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## Rejection Sensitivity and Children's Interpersonal Difficulties

Geraldine Downey, Amy Lebolt, Claudia Rincón, and Antonio L. Freitas

Some children respond to social rejection in ways that undermine their relationships, whereas others respond with more equanimity. This article reports 3 studies that test the proposition that rejection sensitivity—the disposition to defensively (i.e., anxiously or angrily) expect, readily perceive, and overreact to social rejection—helps explain individual differences in response to social rejection. Data were from urban, minority (primarily Hispanic and African American) fifth to seventh graders. Study 1 describes the development of a measure of rejection sensitivity for children. Study 2 provides experimental evidence that children who angrily expected rejection showed heightened distress following an ambiguously intentioned rejection by a peer. Study 3 shows that rejection sensitive children behaved more aggressively and experienced increased interpersonal difficulties and declines in academic functioning over time.

### INTRODUCTION

"Do you want to go to the movies with me on Saturday?" Ruben asked Carla on the playground. "Sorry," she told him, "I'm busy on Saturday." Ruben angrily stormed off the playground, knocking over a trashcan as he passed the gate. Then Tony approached her. "Do you want to go skating with me on Saturday?" he asked. "No, I can't. I'm busy on Saturday," Carla said. "How about on Sunday?" Tony asked. "OK," she said.

What are the psychological processes underlying the distinct reactions of Ruben and Tony to Carla's social rejection? An attributional analysis would ascribe these divergent behavior patterns to different perceptions of the intentionality underlying the event (e.g., Dodge, 1980; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1971). Thus, Ruben's reaction would result from perceiving the rejection as motivated by negative or hostile intent. This attribution would then justify his overreaction. Tony's equanimity would reflect a more benign interpretation of the other child's intentions. An attachment perspective would infer that the two behavior patterns reflect working models of relationships that incorporate different expectations about acceptance and rejection (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Sroufe, 1990). Whereas Ruben expected rejection, Tony expected acceptance. The expectation of rejection would promote a readiness to perceive and overreact to rejection. Alternatively, expectations of acceptance would promote a more benign interpretation of the other child's intent, facilitating greater equanimity and more persistence in pursuit of valued goals.

We have drawn selectively on the attributional and attachment perspectives in proposing a cognitive-affective processing disposition that we believe will help account for the different reactions of Ruben

and Tony to the same ambiguously intentioned social rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Consistent with an attachment perspective, our approach posits that children's internal working models of relationships can guide them to defensively (i.e., angrily or anxiously) expect rejection in social situations. Defensive expectations of rejection can, in turn, lead children to readily perceive rejection by fostering the type of perceptual biases that have been focal to attributional analyses of social maladjustment (e.g., Dodge, 1980). We have previously described individuals who defensively expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection as being rejection sensitive (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997; Feldman & Downey, 1994). In this article, we describe the development of a measure of rejection sensitivity for children and examine how rejection sensitivity may affect children's relations with peers and teachers. We first outline an attributional analysis of children's social maladjustment, and then suggest how such an analysis can be enhanced by incorporating some principles derived from the attachment-theory conception of working models of relationships.

### Attributional Analysis

Research particularly relevant to understanding children's troubled social relationships was initiated by Dodge (1980) to explain why some children characteristically display high rates of aggression. Dodge (1980) hypothesized that aggressive children differed from nonaggressive children by more readily attributing hostile intent to others; this attribution then morally justified aggressive retaliation. This claim

has been well substantiated, and the processes linking hostile attributions with aggressive behavior have been elaborated (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

The question of *why* aggressive children tend to think that others are intentionally hostile toward them has not been clarified, however. Interestingly, Dodge (1980) showed that it is not simply that aggressive children view all negative behavior as motivated by hostility. Rather, their characteristic attributional bias is restricted to negative behavior directed toward themselves and does not emerge in their attributions for negative behavior directed toward others (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1980). Why might aggressive children make different attributions for ambiguously intentioned negative behavior directed toward them than for similar behavior directed toward others?

One possible explanation is that these children's readiness to perceive intentional hostility in others' ambiguously intentioned negative behavior is motivated in part by their expectations of rejection. Thus, these children might believe that others are hostile to them because the others dislike or reject them. This explanation is supported by Dodge and Somberg's (1987) finding that when aggressive children were led to expect peer rejection their tendency to perceive hostile intent in peers' negative or ambiguous behavior toward them increased.

This finding suggests the value of investigating the expectations that children bring to social situations. In fact, Dodge (1980) proposed that aggressive children's attributions in ambiguous peer situations may be shaped by their expectations about how their peers will behave toward them. Consistent with this suggestion, there is considerable evidence from the general social psychological literature that attributions are driven in part by expectations (for a review, see Olsen, Roese, & Zanna, 1996). However, social-cognitive analyses of social adjustment have typically begun with children's encoding of and attributions for others' behavior after the behavior has occurred and have focused on explaining the processes mediating the link between attributions and behavior (e.g., Dodge, 1980; Graham, Hudley, & Williams, 1992; Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1992; for an exception see Rabiner & Coie, 1989).

### Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, in contrast, has theorized more extensively about children's expectations. The expectations that children have about whether others will satisfy their needs or be rejecting is a key component of the internal working models of relationships that Bowlby proposed to explain continuity between

early and subsequent relationships (Bowlby, 1973; Sroufe, 1990). Bowlby (1973) viewed these expectations as deriving initially from the reliability with which children's needs are met in early childhood. When their needs are met sensitively and consistently, children develop secure working models that incorporate the expectation that others will accept and support them. When children's needs are met with covert or overt rejection, they develop insecure working models that incorporate fears and doubts about whether others will accept and support them. Bowlby proposed that this defensive response can emerge in anxiety or anger. This is consistent with theories of emotion that view both anxiety and anger as high arousal, negative valence, defensive reactions to a perceived threat (Lang, 1995). Finally, children's expectations are modified by subsequent experiences of acceptance and rejection.

Although theoretical analyses of internal working models have drawn attention to children's expectations of rejection and acceptance during social interaction (e.g., Sroufe, 1990), this attention has not yet translated into empirical studies. More generally, there has been little interest in operationalizing working models at the level of cognitive and affective processes that generate behavior in specific social situations, the focus of social-cognitive research (Cummings & Cicchetti, 1990; Waters, Kondo-Ikemura, Posada, & Richters, 1991). Instead, attachment researchers have focused primarily on developing global assessments of the security of people's working models and on demonstrating the implications of attachment security thus assessed for adjustment (e.g., Bretherton, 1985; Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Further empirical research seems needed to elucidate the social-cognitive processes through which internal working models of relationships can influence how children perceive social events and how they construct plans for dealing with these events. Toward this end, increased integration of the social-cognitive and attachment perspectives is required, as researchers from both traditions are beginning to recognize (e.g., Bretherton, 1985; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Cummings & Cicchetti, 1990; Reis & Patrick, 1996).

### Rejection Sensitivity

The foregoing discussion suggests that the social-cognitive approach to understanding social adjustment can benefit from incorporating at least two features of attachment theory. First, attachment theory places a greater emphasis than most prior social-cognitive approaches on the influence of children's

expectations of acceptance and rejection on their processing of social situations (for exceptions, see Rabiner & Coie, 1989; Renshaw & Asher, 1982). Second, attachment theory draws attention to the influence of anticipatory affect on children's perception of and reaction to others in situations of potential rejection. To the extent that prior social-cognitive analyses have explicitly included affect, it has usually been viewed as a consequence of children's perception of social events rather than as an influence on such perceptions (e.g., Graham, et al., 1992).

As noted earlier, we have adopted the view that internal working models of relationships can affect children's attributions, behavior plans, and behavior through the defensive expectations of acceptance and rejection that children bring to social situations (Downey & Feldman, 1996). We hypothesize that these defensive expectations of rejection make children hyper-vigilant for signs of rejection. When they encounter rejection cues, however minimal or ambiguous, they readily perceive intentional rejection and feel rejected. The perceived rejection is then likely to foster both affective and behavioral overreactions, including hostility and aggression. Such overreactions are likely to undermine social relationships.

We have defined children who show a characteristic pattern of defensively expecting, readily perceiving, and overreacting to rejection as being rejection sensitive. In support of our conceptualization of rejection sensitivity, our work with young adults indicates that defensive expectations of rejection facilitate a readiness to perceive and overreact to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996, Studies 2 and 3). Our prior research has also shown that rejection sensitivity prompts young adults to behave in ways that undermine their close relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis & Khouri, in press).

### Goals of the Current Article

In this article we examine the implications of rejection sensitivity for social adjustment during early adolescence. This is a life stage during which issues of acceptance and rejection by peers and teachers are especially salient and thus are likely to be particularly important influences on social adjustment. In this article we focus on angry rather than anxious expectations of rejection. We believe that angry expectations are more likely than anxious expectations to lead to aggressive or disruptive behavior, an outcome of primary concern in this article. The following questions are addressed: Do angry expectations of rejection promote a readiness to perceive and overreact

to rejection? Does rejection sensitivity compromise early adolescents' relationships with peers and teachers?

We conducted three studies to address these questions. Study 1 describes a measure of rejection sensitivity developed for use with children, the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. Study 1 also provides evidence of construct validity and examines the contemporaneous and longitudinal relations among the components of rejection sensitivity. Study 2 is an experimental investigation of whether, following an ambiguously intentioned rejection by a peer, children with angry expectations of rejection are more vulnerable than other children to becoming distressed. Study 3 assesses whether rejection sensitivity predicts increasing difficulties over time in social relationships and declining academic investment and performance.

### STUDY 1

The Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ) operationalizes rejection sensitivity as the extent to which children (1) anxiously or angrily expect rejection, (2) feel disliked or rejected following an ambiguously intentioned rejection, and (3) overreact to rejection. Because situations in which children face potential rejection are particularly likely to activate feelings of threat and expectations of rejection in those so disposed, we assume that children's affect and expectations in such situations are diagnostic of their level of rejection sensitivity. Thus, the CRSQ presents children with a range of high-investment, interpersonal situations where they risk rejection by important others, specifically, teachers and peers.

The CRSQ has two parts. Part 1 presents situations in which the child awaits accepting or rejecting social feedback, and probes the child's thoughts and affect *before* any actual acceptance or rejection occurs. Insofar as children both expect a rejecting outcome and feel threatened at the possibility of this rejection, they are considered to defensively expect rejection. Although the CRSQ allows for the possibility that feelings of threat can be expressed as anger or anxiety, this article reports data only on angry expectations of rejection.

Part 2 of the CRSQ focuses on what happens *after* an ambiguously intentioned rejection has occurred. It assesses the extent to which children (1) feel rejected or disliked and (2) show an angry reaction pattern involving angry feelings, thoughts, and behavior plans. An angry reaction pattern is expected to predict hostile, aggressive behavioral reactions to perceived slights and, consequently, interpersonal diffi-

culties similar to those shown by the reactively aggressive children identified by Dodge and colleagues (e.g., Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997). This article devotes little attention to the correlates of feeling disliked or rejected because the items assessing this construct were not added to the CRSQ until much of the data for this article were already collected.

To assess the construct validity of the CRSQ, we first estimated its association with Dodge's (1980) measure of attributions of hostile intent. We predicted that both angry expectations of rejection and an angry reaction to rejection would correlate significantly with attributions of hostile intent, reflecting the assumptions that (1) angry expectations of rejection dispose children to attribute hostile, rejecting intent to others' negative behavior toward them, and that (2) children perceive rejection in negative behavior toward them that they interpret as intentionally hostile. Second, we assessed the relations between the two parts of the CRSQ and various domains of perceived competence (Harter, 1982). We expected that perceived social competence (i.e., beliefs about whether one is as well liked as other children) would correlate negatively with angry expectations of rejection, and that perceived behavioral competence (i.e., beliefs about whether one behaves as well as other children) would correlate negatively with an angry reaction pattern. Contrastingly, we expected that neither component of rejection sensitivity would correlate significantly with competence in domains that were less relevant to issues of acceptance or rejection (i.e., physical or cognitive competence).

Finally, we assessed the interrelations among the three components of rejection sensitivity and examined evidence for an interactional, mutually reinforcing dynamic between angry expectations of rejection and an angry reaction to ambiguously intentioned rejection.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

#### *Total Sample*

Participants were 382 fifth through seventh graders attending a public elementary (fifth graders) and junior high school (sixth and seventh graders) that serves a predominantly minority, economically disadvantaged, inner-city neighborhood. All students in participating classes were invited to participate and were given consent forms to be completed by a parent (or guardian). Around 85% of the children re-

turned completed parental consent forms. Two percent of parents declined to have their child participate in the study. The remaining children did not return completed consent forms despite repeated reminders. Children received small gifts (e.g., pencils, erasers, candy) for participating in the study, including a gift for returning a completed consent form, whether or not the parent agreed to the child's participation. Participating children and their non-participating classmates also went on a yearly educational trip sponsored by the research project.

Children completed the CRSQ in their classrooms, where a team of trained research assistants administered the questionnaires to groups of five to six children. The research team included Hispanic, African American, Vietnamese, and European American men and women who were either advanced undergraduate or graduate students in psychology. All research assistants were familiar to the students (except where noted in Study 2).

Questionnaires were either read aloud or given to children to complete independently, depending on the preassessed reading level of each child. The questions were read aloud for 6% of the students. The responses of these children did not differ significantly from those of other children. Spanish-speaking participants (10% of the sample) completed Spanish translations of the questionnaires supervised by bilingual research assistants. The questionnaires were translated into Spanish by bilingual research assistants who were highly experienced at working with the study participants. The translation was completed by one person and checked by a second person. The translations were modified, where necessary, based on pilot work. There were no significant differences in the results reported below as a function of whether the questionnaires were completed in Spanish or English.

Participants' mean age was 11.5 years ( $SD = 1.0$ ), and 50% were female. The racial and gender composition of the sample was representative of each school's population. Sixty-nine percent of participants were Hispanic; 24% were African, African Caribbean, or African American; 7% were Asian or Asian American (primarily Vietnamese); and 1% were European or European American. The majority of children (91%) attending the school from which the sample was drawn were eligible for free school lunches because their family's income was below 150% of the poverty level. Individual-level data on family income and socioeconomic status were not obtained.

Many of the sixth and seventh graders were participants in an ongoing longitudinal study of risk

and protective factors in children's development and had joined the study while attending the elementary school from which the fifth graders were recruited. The middle-school classmates of the original sixth and seventh graders were given the opportunity to join the research project. Fifty-five percent of the children were in fifth grade, 25% were in sixth grade, and 20% were in seventh grade. Thus, the children were about equally split between elementary and middle school when they initially completed the CRSQ.

### *Longitudinal Sample*

A subsample of 218 children also completed the CRSQ a second time in the 1994–1995 academic year when they were sixth to eighth graders. The follow-up sample included the sixth and seventh graders who continued to attend the participating middle school in seventh and eighth grade and the fifth graders who made the transition to the participating middle school. Fifth graders from the initial sample who did not attend the participating middle school were not followed up. In addition, about 10% of children in the original sample stopped attending the middle school during the study period and were dropped from the sample. Seven parents declined to have their children continue in the study, mainly because of concerns that it would interfere with schoolwork. The longitudinal sample resembled the Study 1 sample in age ( $M = 11.6$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ), gender (47% female), and ethnic composition (Hispanic 69%, African American 22%, Asian American 8%, and European American 1%). Forty-eight percent of the longitudinal sample were fifth graders in 1993–1994; 28% were sixth graders and 24% were seventh graders.

### Measures

#### *Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ)*

The development of the CRSQ is described below. The entire sample completed the CRSQ in 1993–1994 as fifth to seventh graders (Time 1). The longitudinal sample completed it again in 1994–1995 as sixth to eighth graders (Time 2).

*Identifying rejecting situations.* The first step involved identifying social situations in which acceptance or rejection was possible and which were both developmentally and culturally salient, as recommended by Dodge and E. Feldman (1990). A pool of situations was generated from open-ended inter-

views with 50 students about potentially upsetting interactions. Interviews were conducted with groups of 6 to 12 children. The students generated situations such as, "You had a really bad fight with a friend the other day. You wonder if your friend will want to talk to you today," and "You decide to ask the teacher if you can take home the video game for the weekend. You wonder if she will let you have it."

To ensure the inclusion of situations of particular salience to children with interpersonal difficulties of the type expected to be linked with rejection sensitivity, we interviewed 25 children who were identified from peer and teacher reports as being highly aggressive or being the target of other children's aggression and hostility. When asked about recent upsetting interactions with classmates and teachers, they often described situations involving other children openly or furtively talking about them and teachers ignoring them or favoring another student. The pool of situations was expanded accordingly.

*Thoughts and feelings when facing potential rejection (defensive expectations of rejection).* The second step involved determining which of these situations generated responses that varied along two dimensions: degree to which acceptance or rejection was expected, and degree of anticipatory defensive affect (i.e., anxiety or anger). Pretesting showed that embedding the situations in vignettes helped engage children's attention. Thus, the situations identified in Phase 1 were embedded in small vignettes for presentation to 40 children in Phase 2. The following is a sample vignette: "Pretend you have moved and you are going to a new school. In this school, the teacher lets the kids in the class take home a video game to play with on the weekend. Every week so far you have watched someone else take it home. You decide to ask the teacher if *you* can take home the video game this time. You wonder if she will let you have it."

Following each vignette, the children were asked to indicate how they would feel in the situation and whether they would expect an accepting or a rejecting outcome. In response to the former question, some children reported that they would feel angry, whereas others reported that they would feel nervous or anxious. Thus, the measure asks children about how angry and how anxious they would feel in the situation depicted in each vignette.

When situations that did not generate variance in feelings and expectations were eliminated, 12 situations remained. Table 1 presents these items. The CRSQ first asks children to indicate their degree of anxiety in anticipation of the outcome of each situa-

**Table 1** Factor Loadings for CRSQ Items Tapping the Three Components of Rejection Sensitivity

Item	Factor Loading
A. Angry expectations of rejection:	
1. You wonder if the kid will show up to give you the money	.38
2. You wonder if those kids are talking about you	.31
3. You wonder if the teacher will believe you	.52
4. You wonder if your friend will want to talk to you	.47
5. You wonder if the teacher will choose you to meet the famous guest	.62
6. You wonder if the new kid will want to talk to you	.66
7. You wonder if the teacher will choose you to help plan the party	.69
8. You wonder if the kids will stop and help you	.53
9. You wonder if the teacher will let you take home the video this time	.64
10. You wonder if the kids will want you for their group	.66
11. You wonder if the teacher will help you with your math	.61
12. You wonder if the teacher was talking about you	.47
<i>M (SD)</i>	9.4 (4.5)
<i>Median</i>	8.8
<i>Range</i>	1.5–23
B: Angry reaction to ambiguously intentioned rejection:	
1. I would feel mad at the teacher	.59
2. I would feel like hitting someone or something	.63
3. I would feel like I don't like that teacher	.64
4. I would pick on that other kid	.58
5. I'd make noise in class	.60
6. After that, I'd stay away from that teacher	.66
7. I would feel mad at those kids	.49
8. I would feel like hitting those kids	.70
9. After that, I'd stay away from those kids	.54
10. I would feel like I don't like those kids	.47
11. I'll find a way to get back at them	.65
<i>M (SD)</i>	1.78 (.46)
<i>Median</i>	1.73
<i>Range</i>	1–3
C. Feeling rejected ( <i>n</i> = 386, based on 1994–1995 data):	
1. I would feel like the teacher doesn't like me	.70
2. I would feel like the teacher doesn't care about me	.67
3. I would feel like the teacher prefers the other kid	.73
4. I would feel like those kids don't like me	.66
5. I would feel like those kids don't care about me	.66
6. I would feel like those kids ignored me even though they knew I really needed help	.45
<i>M (SD)</i>	1.76 (.48)
<i>Median</i>	1.67
<i>Range</i>	1–3

Note: *n* = 439, except for feeling rejected.

tion (e.g., "How NERVOUS would you feel about whether or not the teacher will let you take the video game home this time?") on a 6 point scale ranging from 1, "not nervous," to 6, "very, very nervous." Next, the children indicate their degree of anger in anticipation of the outcome of each situation (e.g., "How MAD would you feel about whether or not the

teacher will let you take the video game home this time?") on a 6 point scale ranging from 1, "not mad," to 6, "very, very mad." They then indicate the likelihood that the other person would respond with acceptance or rejection (Do you think the teacher is going to let you take home the video game this time?) on a scale ranging from 1, "YES!!!" to 6, "NO!!!" A

high score indicates the expectation of rejection and a low score indicates the expectation of acceptance. Pilot testing revealed that the ordering of the affect questions did not influence children's responses to either the affect or expectations questions.

The score for angry expectations of rejection was computed as follows: A separate score was generated for each situation by multiplying the score for the expected likelihood of rejection by the degree of anger over the possibility of its occurrence (expectancy of rejection  $\times$  anger). Then the final (cross-situational) rejection expectancy score for each participant was computed by summing the rejection expectancy score for each situation and dividing by 12, the total number of situations. Of theoretical interest were children who both expected rejection and experienced anger in anticipation of a potentially rejecting encounter in a variety of interpersonal situations. The score for anxious expectations of rejection was computed in a similar fashion.

*Psychological reactions to ambiguously intentioned rejection.* The third step focused on children's reactions following an ambiguously intentioned rejection. A representative teacher situation and a representative peer situation were chosen from the 12 CRSQ situations. The teacher situation involved the teacher responding to the child's request to take a particular video home for the weekend by saying, "No, you can't take it home this weekend. I'm giving it to someone else." In the peer situation, peers respond to the child's request for help with the spilled groceries by "just walk(ing) quickly by, as if they don't see you." In each situation, the rejecting behavior of the teacher or peers could be interpreted as an intentional rejection or as circumstantial (e.g., the teacher might have already promised it to someone else or the peers did not see the child). Pilot work revealed that children could generate explanations for these outcomes that ranged from benign to rejecting.

We sought to assess two components of the child's reaction to rejection:

1. *Angry psychological reaction.* We identified a set of affective (A), cognitive (C), and planned behavioral responses (PB) indicative of an angry psychological reaction that children might experience following the ambiguously intentioned peer and teacher rejection. An initial list of angry responses was generated from the open-ended interviews with children described in step 1, supplemented by observations of children's reactions to naturally occurring teacher and peer rejections. Examples of an angry reaction to the teacher giving the video to someone else for the weekend include: "I would feel like hitting someone or something" (A); "I would feel like I don't

really like that teacher because she's never fair with me" (C); "Next time when the teacher wants me to be quiet in class, I won't" (PB). Children were given six possible responses to the teacher situation and five possible responses to the peer situation. They were asked to indicate how true each of the responses would be of them, using a 3 point scale: 1 = not true, 2 = sort of true, 3 = very true. A total angry reaction measure was computed by averaging across the angry response scores for each peer and teacher situation.

2. *Perceived rejection.* For the Time 2 (1994–1995) administration of the CRSQ, the set of post-rejection responses was expanded to include six items assessing the extent to which the child felt rejected or disliked following the ambiguously intentioned peer or teacher rejection. A sample item for the teacher situation is, "I would feel like the teacher doesn't care about me." A sample item for the peer situation is, "I would feel like they don't like me."

#### *Attributions of Hostile Intent (Dodge, 1980)*

This questionnaire was completed by 100 fifth graders in 1993–1994. The children were asked to imagine themselves to be the target of three ambiguously intentioned aversive behaviors by peers: (1) suddenly getting milk spilled over one's back by a peer, (2) finding one's lunch missing from a locker shared with one other student, and (3) seeing a peer holding one's pen just when it had been assumed lost forever. They were then asked, "Why do you think [the event] happened?" Following Dodge (personal communication), the child's attributions for the protagonist's action were coded as the protagonist was "being mean" or "not being mean." Where a child's initial response could not readily be coded, the child was asked directly whether he or she thought the protagonist was being mean or not being mean. This occurred in 20% of cases. The results did not differ depending on whether or not a probe was used.

#### *Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1982)*

This valid and reliable self-report instrument assesses children's sense of their competence in a variety of domains, including the following: (1) social (e.g., being easy to like), (2) behavioral (e.g., behaving as well as other children), (3) physical (e.g., doing well at sports), and (4) cognitive (e.g., being smart). In this study, the internal reliability for these subscales was .69, .71, .77, and .74, respectively. This measure was completed by 172 students in the longitudinal sample at Time 2 (1994–1995). A high



score on a 1 to 4 point scale means high perceived competence.

## Results

### Factor Analysis and Norms

*CRSQ: Angry expectations.* Principal components analysis of the 12 items comprising the angry expectations part of the CRSQ yielded three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, but only one factor was retained by the scree test (eigenvalue = 3.7). All of the items loaded at .30 or higher, were similar for boys and girls, and (in data not reported) were relatively stable over a 1 year period. Table 1A gives the factor loading and other descriptive information on the measure. The longitudinal sample did not differ significantly from the complete Time 1 sample in angry expectations (complete sample:  $M = 9.4$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ; longitudinal sample:  $M = 9.9$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ). The distribution of CRSQ scores approximated the normal distribution.

*CRSQ: Angry reaction.* Factor analysis of the items assessing an angry reaction to an ambiguously intentioned rejection yielded a one factor solution (eigenvalue = 4.3). All of the items loaded at or above .45 and were similar for boys and girls, and (in data not reported) were fairly stable across a year (see Table 1B). The longitudinal sample did not differ from the Time 1 sample in mean angry response ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = .46$ ).

*CRSQ: Feeling disliked.* Feelings of being disliked following an ambiguously intentioned rejection were assessed only at Time 2. Factor analysis of the relevant six items supported a single-factor structure (eigenvalue = 2.5). All factor loadings were at .45 or above and were similar for boys and girls (see Table 1C).

### Internal Reliability and Stability of the CRSQ

For angry expectations,  $\alpha = .79$ ; for angry reaction,  $\alpha = .84$ ; for feeling disliked,  $\alpha = .72$ . Data from 76 children showed 4 week attenuation-corrected, test-retest reliabilities of .85 for angry expectations, .90 for angry reaction, and .85 for feeling disliked. The 1 year stabilities in the longitudinal sample were .58 for angry expectations and .61 for angry reaction. This information was unavailable for feeling disliked, which was assessed only at Time 2.

### Construct Validity

As predicted, attributions of hostile intent were significantly correlated with both angry expectations

of rejection,  $r(98) = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ , and an angry reaction to ambiguously intentioned rejection,  $r(98) = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ . As predicted, perceived social competence correlated significantly negatively with angry expectations of rejection,  $r(172) = -.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not with an angry reaction to rejection,  $r(172) = .06$ , *ns*. Perceived behavioral competence correlated significantly negatively with both angry expectations,  $r(172) = -.24$ ,  $p < .01$ , and angry reaction,  $r(172) = -.32$ ,  $p < .001$ . Neither component of the CRSQ correlated significantly with perceived cognitive (expectations:  $r[172] = .12$ ,  $p > .05$ ; reaction:  $r[197] = .13$ ,  $p > .05$ ) or physical competence (expectations:  $r[172] = .10$ ,  $p > .05$ ; reaction:  $r[172] = -.06$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

### Interrelations among the Components of Rejection Sensitivity

Angry expectations and an angry reaction were significantly correlated in both years: Time 1  $r(217) = .39$ , Time 2  $r(217) = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ . Feeling disliked was also very highly correlated with an angry reaction, Time 2  $r(217) = .65$ ,  $p < .001$ , and moderately correlated with angry expectations, Time 2  $r(217) = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ .

We used the Time 1 and Time 2 data from the longitudinal sample to examine whether angry expectations of rejection and an angry reaction to rejection reinforce each other over time. Specifically, we conducted cross-lagged regression analyses to assess (1) the relation between angry expectations and an angry reaction, controlling for initial level of angry reaction, and (2) the relation between an angry reaction and angry expectations, controlling for initial level of angry expectations. Each regression analysis also included dummy variables for whether the child was in elementary or middle school at Time 1 (fifth versus sixth and seventh grade), sex, and ethnicity. For ethnicity, one dummy variable denoted whether the child was African American; another denoted whether the child was Asian/European American. The reference category was Hispanic.

As predicted, angry expectations of rejection predicted an increase in angry reactions to an ambiguously intentioned rejection,  $\beta = .15$ ,  $t(208) = 2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ . An angry reaction predicted an increase in angry expectations of rejection,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $t(208) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

This study describes the development of the CRSQ and reports its psychometric properties. The components of the CRSQ show good internal reliability, and

their test-retest reliabilities and 1 year stabilities are similar to those of other self-report measures of social cognition (e.g., Harter, 1982; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1992). Moreover, the three components show an expected pattern of interrelations, and angry expectations of rejection and an angry reaction to rejection were self-reinforcing over time. Finally, the study provides some evidence of convergent and discriminant validity. The CRSQ was positively associated with attributions of hostile intent (Dodge, 1980) and negatively associated with perceived social and behavioral competence (Harter, 1982), but it did not predict perceived competence in the non-social domains of physical and cognitive competence.

Although the CRSQ appears to tap a valid, relatively enduring, and coherent information-processing disposition, the following questions still need to be addressed: Do angry expectations of rejection predict children's reaction to actual ambiguously intentioned rejections? Does rejection sensitivity have implications for children's social behavior? Study 2 addresses the first question and Study 3 addresses the second question.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 is an experimental investigation of whether children who were high in angry expectations of rejection are more likely than children who were low in angry expectations of rejection to feel distressed following an ambiguously intentioned rejection. Children were asked to select a friend as a partner for an interview. After selecting a friend, the children were informed that the friend did not wish to join them in the activity, but no explanation was offered for the friend's refusal. Children high in rejection expectations were expected to respond with more distress than children low in rejection expectations to their friend's decision.

Half of the participants were exposed to this experimental condition, while the other half were exposed to a control condition in which they learned that the teacher would not allow the chosen friend to leave the classroom. This unambiguously contextual explanation for the same outcome was not expected to induce heightened distress in children irrespective of level of rejection expectations. The experimenter was blind to the participant's experimental status until the manipulation was introduced, and neither the experimenter nor the assistant knew the participants' CRSQ score.

Children completed a self-report distress measure

before and after the experimental manipulation. We predicted that, in the experimental condition, children high in rejection expectations would report a greater increase in distress than children low in rejection expectations.

## Method

### Sample

Participants were 76 children selected from the Study 1 sample ( $M$  age = 12.2,  $SD$  = .92; 54% were female; 62% were Hispanic, 28% were African American, and 10% were Asian or European American). Their mean rejection expectations score ( $M$  = 8.9,  $SD$  = 5.2) did not differ significantly from those of the total sample ( $M$  = 8.44,  $SD$  = 4.29,  $n$  = 367,  $t$  = 1.3, *ns*). Girls and boys did not differ significantly on their mean rejection expectations score,  $t(75)$  = 0.04, *ns*. The children were selected to constitute groups high (above the Study 1 sample median,  $M$  = 13.0,  $SD$  = 3.3) and low (below the Study 1 sample median,  $M$  = 4.1,  $SD$  = 1.6) in angry expectations of rejection. The high and low rejection expectations groups were similar in age,  $t(75)$  = .36, *ns*, and gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 76) = .27$ , *ns*. Although more children than expected in the Asian/European American group were in the low rejection expectations category,  $\chi^2(2, N = 76) = 6.22$ ,  $p < .05$ , they were equally distributed in the experimental and control group and comprised only 10% of the sample.

Children from the high and low rejection expectations groups were randomly assigned to the experimental or control groups, which did not differ significantly in age,  $t(76) = .82$ , *ns*; race,  $\chi^2(2, N = 76) = 4.07$ , *ns*; gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 76) = 2.86$ , *ns*; or rejection expectations score,  $t(75) = 0.1$ , *ns*.

### Experimental Procedure

The examiner brought each participant to a room to be interviewed. Minutes later, the experimenter announced that it would be helpful to continue the interview with a friend. The child was then asked to choose a classmate whose company he or she would enjoy during the interview. At this point, a research assistant entered the room, and the experimenter requested that she bring the child's chosen friend to the experimental room. The assistant left the room, under the pretext of finding the friend, and the experimenter gave the child a short distress measure to complete. Throughout the study, the same experimenter and two research assistants were used. The

experimenter had considerable experience working with children at the participants' school and was familiar to them. The research assistants were unfamiliar to the children. The final experimental design was the culmination of extensive pilot work designed to identify the least severe rejection manipulation that would yield a detectable increase in distress in rejection sensitive children.

Once the participant had completed the measure, the assistant reentered the room and delivered the manipulation. In the experimental condition, the assistant stated, "Your friend said he/she didn't *want* to come." The experimenter then asked "What?" as if she had not heard correctly, and the assistant once again repeated the manipulation. Pilot work revealed that children could generate a range of benign and rejecting explanations for hypothetical friends saying that they did not want to join them in an activity. In the control condition, the assistant stated, "The teacher said he/she couldn't come right now," and then repeated the statement when the experimenter asked "What?" The assistant promptly departed, and the experimenter handed the child a second distress measure to complete, and then left the room as well. Both the experimenter and the assistant were instructed to behave in as neutral a manner as possible toward the child before leaving the room. When the child had completed the second questionnaire, the experimenter returned and completed the interview. After a few minutes, she gave the child the opportunity to select a small gift.

At this point the assistant returned and explained to the child that she had mistakenly gone to the wrong classroom in search of the friend. Therefore, she had not found the child's friend after all, but another child whom she had mistaken for the friend. She apologized profusely for the mistake. This mistake was plausible because the assistant was new at the school. This explanation was selected because we had observed that the children derived considerable enjoyment from unintentional adult mistakes. All participants expressed amusement at the explanation. Following the explanation, they were told that before returning to class they would get to spend extra time working with the experimenter, an activity that the children in the study typically enjoy. The experimenter made this time as positive as possible for the child. During this time, she also unobtrusively probed the children's feelings about the experiment to ensure that they were not experiencing any residual distress or harboring negative feelings toward their friend. No child was permitted to return to the classroom until the experimenter was confident that the child was in a positive mood.

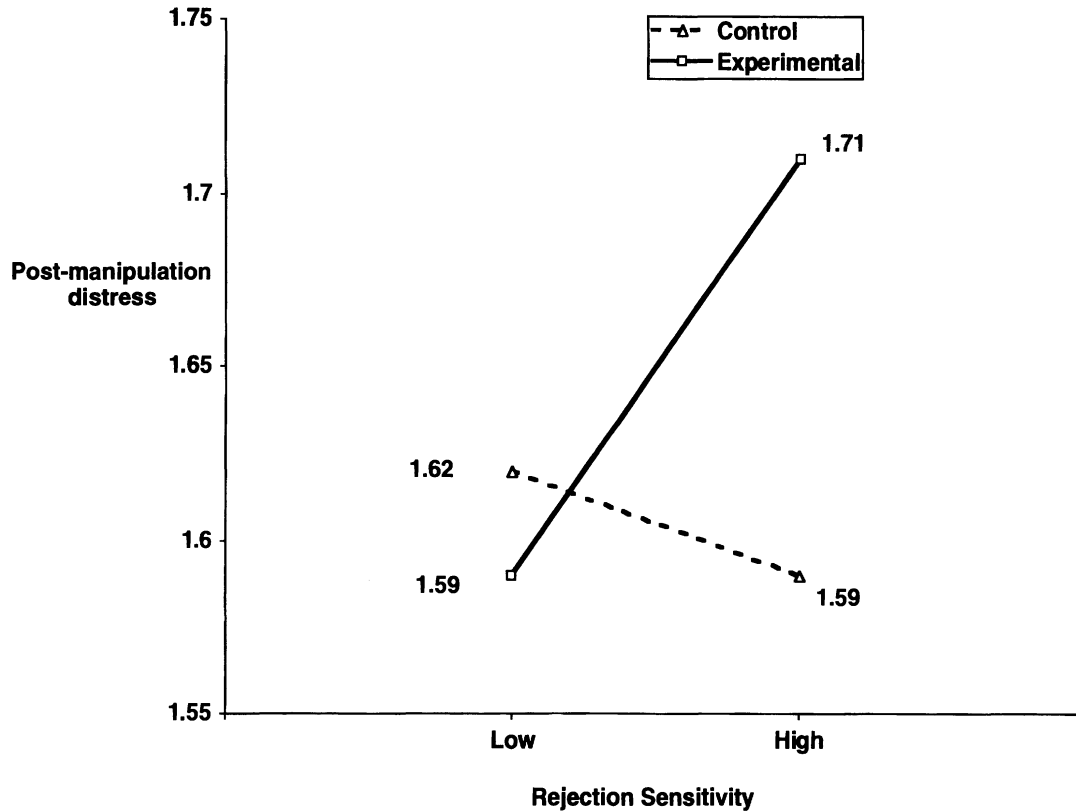
### Measures: Distress

The distress measure included nine negative mood items tapping anxiety (e.g., nervous), distrust (e.g., I don't trust people), depression (e.g., sad), and feelings of rejection (e.g., nobody cares about me), as well as five positive mood items (e.g., having fun). Pilot testing showed that these items were meaningful to the children. Participants were asked to circle the number that best described how much they were experiencing each of the feelings, right then, on a 5 point scale from 0, not at all, to 4, very much. Positive items were reversed and children's average distress score across the 14 items was obtained (premanipulation  $\alpha = .71$ , postmanipulation  $\alpha = .76$ ).

### Results

A 2 (experimental condition)  $\times$  2 (rejection expectations level) ANOVA was conducted with premanipulation distress as the dependent variable to assess preexisting differences in distress as a function of rejection expectations, experimental condition, or their interaction. The  $F$  test for the overall model was nonsignificant,  $F(3, 72) = 1.51, p > .05$ , as were the individual  $F$  tests for the main effects and the interaction term ( $p > .05$ ).

To test whether high rejection expectations children in the experimental condition showed a heightened increase in distress, we first conducted a 2 (experimental condition)  $\times$  2 (rejection expectations level) ANCOVA with premanipulation distress as the covariate and postmanipulation distress as the dependent variable. There was a significant interaction between experimental condition and level of rejection expectations,  $F(1, 71) = 4.56, p < .05$ . These results remained robust when race, age, or gender were included as covariates. We next conducted a planned comparison test to assess whether children high in rejection expectations in the experimental condition showed the highest level of postmanipulation distress, adjusting for premanipulation distress. This hypothesis was supported,  $F(1, 71) = 7.85, p < .01$ . Figure 1 gives the postmanipulation distress for the four groups adjusted for premanipulation distress. Children high in rejection expectations who received the ambiguously intentioned rejection showed the highest level of distress, whereas the distress of experimentally rejected children low in rejection expectations resembled that of control group children. Thus, being told that a friend did not want to join the child for the interview induced an increase in distress only in children high in rejection expectations.



**Note:** Predicted values of distress are estimated for the mean on pre-manipulation distress

Figure 1 Postmanipulation distress as a function of rejection and experimental status adjusting for premanipulation distress

## Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that children with angry expectations of rejection react more negatively than others to an ambiguously intentioned rejection. Children high in rejection expectations became more distressed than children low in rejection expectations following an experimentally manipulated rejection. The distress experienced by children high in rejection expectations was a specific reaction to ambiguously intentioned rejection feedback. Irrespective of level of rejection expectations, children did not show increased distress in the control condition, where the outcome was the same—the friend did not join the child for the interview—but did not result from a rejection by the friend. Thus, children who angrily expected rejection were not simply overreacting to a undesirable outcome.

## STUDY 3

A tendency to overreact to minor or unintended slights or insensitivities is likely to cause trouble with teachers and peers, especially when it takes the form

of an angry reaction pattern, which may prompt hostile defiance or aggressive retaliation. Study 3 tested whether rejection sensitivity predicted increased difficulties with peers and with teachers over time. We also assessed whether rejection sensitivity was characteristic of children who showed a decline in investment in school over time, indexed by declining grades and increasing absences and suspensions.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

The data are from the longitudinal sample described in Study 1: 115 female and 103 male students who completed the CRSQ as fifth to seventh graders in the 1993–1994 academic year (Time 1) and again as sixth to eighth graders in the 1994–1995 academic year (Time 2).

Children completed self-report measures of aggression and victimization in small groups of six to eight supervised by a research assistant. About 20% of the sample completed the measures in Spanish.

Their pattern of responses did not differ significantly from those of children who completed the measures in English.

At the end of the school year, teachers completed a one page questionnaire for each study participant in their class. In 1994–1995 (Time 2), the child's middle school homeroom teacher completed the questionnaire. For Time 1, 1993–1994, the fifth graders' elementary school teacher provided the data. It was not possible to obtain Time 1 data from the sixth and seventh graders' homeroom teachers in 1993–1994. However, most of these children had begun participating in the study when in elementary school as fifth and sixth graders, respectively, in 1992–1993 (sixth grade was subsequently moved to the middle school). That year, their elementary school teacher had completed questionnaires on them. These data were used as the sixth and seventh graders' Time 1 teacher data.

Data on children's grades and school attendance were obtained from school reports, which are prepared four times a year. These data were available at Time 1 and Time 2. Time 2 data on serious rule transgressions and resulting disciplinary actions were obtained from the official log maintained by the dean of discipline assigned to each middle school grade.

## Measures

The measures for this study were the CRSQ, completed by students at Time 1 and Time 2, and three sources of data on children's behavior: (1) self-reports, (2) teacher reports, and (3) official records of transgressions against school rules.

### *Children's Self-Reports of Victimization and Aggression*

Children completed an abbreviated version of the Youth Self-Report Version of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL-YSR; Achenbach, 1991). The measure included 13 items about aggressive or delinquent behavior (e.g., mean to others, hits people, breaks own things). Pilot work using the complete CBCL-YSR with children drawn from the same schools revealed that these items formed a reliable and valid factor. In the present sample, Time 1  $\alpha = .80$  and Time 2  $\alpha = .85$ . The measure also included seven items about victimization (e.g., "Other kids pick on me"; "I get teased a lot"; Time 1  $\alpha = .82$ , Time 2  $\alpha = .85$ ). Four of the seven victimization items were developed for the present study to supplement the victimization items in the CBCL-YSR. Children

were asked whether each behavioral descriptor was "very true" (scored 2), "a little true" (scored 1), or "not true" (scored 0) of them in the past 6 months. Mean aggression and victimization scores were obtained.

### *Teacher Reports*

The teachers' questionnaire was adapted from Coie and Dodge (1988). It included four items indexing aggression toward peers: "threatens and bullies to get own way"; "uses physical force to dominate other children"; "starts fights with other children"; and "says mean things to or threatens other kids." It also included five items assessing social competence ("is easy to get along with"; "tries his or her best to do well in school"; "is liked by everyone"; "has lots of friends"; and "learns from his or her mistakes"). Finally, it included five items that assessed behavioral evidence of children's sensitivity to rejection ("overreacts to accidental hurts with anger or tears"; "is unduly upset by negative feedback from teacher"; "is sensitive to rejection"; "gets angry or gives up when the work is difficult"; and "tends to take things too personally"). The questionnaire yielded three reliable scales. For the four item aggression scale,  $\alpha = .95$  at Time 1 and  $.93$  at Time 2. For the five item rejection sensitivity scale,  $\alpha = .84$  at both Time 1 and Time 2. For the five item social competence scale,  $\alpha = .81$  at Time 1 and  $.82$  at Time 2.

### *Official School Reports*

*Academic performance.* A summary academic performance score was obtained by averaging across the four within-year assessments of children's performance in English, math, social studies, and science recorded in their report cards. Because different grading schemes were used in elementary and middle school, scores were standardized within grade.

*Number of days absent.* Number of days absent during the academic year was obtained from the child's report card. Because absence rate increased with grade level, it was standardized within grade.

*Formal referrals for disciplinary action.* Each time a child is formally referred for disciplinary action by a teacher or school official because of aggressive, disruptive, oppositional, or delinquent behavior, the type of infraction and the sanctions taken, such as suspensions, are recorded by the dean of discipline for the child's grade.

A research assistant identified each time a study participant appeared in the official record for three

types of transgressions: (1) conflicts with teachers or school officials (e.g., curses, threatens or throws things at adults, disobeys or is hostile, defiant and argumentative toward adults, disruptive in the classroom), (2) conflicts with any peers (e.g., curses, ridicules, or gets in physical fight with peers), and (3) conflicts with opposite-sex peers (e.g., curses, ridicules, or gets in physical fight with opposite-sex peer). Number of suspensions was also coded.

## Results and Discussion

Table 2 reports analyses undertaken to assess the impact of rejection sensitivity on social adjustment, indexed by self and teacher reports, and official reports of school rule infractions and suspensions during the subsequent academic year. Logistic regression was used when the dependent variable was dichotomous; otherwise ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used. For purposes of statistical control, each regression analysis included gender, grade, ethnicity (dummy variables were entered for African American and Asian/European American; the reference category was Hispanic). Grade was entered as a dummy variable, with the Time 1 middle school grades (grades 6 and 7) scored 1 and the Time 1 ele-

mentary school grade (grade 5) scored 0. The lagged value of the dependent variable was also controlled, except for school rule infractions and suspensions, where Time 1 data were unavailable.

Table 2 gives the standardized regression coefficients linking Time 1 rejection sensitivity with Time 2 outcome measures. Separate analyses were conducted for (1) angry expectations of rejection and (2) an angry reaction to an ambiguously intentioned rejection. Preliminary analyses revealed few significant sex, race, or grade level differences in relations between adjustment and the two components of rejection sensitivity. The exceptions are discussed below.

*Self reports.* Angry expectations of rejection and an angry reaction to rejection at Time 1 predicted an increase by Time 2 in children's self-reports of aggressive, antisocial behavior and of being victimized.

*Teacher reports.* Both components of rejection sensitivity predicted an increase over time in aggression toward peers and in sensitivity to interpersonal slights and a decline in social competence.

*Official records.* Logistic regression was used to assess the association between both components of rejection sensitivity and dichotomous indicators of the presence or absence of official records of conflicts

**Table 2** Standardized Regression Coefficients Linking Time 1 Aspect of Rejection Sensitivity with Time 2 Measure of Adjustment

Time 2, Dependent Variables	Time 1, Predictor Variables			
	Angry Expectations of Rejection		Angry Reaction to Rejection	
	$\beta$	$p <$	$\beta$	$p <$
<i>Self-report:</i>				
Aggressive behavior	.13	.05	.18	.001
Victimization	.13	.06	.18	.01
<i>Teacher reports:</i>				
Social competence	-.16	.03	-.17	.02
Peer aggression	.17	.02	.13	.05
Rejection sensitivity	.17	.04	.17	.04
<i>School reports:</i>				
Grades	-.05	.62	-.16	.004
No. of days absent	.11	.08	.15	.03
Suspension from school <sup>a</sup>	.14	.12	.28	.002
Conflicts with school personnel <sup>a</sup>	.35	.001	.43	.001
Conflicts with any peers <sup>a</sup>	.22	.04	.38	.001
Conflicts with opposite sex peers <sup>a</sup>	.22	.10	.25	.07

*Note:* Maximum  $n = 218$ , minimum  $n = 174$ ; all analyses included sex, grade, race, and, except where noted, the Time 1 value of the dependent variable as control variables.

<sup>a</sup> Results of logistic regression analyses. These analyses did not include Time 1 value of the dependent variable as a control variable.

with (1) adults, (2) any peers, and (3) opposite-sex peers. In the case of conflicts with adults or with opposite-sex peers, children received a score of 1 on these variables if they ever appeared in official records for these transgressions and 0 otherwise. As official records for conflicts with any peers are more frequent, children received a score of 1 on this variable if they were reported more than once for conflicts with peers and 0 otherwise. In addition to the previous year's measure of rejection sensitivity, the independent variables were grade, gender, and ethnicity.

As Table 2 shows, Time 1 angry expectations predicted official records of conflicts with peers and adults in the following year. The association between angry expectations of rejection and subsequent conflict with adults was particularly pronounced in fifth graders who made the transition to middle school,  $\beta = .94$ ,  $\chi^2(1, N = 218) = 9.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . An angry reaction to an ambiguously intentioned rejection was an even stronger predictor than angry expectations of official records of conflicts with peers and teachers. An angry reaction also predicted difficulties with opposite-sex peers.

Finally, we examined whether rejection sensitivity predicted three indicators of school functioning: grades, number of days absent, and suspensions for serious rule transgressions. Children with at least one suspension received a score of 1, and those with no suspensions were scored 0. It was possible to control for Time 1 grades and days absent, but Time 1 data were unavailable for school suspensions.

As Table 2 shows, children who reacted angrily to an ambiguously intentioned rejection showed a decline in grades and an increase in days absent. There was a marginally significant association between angry expectations of rejection and an increase in days absent. However, this finding masks a significant angry expectations  $\times$  sex interaction: Angry expectations had a more pronounced impact on days absent in girls than in boys,  $\beta = .35$ ,  $t(171) = 2.07$ ,  $p < .05$ . Children who showed an angry reaction to rejection were also at increased risk of being suspended for disciplinary infractions. In the case of angry expectations, there was a nonsignificant trend for suspensions from school. This masked a significant association between angry expectations and school suspensions in fifth graders who made the transition to middle school: angry expectations  $\times$  grade (fifth versus sixth and seventh),  $\beta = .74$ ,  $\chi^2(1, N = 218) = 8.74$ ,  $p < .01$ .

In sum, rejection sensitive children experienced increasing difficulties in school with peers and teachers, and they reported experiencing more victimiza-

tion and engaging in more aggressive, antisocial behavior over time. They also began to disengage from school; their grades declined and their rate of absences and suspensions increased. It is true, however, that sensitivity to rejection is but one of many influences on children in the school setting.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The first goal was to describe the development of a valid and reliable measure of rejection sensitivity, a cognitive-affective processing disposition that we propose helps account for individual differences in children's reactions to social rejection. The second goal was to demonstrate the implications of rejection sensitivity for children's relationships with peers and teachers.

Study 1 describes the development of a measure of rejection sensitivity, the CRSQ, and provides evidence that the measure is valid and reliable. This measure operationalizes rejection sensitivity in terms of the cognitive-affective processes that guide behavior in situations where rejection is possible. The CRSQ assesses the three distinct but interrelated components of rejection sensitivity: anxious or angry expectations of rejection, readiness to perceive rejection, and tendency to overreact to perceived rejection. This study focused on angry expectations of rejection and on angry reactions to perceived rejection.

Study 2 tested whether angry expectations of rejection, assessed via the CRSQ, would prompt children to affectively overreact to ambiguously intentioned rejection. In support of this prediction, following an experimentally manipulated rejection that was ambiguously intentioned, children who angrily expected rejection became more distressed than children with less negative expectations. This finding cannot be attributed to a general disposition to overreact to goal frustration because the reaction of children high and low in angry expectations of rejection did not differ in the rejection condition in which the explanation was clearly circumstantial. Presumably, the reason for the increased distress of children who angrily expected rejection in the ambiguously intentioned condition was their perception that their friend's behavior was motivated by rejecting intent. However, the study did not examine this possibility directly.

Finally, Study 3 showed that rejection sensitivity predicts difficulties with peers and teachers. Data from teacher reports, school records, and child self-reports revealed that, over time, rejection sensitive children showed increased levels of disruptive, oppositional, and conflictful behavior and disen-

gement from school, indexed by increased absences and suspensions and declining grades.

### Issues for Further Research

Although our findings support our predictions, several issues warrant further investigation.

#### Alternative Anticipatory Affect in Situations of Potential Rejection

The current study focused on angry expectations of rejection in situations in which rejection was possible. Yet, in such situations, children could also experience anticipatory anxiety. These two types of anticipatory affect are not mutually exclusive but often overlap. Future research needs to examine whether anxious and angry expectations of rejection may promote different responses to perceived rejection and thus have different implications for long-term adjustment. Whereas angry expectations promote aggressive behavior, anxious expectations may promote social withdrawal, leading to loneliness and school drop-out. Alternatively, anxious expectations may prompt children to engage in ingratiating or conforming behavior in the belief that others will not reject them so long as they meet others' needs (Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997; Horney, 1937; Troy & Sroufe, 1986). Finally, anxious expectations, relative to angry expectations, may make a child more vulnerable to helplessness and depression when they perceive rejection.

Why might some rejection sensitive children experience anger, whereas others experience anxiety in anticipation of potential rejection? One possible explanation is that different socialization contexts may contribute to the differential salience of anger and anxiety. Among predominantly middle-class college students, we have found anxiety to be the salient anticipatory affect in situations of possible rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Among participants in the present study, however, anticipatory anger was also salient. One contextual difference underlying this divergence could be the increased risk of violence faced by inner-city children relative to middle-class college students. In the relatively dangerous inner-city context, the expression of anxiety in threatening situations could make a child appear vulnerable and a potential target of victimization. Thus, experiencing anger rather than anxiety may be a protective strategy that some inner-city children learn through reinforcement and modeling. In contrast, the majority of college students participating in our research were raised in contexts in which the ex-

pression of fear and anxiety may have been relatively less dangerous and in which the expression of anger and aggression may have been less acceptable.

Inner-city early adolescents' and middle-class college students' differing reactions to perceived rejection could also reflect their different levels of development. Accordingly, it will be important to investigate possible developmental differences in whether a defensive reaction to the possibility of rejection is experienced as anxiety or anger. As we continue to track our early adolescent sample, it will be possible to examine whether the anticipatory affect elicited by threats of rejection is more likely to be described as fear than as anger as the sample approaches early adulthood.

#### Implications of Rejection Sensitivity for Other Important Relationships

The present research addressed the implications of rejection sensitivity for adolescents' relationships with peers and teachers. Consequently, the CRSQ was limited to situations involving these school-based relationships. However, parents and siblings are also important sources of acceptance and rejection. We are currently expanding the CRSQ to include situations involving family members. In addition, we are also beginning to examine romantic relationships, another important source of acceptance and rejection that emerges in adolescence (see Downey, Bonica, & Rincón, in press).

#### Origins of Rejection Sensitivity

Our focus on the implications of rejection sensitivity for social relationships needs to be complemented by a focus on the implications of relationships for rejection sensitivity. Troubled, rejecting relationships with parents, siblings, peers, and teachers are likely to be particularly influential in this regard (Downey et al., 1997). In the case of economically disadvantaged, minority children, such as those in our study, another layer of potential rejection needs also to be considered. Our study participants share a vulnerability to rejection and discrimination because they are members of negatively stereotyped groups (i.e., most were poor and African American or Hispanic). Poor, minority children may become sensitized to potential rejection because of their social class and race through personal experiences of discrimination and exclusion and through an acquired knowledge of discrimination against other members of their race and social class. The stress of knowing that one is a potential target of prejudice and discrimination may then



lead to a heightened awareness of contextual cues pertinent to one's status group (Link, 1987).

### Breaking the Cycle That Maintains Rejection Sensitivity

Our findings suggest that rejection sensitive children may behave in ways that elicit rejection from others, thus reinforcing their expectations of rejection. These findings imply the need to identify ways of interrupting this self-perpetuating process.

First, expectations of rejection may be altered. There is experimental evidence that inducing expectations of acceptance in peer-rejected children prior to their entry into a group of unfamiliar peers led the new peers to respond more positively toward the rejected children (Rabiner & Coie, 1989). Inducing enduring change in expectations may be more difficult. However, there is evidence that supportive relationships can help people transcend severe childhood rejection of the types thought to induce expectations of rejection (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Patterson, Cohn, & Kao, 1989; Quinton, Rutter, & Liddle, 1984). This evidence suggests the need for research that identifies the manner through which such relationships may alter expectations of rejection and the circumstances under which such relationships develop.

Second, children's readiness to perceive intentional rejection in other people's behavior may prove amenable to change. Hudley and Graham (1993, 1995) have shown that training aggressive children to make less hostile attributions for others' ambiguous behavior lowered the youths' aggression levels. Similarly, teaching rejection sensitive children to consider alternative interpretations of incidents of possible social rejection could help reduce their readiness to perceive rejecting intent in others' behavior.

Third, the translation of an angry psychological reaction to perceived rejection into aggressive action may be prevented. Self-regulatory competencies, such as the ability to delay immediate gratification in the pursuit of a long-term goal, could help children to stop themselves from acting on angry thoughts and feelings (Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996). Consistent with this proposal, Mendoza-Denton and Freitas (1997) found that the ability to delay gratification helped reduce the likelihood that an angry reaction to rejection would translate into aggressive behavior.

### Conclusion

In this article we propose that rejection sensitivity is an important mediator of children's interpersonal

difficulties. We defined rejection sensitivity as a disposition to defensively expect, readily perceive, and overreact to social rejection. Our data show that rejection sensitivity affects how children think, feel, and behave in their relationships with peers and teachers.

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