress following an ambiguously-intentioned rejection by a peer. Further, rejection-sensitive children were more aggressive (as reported by teachers), engaged in troubled interpersonal relationships, and declined in academic performance over time. Persistent peer group rejection of rejection-sensitive children may explain why some adults more readily attribute hostile intent to other people. Again, however, the important voice of the overly-rejected child is not visible; moreover the more complex dynamics and emotions of real world rejection cannot be contained in hypothetical stories. Importantly, childhood rejection histories may actually trigger a reputational bias in peer groups. Group members allegedly respond more favorably to popular than unpopular children's entry overtures, even when the outsider children use similar entry strategies (Dodge, Schlundt, Schocken, & Delugach, 1983; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981).

Recently, Dodge et al. (2003) discovered that peer group rejection in early elementary school was associated with later antisocial aggressive behavior (even when they controlled for antisocial acts occurring before rejection experiences). In a longitudinal four-study design involving 259 early elementary children, followed by another study with 585 children, these investigators reported that antisocial behavior subsequent to rejection was equally apparent among boys and girls and was partially accounted for by a child's tendency to develop biased patterns of processing social information as a result of peer group rejection. We do not know, however, whether pre-existing aggressive behaviors were merely accelerated by group rejection, or whether any interventions might alter a rejected child's biased processing of social exclusion. Buhs and Ladd (2001), studying the relationship between peer rejection and children's academic adjustment during kindergarten, reported that rejected children were more likely to report loneliness, express a desire to avoid school, and decrease their classroom participation. Such outcomes highlight the need for an applied communication approach to understanding how the rejected child experiences the attempt to gain entry.

Research has thus shown that childhood social exclusion is complex, but seems to be predictive of life adjustments, general self-worth, later aggressive behaviors, and academic achievement, including attitudes towards school and learning; that children are frequently ineffective at attempts to gain inclusion; and that rejection histories affect strategies in future attempts at group inclusion, as well as altering an individual's interpretations of ambiguous social events. Although specific outcomes of peer group rejection in childhood have been measured and observed, the communication dynamics of the rejection event in situ remain largely unexplored.

Peer Group Rejection

An early study of attempts at boundary penetration in laboratory-constructed groups was that of Phillips, Shenker, and Revitz (1951). They investigated childhood group assimilation as a strategic process and conceptualized the task of group entry for new

children as one of reducing the discrepancy between the other group members and themselves. They studied group entry attempts of newcomer 6- and 7-year-old girls into experimentally-formed pre-acquainted 3-member groups that met for six 30-minute sessions. They found that it was the newcomer who attempted to communicate with the other children, rather than the group members initiating or even reciprocating those efforts. Rarely did any group member solicit comments or concerns of the new child or take the newcomer into account in their activities, which confirmed that physical inclusion in groups does not translate into real inclusion.

What happens, however, when the group is a familiar one to the new member? The earliest work examining communication strategies to gain entry into familiar groups was by Mallay (1935), who recorded behavior culminating in successful entry into social groups in nursery school, by means of on-site observation. He defined success as maintained group contact, with successful behaviors including vocalizations (statements or laughter), physical contact (directly or using objects), parallel activity (independent side-by-side engagement in related activity), and cooperative activity (engagement in related interdependent or supplemental activity). The pattern most successful in gaining group entry consisted of combinations of regard (looking at another child) with parallel play or vocalization.

Forbes, Katz, Paul, and Lubin (1982) explored developmental and gender differences in the ways children sequenced their actions when attempting to join peer groups. They employed a design in which 24 unfamiliar children (ages 5 or 7) formed 6-member play groups, homogeneous by age, meeting for twelve 1-hour sessions over three weeks. Videotaped records revealed a variety of group entry behavior. Boys, for instance, were more likely than girls to employ forceful strategies (that is, displaying one's own qualities, asserting superiority over group members, or criticizing group members). Following negative feedback from the group, boys were also more likely than girls to engage in face-saving behavior or appeal to playroom norms mandating acceptance. By age 7, girls were more apt to accommodate to the group following rejection (e.g., making neutral comments to the group about themselves, or asking permission to join the group). Pope, Bierman, and Mumma (1991) reported that the most powerful predictor of peer rejection for boys in third through sixth grades was undercontrolled behaviors (i.e., aggression, hyperactivity, or inattention-immaturity). Studies have consistently shown that, in addition, persistence and behaving in a manner consistent with the group members are likely to result in eventual group acceptance (e.g., Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990).

Children's behaviors in response to rejection may not match their social values. For instance, in one investigation, when preschool children were individually interviewed about hypothetical exclusion and inclusion from a group, they evaluated exclusion based on gender as wrong (Killen, Pisacane, Lee-Kim, & Ardila-Rey, 2001). Also examining the moral dimensions of rejection, Theimer, Killen, and Stangor (2001) discovered that preschool children are already forming moral rules and social exclusion, as children consistently rated gender exclusion as morally wrong. Adolescents may also claim social values that do not match their peer group's

behavior. Horn (2003) investigated adolescents' reasoning concerning issues involving social exclusion on the basis of reference groups and the factors that influence such reasoning. Using hypotheticals, Horn surveyed 319 high school students concerning a member of a high-status or low-status group being denied school resources (scholarship or a free school trip) or group membership (cheerleading, basketball, or student council). She reported that ninth and 11th graders viewed the exclusion from social groups on the basis of some other peer group membership (high-status or low-status) as wrong. In addition, in one of the rare studies to attempt observation of peer rejection acts, Arnold, Homrok, Ortiz, and Stowe (1999) videotaped 86 preschool children and determined that preschool children were likely to reject others after aggressive acts by the outsider.

Paley (1992) conducted the seminal ethnographic study of children's exclusionary behavior in both a kindergarten and fourth grade class. Relying upon the active participation of students, Paley began by talking to her class about exclusion and friendships and asking their opinions about a rule that said, "You can't say you can't play." She discovered that some children voiced strong opinions about the right to exclude others in their social play, resisted formal inclusion rules, but were ultimately moved by Paley's use of storytelling interventions that allowed rejected children to share their rejection experiences. She concluded that teacher-initiated inclusion rules were most effective when instituted in kindergarten or first grade, after full discussion with children in the classroom.

Extending Paley's work, Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, and Mastin (1998a) studied four elementary classrooms (kindergarten to fourth grades), with students representing a range of socioeconomic, religious, ability, and ethnic backgrounds. They attempted to determine whether teachers could alter group social patterns by enforcing Paley's "you can't say" rule that had been designed to promote support group inclusion. The results varied not only across classrooms, but also across grade levels. First, classrooms in which teachers invoked the rule of inclusion consistently demonstrated an increase in overall pro-social behavior of students, even though the rule was not a cure-all, as enactment of the rule emerged only over time and after classroom discussions concerning *how* to include others. Second, for the inclusionary group rule to work, students had to trigger it by attempting inclusion. Teachers emphasized two things: (a) for group outsiders, models for acceptable ways of requesting group inclusion; and (b) for group insiders, encouragement to notice that another child was on the periphery, perhaps hoping to be included.

The specific dynamics of rejection investigated to date have included the finding that, in early childhood, it is generally the child seeking inclusion who must initiate communication with the group, that the most successful group entry attempts at this age are characterized by a combination of looking at another child, parallel play, and talking to the group, and that successful sequencing of behaviors that gain entry include aggressive behaviors (boys) and accommodation (girls). Children demonstrate their social values during rejection events, including gender preferences, distribution of scarce resources, attitudes towards aggression, and the right to choose

one's social friends. As a result, it is apparent that when researchers speak of rejected children as a type of child (such as artistic children or introverted children), the rich dynamics of rejection as an interpersonal communication event, performed by more than one person, may be obscured. We still know little about the rejection event itself and how it is constructed and experienced through communication.

A Communication Perspective for the Study of Childhood Peer Groups

The study reported here reflects a communication perspective for the study of naturally occurring childhood and adolescent peer group rejection events. Consequently, the focus turns to messages sent, as well as the receiver's experience of rejection messages, rather than the observable scholastic or psychological outcomes.

In addition, our study was influenced by a bona fide groups perspective (BFGP), which challenges the view of groups as fixed containers and suggests instead that groups exist in dynamic interrelationship with their environments (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, 1996). One of the strengths of BFGP lies in its recognition of two significant characteristics of groups: (a) permeable boundaries; and (b) interdependence with the social contexts in which they are embedded. BFGP suggests that boundaries are changed, redefined, and negotiated by members through, among other factors, fluctuations in membership (Putnam & Stohl, 1996). Group boundaries are symbolic, socially constructed through interactions, penetrable, and continually redefined and negotiated—in part, as a function of group identity formation and re-formation. How members communicate a group's boundaries and the stress resulting from group entry attempts were the focus of this preliminary investigation into peer group rejection. A focus on naturally-occurring groups, boundary permeability, and the negotiation of group identity renders the bona fide groups perspective relevant for increasing our understanding of group rejection in childhood. For our first research question, we drew upon the BFGP, focusing attention on boundary construction and negotiation:

> RQ1: How do children and adolescents communicate peer group boundaries to unwanted children who attempt to join their groups?

One of our goals was to extend the work of child development scholars, who have found that peer rejection is an interpersonal stressor, with long-term adverse impact for some (Dodge et al., 2003), by connecting the stress outcome with a specific interpersonal communication event (failed group entry event). We were interested in expanding knowledge about level of stress involved for a neglected category—those who watch group rejection—as well as those who are rejected. Consequently, the following two research questions also guided this study:

> RQ2: How stressful is group rejection for children and adolescents attempting to join peer groups?

> RQ3: How stressful is watching group rejection of outsiders for the peer group members?

Method

Respondents

In the study, 682 adolescents (377 males, 301 females, and 4 undeclared) from one private ($n = 139$), two public ($n = 481$), and two continuation ($n = 50$) high schools (grades 9–12), from large urban school districts in northern California, comprised a convenience sample. The high schools were located in diverse communities having residents with various linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The sample ranged in age from 13 to 19 ($Mdn = 14$). From self-reported ethnic identities, 41.3% were Caucasian/White, 18.8% Asian American, 24.2% Hispanic American, 5.7% African American, and 10.0% other. Some participants did not report demographic information.

Procedure

After securing human subjects research committee approval, we sought permission from various school district administrators to conduct a survey. Upon receiving district level approval, we contacted high school principals and teachers for potential participation, involving only teachers who volunteered at the beginning of the school year and expressed an interest in the subject matter of the research. Both written parental and student consent were required before the instrument was administered, and we prepared a letter explaining the study to parents and students. We told the students again in class that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time as they read the questions. We appeared at the participating schools, were introduced by the regular classroom teacher, and administered self-report questionnaires to students in classroom-size groups during normal class periods. We introduced the study as one focusing on how people respond to social dilemmas that deal with being left out. If students did not have written parental permission or agree to participate, they worked on school-related activities at their desks, which their teachers had previously designed. Classrooms typically had 30–40 students; the highest number of nonparticipating students in any single class was six. The questionnaire required approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Measuring Instrument

The data reported herein were part of a larger investigation of social exclusion. The questionnaire consisted of sections containing both free-response and closed-ended items organized into three parts.

The first section included four open-ended questions that examined participants' (a) experiences of being excluded from groups they had attempted to enter; (b) experiences of excluding others who were attempting to enter their group; (c) experiences of passively watching another child in their group exclude someone who was trying to enter; and (d) personal rules for excluding others from groups. For this study, one narrative item was analyzed: "Think of a time when a group of people

excluded you and it hurt your feelings. What did someone in that group *say or do* (behavior and/or words) that let you know you would not be included?" and "At that time (not what you may believe now), why did you think you were being excluded?"

The second section consisted of 11 items, for which students recorded responses on five- and seven-point scales. Two items index participants' self-reported frequency of being excluded ($M = 2.56$, $SD = .90$) and excluding others ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .73$) on five-point scales ranging from *never* (1) to *constantly* (5). The next items analyzed related to participants' self-reported stress when being excluded ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.51$) and when witnessing (but not participating in) the exclusion of others ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.56$). To explore whether reported stress changes over time, stress items were evaluated across three age levels (0–10, 11–13, 14–19 years). Students made responses on seven-point scales, with a score of one representing *not at all stressful* and a score of seven representing *definitely stressful*. Given we did not examine developmental patterns, the stress measures were collapsed across age to form one composite measure of stress per item: (a) being excluded ("How stressful was if for you to be excluded, when you wanted to be a part of a group or activity" Cronbach's alpha = .81); and (b) witnessing the exclusion of others ("As you think about it now, how stressful was if for you to watch someone else be excluded when they wanted to be part of a group or activity?" Cronbach's alpha = .84).

The third section asked for basic demographic information such as age, gender, and ethnic heritage, as well as provided an optional opportunity to offer any additional thoughts or feelings about being left out that participants felt were important. This space allowed us to collect evidence of thoughts, opinions, or stories prompted by the immediate experience of participating in the study.

Data Analysis

Statistical as well as narrative thematic analyses contributed to answering this study's research questions. Our discussion of the narrative analyses are linked to the data and reported in the results section. With respect to the quantitative data, we analyzed the rank order of perceived stress (more or less) and used nonparametric methods (Sheskin, 1997). As Siegel and Castellan (1988) note, nonparametric tests are appropriate when "numerical scores have the strength of ranks. That is, the researcher may be able to say of his or her subjects that one has more or less of the characteristic than another, without being able to say how much more or less" (p. 35). Given that peer rejection is not evenly distributed or similarly experienced, our interest was not in the central tendencies, but rather in the relationship between perceived elevated, moderate and low levels of stress. As a result, we used a median split procedure and collapsed the stress level continuum into three categories: (a) moderate level of stress (mean stress level score = 4.66 for being excluded and 4 for watching exclusion); (b) low stress (mean stress level < 4.66 and < 4 for watching exclusion); and (c) elevated stress (mean stress level > 4.66 and > 4 for watching exclusion).

Results

To understand how peer group members communicate boundaries to outsiders (RQ1), we analyzed the themes in participants' accounts, on the basis of Owen's (1984) three-part criteria: (a) recurring themes (same thread of meaning, with different wording); (b) repeated themes (repetition of key words or phrases); or (c) forcefulness (examining these handwritten accounts for italics, underlining, capital letters, increased size, circling, or inserted symbols and drawings). Using an inductive approach to our adolescent participants, we began by reading all 682 accounts several times. We made sense of the data in terms of first-order explanations from students' own answers and second-order explanations through our eyes as researchers. We took a bottom-up approach in analyzing responses by collecting short responses about similar events and then examining these responses for what they revealed about the communication relating to rejection of outsiders who were attempting to join existing groups. Once we identified broad themes, we looked for connections among them and issues concerning group peer rejection and group identity. We collapsed several themes into single categories when similar communication dynamics were present (i.e., *lying* and *rule-changing* became the communication theme *creating new rules*).

Communication of Peer Group Boundaries

Of the 682 participants in this study, 90% ($n = 612$) shared specific hurtful accounts of being excluded from peer groups. We began an initial cycle of data analysis for research question 1 by reading all exclusion accounts twice, noticing patterns, connections, and dissimilarities in the responses of the ways peer groups communicated rejection to outsiders ("What did someone in that group say or do that let you know you would not be included?"). While there were occasional references to sibling rejections or family outing rejections (i.e., a child not being allowed to join other family members), these rejection accounts consistently described events that happened at school.

Five robust categories of peer group rejection strategies emerged from the accounts: (a) ignoring; (b) disqualifying; (c) insulting; (d) blaming; and (e) creating new rules. Table 1 contains exemplars from the adolescents' accounts of strategies groups had used to reject them, further organized by gender and ethnicity (with the latter collapsed into White and nonWhite). We found no significant differences between the rejection accounts of males and females or Whites and nonWhites; however, the participants' words may take on additional meaning when the gender and ethnicity of the student is revealed, as displayed in Table 1. Both Whites and nonWhites reported being told they were not wanted because of their race or skin color; both males and females reported being ridiculed or told they were not good enough to join a peer group; and males, females, Whites, and nonWhites reported being silently ignored when trying to gain entry to peer groups. Some accounts made mention of more than one group rejection strategy or message.

Peer rejection by ignoring

Students told stories of being made to feel invisible when they tried to join groups, and one young student's personal pain was central to his self-esteem: "Everyone was invited right in front of me, except me. Being left out is one of the worst feelings there is. When someone is left out they feel they are not good enough and want to change themselves." As shown in Table 1, peer groups literally turned their backs on some children seeking entry, or simply walked away. The communication of rejection without reasons or words was memorable to students, even if it happened only once: "When I was new to a junior high and we were in P.E. they had to pick teams and I of course was new so they didn't pick me. I felt like crying or even like—Well the thing is that I felt bad. I don't think I'll ever forget that."

Peer rejection by disqualifying

Adolescents remembered being rejected by peer groups they were trying to join by being told they did not have a necessary qualification. Reasoning-giving, compared to ignoring, specifically drew attention to the excluded children, but focused on some flaw (Table 1): Exclusion was based on specifics such as race, physical infirmity, age, gender, language skills, lack of skill, or intelligence. One child took the disqualification as a challenge because she wanted to play football with the boys: "Then I played in disguise and the boys realized I was good."

Peer rejection by insulting

The accounts of insults as replies to outsider requests for inclusion reported name-calling that included references to ethnicity, ugliness, and various physical deformities.

> They said I couldn't be in the group because I was too ugly and I wasn't german which made me not good enough to be in the group. I was really hurt and I thought I was ugly and I wished I looked german. I thought I was the ugliest person alive.
>
> They called me names and wouldn't stop. They sometimes pushed me away telling me to leave and never come back. They made fun of me and they never stopped. They called me names like bucky beaver and big teeth.

Peer rejection by blaming the outsider

Beyond lacking some quality the rejecting group claimed it needed (disqualifying), or tossing out simple personal insults without responding to the request to join, blaming showed negative judgment of the outsider by the peer group and communicated responsibility for the rejection to the outsider. As the responses in Table 1 show, peer groups blamed outsiders for their behavior (bullying, rudeness, lying), lack of skill (sports), intelligence (too smart or too dumb), lack of popularity (not cool enough), or the ultimate painful catch-all social assessment, "Nobody likes you." One adolescent described the strategy of masking his anger and embarrassment, then exploding in private:

> Someone told me straight out that I wasn't wanted and that none of the people making up the group liked me. I was angry and embarrassed, but I didn't show any emotion at all until I got away from the situation. Then I let out my emotions by yelling and swearing.

Table 1 Adolescents' Accounts of Communication Tactics Peer Groups Used to Reject Them

Response themes	Representative responses What did someone in that group say or do that let you know you would not be included? Males		Females	
	White	NonWhite	White	NonWhite
Ignoring	I was new to the school and didn't know anyone. When it got time for recess I had nothing to do or anyone to lay with. In the class I had to do my work alone and was ignored by the other students. They pretty much ignored my presence.	They did not talk to me and they turned their back on me literally. Walked away. When I was the only black person in a group they totally ignored me and whispered stuff to each other about me.	The group wouldn't look at me, they seemed to be avoiding looking at my face and they turned their backs towards me. At recess in 5th grade there was a group of girls I always wanted to play with, but whenever I tried to they gave me dirty looks and ignored me or told me to go away.	They ignored me. I felt sad and wondered what I did. They don't acknowledge my presence, don't say hi or anything. They all gave me an awkward look and continued to talk among themselves.
Disqualifying	They needed an extra person, so I offered. The person making the team said I was not good enough, even though we played on the same school football team. Just because my feet are crooked. I couldn't run fast. They said my friends and I could not play because I was white. Their exact words were "No white boys allowed."	Said that I wasn't their friend, I'm not good enough. They said "no" in reply because I was too short. Because of some difficulty I have with my heart. They mocked me and made fun of my situation telling me that I'll die or have a heart attack. You're too young.	I wanted to play a game of soccer with some people. Excluded because I was a girl. He wasn't very nice. They said I couldn't play cuz I wasn't good enough of a player. They were mean. They said I couldn't be in the group because I was too ugly and I wasn't German which made me "not good enough" to be in the group.	Basically, that I wouldn't understand what they were talking about because I was scholastically far behind them. I was an athletic girl, so I was usually one of the first people picked. But that day I had to wear my Girl Scout dress to school. The boys saw that I was dressed too much like a girl and wouldn't let me play.

Insulting	People I thought were friends called me names and laughed at me. They told me to shut up and go away because I was stupid.	I was told no "Ghandhis" were allowed. They say some things about my race or ethnicity. They start to laugh and go away. You ain't cool, you are weird.	The boys said I couldn't play with them because I was a girl and I had cooties.	Someone in there say I don't like her, she is stupid and ugly. I don't want her to be in my team. Other kids did not want to play with me because I had a mole on my nose. They would call me mole face.
Blaming	They said we have even teams and that I could not play very well. Because no one knew me and because of all my freckles. I wanted to play but they said no cause I wasn't good enough.	They said that I sucked [at baseball] and they hurt me. They told me that I would get hurt and start crying.	People do it all the time because I'm not like them or I'm not <u>cool</u>!! Back in grade school I was really large (fat) and people would exclude me all the time. It hurt me a lot.	They said I lied to them about something (which I didn't). I wasn't a fun or smart person to be with. They said I wasn't popular enough.
Creating new rules	They said I didn't get there in time and they already started. I would have to get another person in order to play. They ignored me and left me for last pick. Then they told me I couldn't play because it was uneven.	One time I ask to play football with some people and they said that I was too late, then we have too many people, then you're too small. Next time I got there early and asked if I could play and they act like they did not hear me. I went to the basketball courts and asked if I play and they said they were making teams. So as they chose I looked, there was 12 people so it would be 6 on 6. I waited then when I was the last one, the captain said, "It's already we'll make it 6 on 5, we have a better team."	They said "Sorry no more room" but I knew that there was about 5 spaces left. I saw someone else go up there to ask if they could play and the kids let that person in. They said that they had to go home because they were leaving. I thought it was cause they didn't like us.	One time in 8th grade we were supposed to be getting into groups of 4 people and then I was going over to this one group to ask them if I could be in their group because they only had 3. When I asked them, they were like, "No, because Amanda was going to be in our group."

Peer rejection by changing the rules

Thinly veiled as an indirect form of public rejection, when a peer group openly changed the requirements to join the group, it appeared from these accounts that the outsider quickly concluded the announced rule-change was a ruse. One African American male used small handwriting to condense a powerful drama into the small response space on the questionnaire:

> I started a new school. I was nerves [sic] because people kept on staring at me, to tell what kind of person I am. At lunch I usually play a sport so I went to the basketball courts and asked if I play, and they said they were making teams. So, as they choose, I looked. There was 12 people, so it would be 6 on 6. I waited. Then when I was the last one, the captain said, 'It's alright; we'll make it 6 on 5 we'll have a better team!

It appeared that school sports provided a variety of opportunities for open rejection by changing the rules, as a white male reported: "They ignored me and left me for last pick. Then they told me I couldn't play because it was uneven."

One female shared her analysis of the many changing-reasons she could not be included and what she ultimately decided had been a lie:

> I was not given a ride to the first dance of the year and as a result did not attend. I was jokingly (at least I think) told that I was too poor and too smelly to ride in their car. I was then told that they were driving a 3-seater car that it would be full. I know they don't have such a car, and I don't think one exists.

Evidence that rules were designed to exclude one person, but not others, emerged when rules changed a second time for a subsequent entry attempt by someone else: "They said, 'Sorry, no more room,' but I knew that there was about 5 spaces left. I saw someone else go up there to ask if they could play and the kids let that person in." Rejected children confronted social injustice when the rules changed.

> I asked if I could play in a schoolyard game, and they said I didn't get there in time and they already started. I would have to get another person in order to play. I looked for another person but couldn't find one. When I came back there was another kid playing who had just gotten there, but they still didn't let me play.

Stress of Attempting Peer Group Inclusion

For research question 2, we used a median split procedure to classify participants into three groups according to whether they had elevated (7, 6, 5), moderate (4), or low (3, 2, 1) self-reported stress scores when recalling an experience of being left out. As Table 2 shows, there is a significant difference across self-assessed stress levels of being left out ($\chi^2[2, n = 596] = 261.89$, $p < .001$), with 62% claiming elevated stress, 9% moderate stress, and 29% low stress.

Gender

While there were no significant differences in the percentage of girls and boys perceiving elevated, moderate, and low stress levels, we did find that girls expressed more stress in response to peer group rejection than boys (female $M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.41$ vs. male $M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.58$; $t[592] = -2.18$, $p = .03$).

Ethnicity

The relative percentages of Whites and nonWhites perceiving elevated, moderate, and low stress when experiencing peer group rejection differed significantly ($\chi^2[2, n = 583] = 12.43$, $p < .001$). Specifically, nonWhites were more likely to report low (33%) stress than Whites, and, in turn, Whites were more likely to express elevated (71%) stress. Along these lines, we discovered that across age levels, White students were significantly more upset by peer group exclusion than nonWhites (White $M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.39$ vs. nonWhite $M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.54$; $t[582] = 3.90$, $p = .001$).

Experience with being excluded

We also used a median split procedure to classify participants by how frequently they reported having been previously excluded: elevated (5, 4), moderate (3), and low (2, 1). Fifteen percent ($n = 100$) of the adolescents reported being constantly left out, 29% ($n = 197$) felt they were excluded to the same extent as others, and 56% ($n = 375$) declared they were rarely left out. Overall, the categories for self-perceived frequency of exclusion showed significant differences in stress levels ($F[2, 590] = 33.80$, $\eta^2 = .10$, $p < .001$). A Scheffé post hoc test revealed that those who experienced elevated ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.22$) levels of exclusion found it more stressful than those with moderate ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.28$) or low ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.56$) levels of exclusion. Participants who reported moderate levels of exclusion indicated significantly more stress than those reporting low levels.

Participants who have more experience with peer group rejection were more likely to report elevated stress levels than those with less experience ($\chi^2[4, n = 592] = 38.56$, $p < .001$). In other words, the majority of the adolescents who were frequently (83%) or moderately (70%) excluded reported elevated stress, whereas half of the participants with little (52%) experience reported elevated stress. This pattern was consistent for gender and ethnicity.

Watching Peer Group Rejection of Outsiders

For research question 3, a median split procedure was used to classify participants into three groups according to whether they had elevated (7, 6, 5), moderate (4), or low (3, 2, 1) self-reported scores about when they had watched peer group rejection. The results in Table 3 show a significant difference across self-ascribed stress levels ($\chi^2[2, n = 627] = 128.45$, $p < .001$), with 42% reporting elevated stress, 12% moderate stress, and 46% low stress.

Table 2. Distribution of Self-Reported Stress Levels for Being Excluded by Groups

	Experience of being excluded									
	All		Male		Female		White		NonWhite	
Level of stress	%	*N*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Elevated (5, 6, 7)	62	72	61	202	64	168	71	173	57	195
Moderate (4)	9	53	10	32	8	21	8	20	10	33
Low (1, 2, 3)	29	171	29	96	28	74	21	50	33	112

Table 3. Distribution of Self-Reported Stress Levels for Watching Group Exclusion

	Experience of watching someone else excluded									
	All		Male		Female		White		NonWhite	
Level of stress	%	*N*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Elevated (5, 6, 7)	42	263	40	140	45	121	39	100	44	159
Moderate (4)	12	76	13	45	11	31	13	32	12	44
Low (1, 2, 3)	46	288	48	169	44	118	48	124	44	160

Gender and ethnicity

Again, there were no significant differences in the percentage of girls and boys perceiving elevated, moderate, and low stress levels, but girls indicated experiencing more distress from watching the exclusion of their peers than boys (female $M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.43$ vs. male $M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.62$; $t[622] = -3.11$, $p = .002$). No differences attributable to ethnicity surfaced.

Experience with being excluded

Using the same exclusion categories (elevated, moderate, and low) discussed in relation to RQ2, we discovered significant differences in regard to perceived stress when watching peer group rejection ($F[2, 617] = 7.94$, $\eta^2 = .03$, $p < .001$). Specifically, Scheffé post hoc tests revealed that those students repeatedly ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.42$) left out reported more stress in watching exclusion than students who had moderate ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.38$) or little ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.64$) exclusion experience. Adolescents continually left out were almost twice as likely to report elevated levels of stress when observing the exclusion of others than those claiming moderate to low experience with peer group rejection ($\chi^2[4, n = 620] = 14.91$, $p < .001$). Specifically, two-thirds (60%) of the participants who reported being regularly excluded claimed to find watching peer group rejection to be highly stressful, whereas 35% of those with moderate or little experience noted that to be the case. This trend was consistent for both gender and ethnicity.

Discussion

A communication perspective on childhood and adolescent peer group rejection was taken by paying attention to real world messages of rejection as experienced by the receiver of the rejection message. Ninety percent ($n = 612$) of the adolescents in this study shared hurtful group rejection accounts, and 15% ($n = 100$) reported being constantly left out—findings suggesting that penetrating peer group boundaries in childhood may be more painful to all children and adolescents than previously acknowledged. Five important findings emerged from the data reported: (a) schools were the predominant context in which peer group rejection occurred; (b) group rejection strategies were consistently negatively constructed; (c) during rejection attempts, entry stress affected not only outsiders but also observers; (d) White students were significantly more upset when rejected by peer groups than were nonWhites; and (e) self-perceived frequency of exclusion as either frequent or moderate significantly correlated with levels of stress during group rejection events (both being rejected and watching rejection), compared to students who reported a low frequency of being excluded by peer groups.

Structuring and Communicating Group Boundaries

As membership in a group changes (or, we would argue, as it is threatened with change), Putnam and Stohl (1996) suggest that boundaries may become ambiguous

or unclear and alter group identity for both insiders and outsiders. This study advances our understanding, from a bona fide groups perspective, about how adolescents and children interpret and experience boundary penetration attempts in peer groups. Responding to the call of Stohl and Putnam (2003), we squarely addressed boundary issues as a problematic for group researchers. The narrative accounts in this study offer preliminary descriptions of boundary ambiguity, stress, and penetration failures in childhood peer groups.

Several possible group dynamics may cast light on boundary ambiguity and penetration failures: (a) childhood group boundaries may at times be clear to members, but unclear to outsiders, since the structuring of group boundaries constitutes an intragroup symbolic process; (b) childhood group boundaries may be generally unclear to both members and outsiders (that is, unstructured) until a nonmember seeks entry, at which point the group begins to structure boundaries; (c) childhood social group boundaries may be highly permeable in general, but become impenetrable when an unwanted outsider attempts entry, at which point a single group member who communicates rejection functionally initiates re-structuring of group boundaries; (d) some childhood groups may be unable to tolerate the ambiguity of fluid group boundaries (threatening group identity), and, as a result, communicate rigid impenetrable boundaries to outsiders in order to reassure group members of their uniqueness; and (e) the structuring of group boundaries in some childhood groups may be the result of a single group member, who acts without consensus, enacting unshared social rules or values. This last explanation, an individual-member-boundary-builder dynamic, might also account for the watcher-stress findings of this study. Group rejection decisions that are not shared by a member may trigger unexpressed stress (one adolescent who had remained silent while his group rejected another adolescent reflected, “I wish I would have left the group and made my own, in which everyone was welcome”).

Peer Group Rejection Stress

This study filled a gap concerning research in peer group rejection by providing information about entry stress—a neglected variable associated with group processes. The data extends knowledge about some negative emotions individuals bring to new group experiences, encouraging a real consideration of childhood group rejection experiences in understanding adults who dislike group work, for example. Although no robust line of research by communication scholars on emotion and group communication currently exists, one construct that is gaining attention is *grouphate*, which Sorensen (1981) first used to describe the negative attitudes some people have toward working in groups. Little is known about what creates grouphate (Keyton & Frey, 2002), but the stress children and adolescents experience when their group inclusion attempts are rejected is a likely contender. Our findings provide preliminary information about anticipated entry into groups and the negative anxiety that may accompany outsider attempts to gain peer group inclusion. The findings are consistent with the observations of Orenstein (1994) who describes as

typical the account of one middle-school girl remembering her desperate desire to gain social inclusion when, instead, she was cruelly stigmatized on the first day of school for her weight. The stigma kept her from gaining group access: "Nobody even gave me a chance. It was like they were afraid to talk to me because I was fat, like I had a disease" (p. 100). The perceived stigma of peer group rejection may enhance anticipated group entry stress when children believe that their rejection may seem contagious to other potential friends (see Sunwolf & Leets, 2003, describing the peer group rejection contagion belief among adolescents).

Oetzel (2002) has called for a greater focus on cultural differences that affect group processes. Findings from this study provide evidence of effects of perceived ethnic differences on group rejection on experienced stress, with significant differences between Whites and nonWhites. The data revealed a counter-intuitive outcome: nonWhites were more likely to report low (33%) stress for personal experiences of group rejection than Whites, and, in turn, Whites were more likely to express elevated (71%) stress relating to the same event. Future studies are needed to discover whether such an effect would hold across populations of children or adolescents.

Limitations

As with any study of natural group processes, one must consider this study's results with caution. First, while the narratives and stress levels of the participants may parallel those of other teenagers in the Western world, the results cannot be generalized beyond the contexts of the lives and environments of the adolescents involved. The sample had value, however, in that it equally represented both girls and boys, as well as both public and private schools, and less than 42% of the participants were Caucasian/White. The wide variety of contexts described (e.g., playground groups, classrooms, teams, friendship groups) strengthens the basis for claiming ecological validity and suggests that results might mirror the everyday challenges children face in penetrating group boundaries.

Second, the self-report method has limitations when used to infer actual behavior. What adolescents said happened may not be what actually occurred. Further, in the retrospective self-reports, the participants engaged in recall of painful events. People can distort ego-threatening incidents. The adolescents' accounts may have distorted representation of the antisocial behavior of others, defensively minimized or exaggerated the actually experienced levels of stress at the time, or stemmed from biased systems of attribution. The data collection procedure attempted to adjust for difficulties in recalling emotions by having respondents reflect on more than one perspective concerning group exclusion. However, the stress scales appeared after the narratives when stress may have been re-triggered by recall.

Finally, unreported variables in specific accounts obviously existed. The absence of any indications of the role of the rejectee, for example, would seem to be a potential biasing factor worthy of further consideration.

Future Research

> "You can't play" suddenly seems too overbearing and harsh, resounding like a slap from wall to wall. How casually one child determines the fate of another. (Paley, 1992, p. 3)

The findings of this preliminary study support research that examines interventions that might facilitate more frequent and fruitful peer group inclusion of outsiders. We urge the creation of studies which examine the outcome of peer group facilitation at schools—foregrounding aiding performance, rather than governing it, and coaching inclusion successes, rather than punishing rejection infractions. Although exclusion is inextricably woven into the fabric of childhood play or competitive group experiences, injustices and pain associated with some strategies of peer group rejection might be reduced by novel facilitation.

This suggestion is consistent with the argument of Horn (2003), who critiques school interventions that have been constructed with the rejected child as the target and focus on changing the behaviors of rejected students. We abandon the rejected-child-intervention and suggest adopting group-targeted interventions for teachers. Group-based interventions are community-based and facilitate attitude and expectation changes of peer group members toward outsiders. The urgency of initiating school-based interventions is clear: Negative consequences associated with peer group rejection are linked to a child's adjustment immediately after entering grade school (Buhs & Ladd, 2001), and primary school children engage most of their task group activities at school (Socha & Socha, 1994). Teachers increasingly rely on group activities, but learn that mere physical inclusion of children in a class group by teachers does not guarantee social inclusion (Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, & Mastin, 1998a, 1998b). One participant in our study shared an account that illustrates this situation: "When we were picking teams to play basketball. Someone in there say I don't like her, she is stupid and ugly. Well, the teacher came and solve it out. I have to be in their team and when we were playing, they didn't pass me the ball or anything."

During peer group play, children learn the strength of belonging to a group, but also the vulnerability that faces loners on the outside. Thompson et al. (2001) argued that one dynamic *law* that influences the group life of children is that you *must* belong to a group. Based on Thompson's work as a psychologist in schools, they describe group inclusion as so critical that rejected children frequently create groups of their own. Peer group membership is emotionally fraught, characterized both by intense intimacy and bewildering cruelty. Further studies of bona fide childhood peer groups would be enriched by an acknowledgement of the embeddedness of these groups in complex social-academic-community contexts. Ellingson (2003), drawing upon a bona fide groups perspective, pointed out the fluidity of backstage settings that form the context for an interdisciplinary geriatric oncology team at a cancer center. Her theorizing about backstage teamwork is a useful model for future research that could examine the degree to which the classroom (and teachers) have limited access to the backstage peer group exclusion that occurs during school

breaks, at lunch, or before and after school, even though the effects may impede success for some in the classroom.

Practical Applications and Interventions for Schools

Group interaction skills can be taught to children, as well as incorporated into classroom culture (Keyton, 1994; Matthews, 1996). Since peer group rejection happens predominantly at school and since our findings indicate the rejection messages are negative, interventions that model positive messages, as well as more frequent inclusion, are appropriate. Here, we suggest three low-fiscal impact interventions, previously reported in the literature, that teachers can implement: (a) storytelling and peer modeling; (b) behavioral journalism; and (c) co-constructing classroom inclusionary rules.

Storytelling and Peer Modeling

Our data suggested that children may lack knowledge about how to gain access to peer groups. One 14-year-old female Hispanic student described her social ignorance: "I have a problem with people. I don't know how to act in social situations. I get excluded all the time because I really don't know what to do, or where my place is." In an early study of social acceptance, Wentzel and Erdley (1993) concluded that a child's strategy knowledge and frequency of peer acceptance were positively related, which suggests that interventions which provide students with inclusion and exclusion communication skills would be valuable.

Paley's (1992) work with initiating storytelling in the classroom to uncover and transform social injustices reveals an intervention easy to fold into the existing course or classroom day (applied in the classroom by Sapon-Shevin et al., 1998a, 1998b). Our data offer not only specific accounts, words, and themes relevant to peer rejection that trigger student memories and discussion, but a format that can be adapted by schools to gather data about the climate of exclusion on their respective campuses. Using the responses in our study, teachers can generate dialogue by sharing our findings and continuing with such questions as, "Has that ever happened to you?" or "What is your opinion about what was said?" Our data point to the conclusion that most, if not all, students have painful stories of rejection. Sharing stories makes students' experiences real to one another, and moral disengagement from one another becomes more difficult.

Our study also suggests that the watchers of rejection have important stories to tell. Storytelling connects with peer modeling when students are encouraged to share tales of regrets after watching peer group rejection ("I wish instead that I had . . .") or tales of including others. Thus, the lived experience of one student becomes usable information for others. Rosenberg, McKeon, and Dinero (1999) reported that interventions based on peer groups reclaiming rejected children allowed for constructive affiliations with peers through new activities. Storytelling is a fluid format for such re-claiming of acceptance. Stories model both successful and unsuccessful

behavior by fellow students in rejection events. At the same time, teachers are resources for one another when they collaborate with neighboring schools, in a storied exchange. When we have read the accounts from our data to teachers and students in elementary and middle schools, they have immediately provoked reciprocal tales. It may be less ego-threatening to critique stories involving someone else, than to receive behavior adjustment critique concerning personal behavior.

Behavioral Journalism

Our data revealed high stress levels for both observers and receivers of group rejection and accounts of uncertainty concerning how to manage exclusion or gain inclusion. One communication technique used to facilitate healthy change in high schools is behavioral journalism, which emphasizes peer modeling of relevant audience-produced stories in pre-existing school media forums (McAlister, 1995). Recently, behavioral journalism has been successfully employed in a large ethnically diverse high school to reduce inter-group verbal aggression and hostility (McAlister, Ama, Barroso, Peters, & Kelder, 2000).

Although a variety of violence prevention curricula are available, few teachers use them, mainly because of limited resources (McAlister et al., 2000). However, school-as-community interventions such as behavioral journalism do not require teacher training or the implementation of new curricula. McAlister and colleagues designed simple statements in surveys ("If someone hits you, you should hit them back," or "Carrying a weapon can make me safer") and used them to collect data about students' values and experiences. In a five-month communication campaign, student newspapers, school-wide publicity, and classroom presentations served as vehicles for sharing audience-generated stories designed to overcome processes of moral disengagement from outsider groups. Each news story explicitly focused on data from the surveys and included key words in headlines and captions. The results revealed that receptivity to intergroup affiliation at school and perceptions of similarity between groups significantly increased, whereas beliefs about the acceptability of violence decreased.

Teachers can assess extant media resources in their schools and then use the methods or findings reported here to institute semester-long information campaigns about attitudes, values, and effects of peer exclusion. Theater is one form of media resource, in which student-generated stories of exclusion and inclusion can be performed in classrooms and used to involve student audiences; Reader's Theater allows students to take on the role of other students, reading for one another what happened (or what might have been, if students rewrite endings). When the pain of rejection or the exclusion-inclusion dilemma is not personal or in the moment, thoughtful reflection is possible.

Co-Constructing New Classroom Rules

Student accounts in this study made visible myriad ways in which teachers unwit-

tingly facilitate the painful social exclusion of their students. We suggest that one of the easiest interventions available to teachers is to stop activities that invoke peer group rejection and substitute activities that require, for success, social inclusion.

One recurring robust theme in the accounts was being picked last (or not at all) when teachers asked students to choose work groups or competitive teams. Whether or not that is an expedient choice, it is clear it is always painful to those last-chosen. Facilitation manuals are replete with ice-breakers and group-formation tools that can be quickly adopted by teachers, including random methods (i.e., counting off, drawing numbers), grouping by profile (i.e., cat lovers, hip-hop lovers, January-February birthdays, anyone who plays an instrument, favorite foods), scavenger hunts (i.e., find someone who has a hamster, knows how to sew, has been to Canada), or rotating memberships (i.e., every day/half-hour the group rotates one member), which avoids permanent status markers and sets an expectation that everyone works with everyone. A climate of inclusion in classrooms requires that teachers abandon opportunities for children to select those with whom they want to work, play, or compete.

Once teachers examine traditional structures in their classrooms that allow social exclusion, the stage is set, especially in primary school, to invite students to collaborate in rules of inclusion. In addition to Paley's negative "You can't say you can't play" rule, positive rules can be engaged ("Everyone gets to play for at least 5 minutes," "You have to find out something you have in common with someone first"). Sharing accounts from our study, for example, can precede the probe: "What should the rule have been for those students?" In a study utilizing classroom peer groups to address students' inclusion needs, Frederickson and Turner (2003) determined that a *Circle of Friends* intervention improved the social acceptance of mainstreamed special needs children. As a further measure, rule-changing can be combined with the facilitation technique of positive peer reporting (or positive tattling), in which students report prosocial behaviors exhibited by their peers (Bowers et al., 1999). A climate of inclusion may involve rewards for the positive tattler, or for the target of the prosocial report, or take the form of accounts posted around the classroom. Although many classrooms encourage all prosocial reports, selected themes (inclusion, empathy, sharing) allow the entire classroom to focus on targeted behavior.

Effects on the Academic Contexts in Which Childhood Peer Groups are Embedded

The creation and enforcement of group inclusionary rules for children or adolescents reportedly affects teachers, as well as students, positively:

> Surprisingly, the effects of implementing the rule had at least as much influence on me as on the children. It challenged us all to work hard creating and maintaining a more idealistic world. . . . At the end of the year, I had to admit I'd never seen a group of kids change so dramatically. I had grown, too. (Second grade teacher quoted in Sapon-Shevin et al., 1998a, p. 44)

When prosocial inclusionary rules for children's peer groups are initially implemented by adults, benefits extend to others in the school's organizational culture. A bona fide groups perspective reminds us that all groups are embedded in contexts that include both other groups and a larger organization:

> As the rule began to permeate the entire school (one of the most exciting results of the project), some of the upper-level teachers actually taught and implemented the rule with the help of students who had already been in "You can't say" classrooms at an earlier grade. (Sapon-Shevin et al., 1998a, p. 43)

All of us can become more intentionally thoughtful about changing how we socialize students in our classrooms. The social behavior of any peer group member depends on an increased awareness of communication choices. Unfortunately, few communication models exist for facilitating group inclusion (yet respecting unique group identities or values). Although teachers cannot eliminate the rejection of some children by their classmates, teachers may be able to increase peer group inclusion, as well as reduce a student's exposure to damaging rejection processes.

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