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Aggression and school social dynamics: The good, the bad, and the ordinary ☆

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Abstract

A social dynamics perspective of aggression in school is presented. This framework focuses on the role of natural social processes in the establishment and maintenance of aggressive behavior in the school context. The five articles in this special issue are briefly reviewed and a synthesis of their contributions for understanding the social dynamics of aggression in school is underscored. Future research and intervention implications are also discussed. The need for examining the role of school social dynamics in conducting social skills interventions, functional behavioral assessments, and the development of positive behavioral support plans is emphasized.

Keywords: Aggression; Social dynamics; Bullying; Functional behavioral assessments; Peer relations

This special issue focuses on social dynamic factors and processes that support aggression in school. Building from decades of research on aggression, peer rejection, and social skill deficits (for reviews see Asher & Coie, 1990; Ladd, 1999; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998), a common conception is that aggressive youth are socially unskilled and marginalized. Although there is considerable empirical support for this view, it represents

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only one side of the coin. Nearly 50% of aggressive youth are not rejected by peers (Coie & Dodge, 1998). In addition, some aggressive children and adolescents associate with popular peers (Farmer, Estell, Bishop, O'Neal, & Cairns, 2003; Farmer et al., 2002) and are viewed by teachers and classmates as being popular and central within the social hierarchy (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & VanAcker, 2000). These differing perspectives of the peer relations of aggressive youth underscore the complexity of the social dynamics that promote the establishment and maintenance of aggressive behavior in school. While interventions to reduce aggression tend to focus on youth with social difficulties, there is a growing recognition that such efforts must also address processes of peer support and the broader contributions of all students within the peer ecology (Farmer, 2000; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Salmivalli, 1999).

Accordingly, the goal of this special issue is to highlight advances in the study of social dynamics that may help to clarify interpersonal processes that support aggression in school. The five studies in this issue are quite eclectic in terms of conceptual frameworks, research methods, and scope. Further, they cover a broad range of factors and processes that are associated with aggressive behavior and they span the preschool through the high school years. However, these articles share three common features that are critical to the purpose of this issue. First, they go beyond a focus on socially marginalized youth and also consider how socially competent and dominant youth contribute to aggression. Second, they situate aggressive behavior within the classroom or social ecology and view aggression as being embedded within an interactional context rather than emanating solely from the individual. Third, while they do not examine or evaluate interventions, each of these articles examines key factors or processes that could be modifiable within the school context. These three points come together to suggest that these studies may yield new perspectives on aggressive behavior in school and provide insights on the development of innovative approaches to reduce or prevent aggression in the classroom.

In this introduction, we briefly review research on the social dynamics of aggression in school. Our focus involves considering how all youth, not just those who are marginalized, may contribute to creating social contexts that support aggressive behavior. Next, we summarize the critical concepts and results of each of article and provide a commentary of their contributions to understanding the social dynamics of aggression in school. We conclude with a synthesis of the implications of these studies for the development of interventions to address aggressive behavior.

School social dynamics

When same-age children or youth are aggregated together they tend to selectively and systematically synchronize their behavior with each other (see Farmer, Xie, Cairns, & Hutchins, 2007; Gallagher, Dadisman, Farmer, Huss, & Hutchins, 2007; Youniss, 1980). This leads to the formation of (1) differential preferences for peer interactions, (2) distinct social groups, and (3) hierarchical social structures (Adler & Adler, 1998; Cairns, Perrin, & Cairns, 1985; Strayer & Trudel, 1984). Prosocial children are often liked by their peers, while aggressive children are often disliked (Rubin et al., 1998). This is taken as evidence that aggressive children are rejected and socially marginalized in school. However, children tend to form groups with others who are similar to them on key social characteristics.

Consequently, several studies have shown that aggressive youth affiliate with others who are aggressive (e.g., Bagwell, Coie, Terry, & Lochman, 2000; Cairns, Carins, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988; Farmer & Hollowell, 1994). These results have been viewed as supporting the theory that aggressive youth are socially unskilled and associate together by default because they are marginalized by conventional peers (see Dishion, Patterson, & Griesler, 1994). More recent studies show that some aggressive children, especially some socially (or relationally/indirectly) aggressive children, have prominent social status within the social hierarchy. Some are central members, some are leaders, and some are viewed as highly popular in school (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Lease et al., 2002; Xie, Farmer, & Cairns, 2003; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002).

As indicated above, there are popular and unpopular subtypes of aggressive youth who have distinct peer affiliation patterns (Farmer et al., 2002; Farmer, Estell, Bishop et al., 2003; Farmer, Estell, Leung et al., 2003). This suggests that there are two social worlds of aggression in school: one involves aggressive youth who are socially marginalized and the other involves youth who are well-integrated and influential in the social structure. This view of two social worlds of aggression is supported by ethnographic, narrative, and observational studies which indicate that some youth who are perceived as being highly popular and central in the social network use physical and social forms of aggression to promote and sustain their influence and positions in the social hierarchy while other aggressive youth are picked-on and victimized by peers in general (Adler & Adler, 1998; Pelligrini & Long, 2002; Pepler, Craig, & Roberts, 1998; Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 2005). These collective findings indicate that aggression is part of the general social dynamics in classrooms and suggests that it may serve a variety of functions as youth negotiate their social worlds. The discussion below briefly outlines the complexity of the social dynamics that support aggressive behavior by considering the "good," bad," and "ordinary" side of aggression in school.

The "good" side of aggression

Typically, it is not common to think of a "good side" of aggression in the school context, although the almost universal existence of aggression suggests its adaptive functioning in various species. In recent years, researchers have begun to focus on the productive functions of aggression and the contributions of "good" students to aggressive behavior in the classroom and school. On this score, a recent volume titled *Aggression and Adaptation: The Bright Side to Bad Behavior* (Hawley, Little, & Rodkin, 2007) highlights theoretical and empirical foundations for clarifying how aggression can promote individual development as well as the functioning of broader social units such as classroom and school social networks. By systematically using both aggressive and prosocial strategies, some youth are able to maximize their social opportunities and to promote order within the social system (Hawley, 1999; Cairns & Cairns, 2000). When socially skilled children selectively use aggression to establish dominance or to prevent further transgressions by others, they may promote a social hierarchy that reduces jockeying for social position, decreases the frequency of conflict, and diminishes the likelihood that interpersonal disagreements will escalate into more harmful incidents (Pelligrini & Long, 2002; Strayer & Trudel, 1984). On this count, social aggression (indirect or relational) may play an

important role, particularly in the early adolescent years. Further, youth who are adept at social aggression tend to have high social network centrality and a strong understanding of interpersonal dynamics (Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Xie et al., 2005, 2003).

Ethnographic research in both elementary and middle school settings indicate that many socially dominant youth who use physical and social forms of aggression tend to be students in high profile social roles such as cheerleaders, athletes, and student government leaders (Adler & Adler, 1996; Eder, 1985; Eder & Parker, 1987). This is supported by recent survey research which indicates that a subset of aggressive youth are perceived by teachers and peers as being attractive, athletic, class leaders, popular, and cool (Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2003; Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, in press; Farmer, Estell, Bishop, et al., 2003; Farmer, Estell, Leung et al., 2003; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006). Therefore, while teachers acknowledge that these youth are aggressive, they also recognize that these students have social roles that afford them a high level of esteem and influence in the social ecology. It is possible that these youth may have the social influence and ability to use aggression in ways that promote productive classroom and group activities.

The "bad" side of aggression

The negative impact of aggression on development is well documented (see Coie & Dodge, 1998; Loeber & Hay, 1997) and is beyond the scope of this article. For the purpose of this special issue, we focus on how aggression and social dynamics contribute to school adjustment. From the perspective of perpetrators, physical aggression often co-occurs with other academic, behavioral, and social problems (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Walker & Sprague, 1999). As part of a system of correlated constraints or risk factors, physically aggressive behavior is frequently linked to patterns of social roles, interpersonal interactions, and peer affiliations that support and sustain a range of adjustment problems and poor outcomes (Farmer, Farmer, Estell, & Hutchins, in press). Aggressive youth who experience social problems are less likely to be academically engaged, more likely to disrupt the activities of others, and at increased risk for academic difficulties, school failure, poor teacher–student relationships, and school dropout (Farmer, Estell, Leung et al., 2003; French, Conrad, & Turner, 1995; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Wentzel & Asher, 1995).

From the perspective of victims, aggression may inhibit school engagement and social relationships. Children who are chronically victimized (either physically or socially) by peers are more likely to withdraw from instructional activities, have chronic attendance problems, and experience academic difficulties (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). Peer exclusion, victimization, and low academic self-concept work together to contribute to academic engagement difficulties and subsequent achievement problems (Buhs, 2005). Further, youth who are frequently victimized typically have few friends and are often viewed as social liabilities by their peers (Adler & Adler, 1998; Evans & Eder, 1993; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). This is problematic as recent studies suggest that having friends and competent associates may buffer against chronic victimization and associated developmental consequences (Hanish, Ryan, Martin, & Fabes, 2005; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Malcolm, Jensen-Campbell, Rex-Lear, & Waldrip, 2006).

The "ordinary" side of aggression

One of the paradoxes of aggression is that it is associated with both perceived popularity and peer rejection (Cillessen & Rose, 2005). From a social dynamics perspective, this is not surprising and it reflects the natural interactional patterns and social roles that emerge within a hierarchical social system (Farmer, Farmer, et al., in press). Youth who are at the extremes of the social hierarchy–nuclear leaders and social outcasts–are both socially vulnerable. Nuclear leaders may use aggression to protect their social positions and to maintain their influence with peers, while social outcasts may react aggressively against the transgressions and taunts of others with the aim of warding off future attacks (Adler & Adler, 1998; Estell, Farmer, & Cairns, 2007; Evans & Eder, 1993; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002).

The offshoot of this is that while social hierarchies can reduce aggression, they can also exacerbate it when youth feel socially vulnerable and their roles and reputations within the social system are in danger (Adler & Adler, 1995; Hymel, Wagner, & Bulter, 1990). In situations where the social hierarchy is uncertain, aggressive expression may become more pronounced and commonplace (Adler & Adler, 1996; Merten, 1997; Pelligrini & Long, 2002). In such cases, it is likely that "ordinary" children become more tolerant of aggression and may support the bullying behavior of leaders or engage in such behavior themselves as a way to promote their own status or to deflect the possibility that they may become vulnerable to the attacks of others (Adler & Adler, 1995; Evans & Eder, 1993). This is consistent with research indicating that bullying involves the social community and is supported by the social roles of a broad range of peers (Pepler et al., 1998; Salmivalli et al., 1996).

The current articles

The articles in this special issue focus on aggression in relation to naturally occurring social processes in the school ecology. As suggested by the review above, clarifying the factors that support the establishment and maintenance of aggression involves a consideration of the social roles, interactional dynamics, and peer group processes in which the child is embedded.

Toward this aim, the five articles in this issue extend current perspectives of the social and developmental context of aggression in school. The key conceptual and empirical contributions of each of these articles is briefly outlined below with an emphasis on their implications for the development of interventions aimed at promoting children's peer relations and reducing aggressive behavior in the classroom an school.

Roseth et al. (2007-this issue) examine social dominance (i.e., the naturally occurring difference in resource-control-status among individual members of a social group) across a school year in four preschool classrooms. Based on ethological theory regarding management of interpersonal conflict in social settings, these researchers investigated patterns of rates of physical aggression, affiliation, and visual regard in relation to children's dominance status. As predicted by these investigators, physical and verbal aggression increased during the beginning of the school year, and decreased afterwards. This supports the view that aggression is most prevalent when social dominance structures are ambiguous

and is consistent with findings on the transition to middle school when youth jockey for social positions in a new social context (e.g., Pelligrini & Long, 2002). Social dominance status was related to covariation in types of aggression (physical, verbal) and in rates of aggression and affiliation. Aggression was positively associated with affiliation. Further, high dominance children were more discriminating in their use of verbal and physical aggression and appeared to use it more effectively and efficiently than other children. In sum, these findings suggest that socially dominant preschoolers balance the use of aggressive and affiliative strategies depending on the stability of the peer relationship and the context in which the social interchange occurs.

These findings underscore the functional importance of aggression in young children's peer relationships. Rather than inhibiting peer affiliations, children who are highly dominant and interact frequently with peers in a positive or neutral manner engage in high rates of aggressive behavior, particular verbal aggression. After establishing dominance through physical means, it is possible that verbally aggressive strategies become more effective and that these children use aggression in competent ways that do not escalate or disrupt peer activities. Conversely, less dominant children may continue to try to use aggression to get their way even though it is not effective for them. This brings to light a critical issue for teachers and interventionists. The problem may not be aggression per se, but rather, an imbalance in general competencies for children who "lose" a lot in interpersonal conflicts. It is likely that in most classrooms, some children will lack characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, familiarity with peers) and abilities (e.g., physical, cognitive, language) that transcend social skills and that are important in "winning" disputes. While few adults would advocate teaching children to become more competent aggressors, is it appropriate to teach them to become good "losers" or "followers"? Perhaps, but it may be equally or more important to support natural social dynamic processes while intervening with aggression, teaching the child more effective skills for behavioral regulation and negotiating conflict, and enhancing her or his capabilities in one or two domains (e.g., academic skills, sports, language skills) so she or he experiences more "wins." To support this, teachers can structure activities, partners, and interactional opportunities so that children who are prone to aggressive conflicts can experience more "wins" that reinforce appropriate behaviors (see Holmberg, 1980).

Hawley et al. (2007-this issue) also build from an ethological perspective and focus on social dominance in preschool. This study explored the linkages between social power and perceptions of physical attractiveness. Based on resource control theory (Hawley, 1999), these researchers identified five subtypes of children according to the strategies (prosocial, coercive) they use to control resources (social, material). *Prosocial* controllers use primarily prosocial strategies to gain resources, *Coercive* controllers use primarily coercive strategies, *Bistrategic* controllers use both prosocial and coercive strategies, *Noncontrollers* are low on both prosocial and coercive strategies, and typical controllers are not particularly high or low in resource control. Using variable oriented approaches, these investigators found that teacher-rated physical attractiveness was positively associated with social prominence and negatively associated with aggression for boys, and positively associated with social dominance and social skills for girls. However, from a person-oriented perspective, the analyses revealed that teachers did view aggressive children who were bistrategic controllers as being physically attractive while they viewed coercive

controllers as unattractive. In contrast, independent adult raters (i.e., rated pictures) who were not familiar with the children did not discriminate between resource control types. Further, peers appeared to share their teachers' positive regard for bistrategic controllers. These aggressive children were regarded favorably by classmates, while coercive controllers were disliked.

These are provocative findings which support the view that social dominance and social competence contribute to teachers' perceptions of attractiveness and may also influence who classmates like and perceive as being popular. These results are consistent with the work of Roseth et al. (2007-this issue) and also suggest that social dominance may afford some children the opportunity to develop social roles that help to maintain their dominance. Other aggressive children appear to develop reputations that help to support and sustain problematic patterns of behavior and relationships with peers and teachers (see Hymel et al., 1990). The results of this study also highlight the importance of augmenting variable-centered approaches with person-oriented procedures. Working solely from a variable-oriented approach, this study suggests that there is a negative relationship or no relationship between aggression and physical attractiveness. Yet, when person-oriented procedures are included, the results show that a small but important sub-group of aggressive children are viewed as attractive by their teachers. These findings are also consistent with other person-oriented research showing that in both elementary and middle school settings there are distinct configurations of aggressive–dominant children who are viewed by teachers as being popular, attractive, and good at sports (e.g., Estell et al., 2003; Estell, Farmer, Pearl, et al., in press; Farmer, Estell, Bishop et al., 2003; Farmer, Estell, Leung et al., 2003; Rodkin et al., 2000). From the perspective of implications for intervention, this study raises three critical questions. First, are socially dominant aggressive children afforded social opportunities that are not available to others and, if so, does this promote a sense of "unfairness" from the viewpoint of other aggressive children? Second, do coercive controllers model their aggressive behavior after the aggressive behavior of bistrategic controllers? Third, do teachers' perceptions and actions help create social dominance structures in the classroom and do they contribute to students' viewpoints of their classmates' social characteristics?

Putallaz et al. (2007-this issue) examined overt and relational forms of aggression in relation to victimization in 4th grade classrooms as a function of sociometric status, ethnicity, and gender. The overarching goal of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of relational versus physical aggression with regard to behavioral profiles of both aggressors and victims. The broader impetus of this research is that while there is a comprehensive body of empirical results and corresponding conceptual frameworks to explain the relationship between overt aggression, victimization, and sociometric status, the international dynamics of relational aggression are relatively uncharted waters. It is known that as girls transition into early adolescence, there is a decrease in physical aggression and a corresponding increase in social aggression, particularly among girls who are nuclear in the social network (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). However, there is a need for clarification of the correspondence between peer status and overt and relational forms of aggression and victimization. The results of the current study indicate that as compared to boys, girls are less likely to be perceived as overtly aggressive but no more likely to be relationally aggressive. Instead, gender differences in relational aggression were

evident in terms of victimization as girls were significantly more likely to be viewed as victims of relational forms of attack. Further, while controversial and rejected status children were more likely to engage in both overt and relational aggression, rejected but not controversial status children were more likely to be victims of relational aggression. Also, while African American children were more likely to use overt and relational forms of aggression, both African American and European American girls showed a preference for relational forms of aggression over overt forms. In addition, girls who were overtly aggressive had negative behavioral profiles, while girls who were relational aggressive did not have adjustment problems. Yet, girls who were the targets of relational aggression experienced multiple adjustment problems as did girls who were overtly victimized.

The differences in the relationships among overt and relational forms of aggression and victimization point to the complexity of the social dynamics of aggression. As the authors of this study suggest, these findings present a conundrum for researchers. For girls there was a consistent pattern of behavior associated with overt aggression, relational victimization, and overt victimization as students who fit these categories appear to be disruptive, not inclusive of others, weak in peer group entry and conflict resolution skills, and lacking in empathy and prosocial behavior. The conundrum is that these descriptive correlational data do not provide information on the factors that differentiate between aggressors and victims. It is likely that the answer to this question may lie in part in social roles, affiliative patterns, and social dominance profiles of aggressors versus victims. As the present findings show, controversial status children are less likely to be victims but more likely to be aggressors. Other research has shown that children fitting the controversial status profile tend to be aggressive leaders or socially dominant bullies who are well integrated into popular and conventional peer groups (Estell, Farmer, & Cairns, 2007; Estell, Farmer, Irvin, et al., 2007; Estell, Farmer, Pearl, et al., in press; Farmer et al., 2002; Farmer, Estell, Bishop et al., 2003; Farmer, Estell, Leung et al., 2003). In contrast, aggressive children who are victimized are likely to be socially marginalized (isolated or affiliate with unpopular peers) and frequently scapegoated by peers (Adler & Adler, 1998; Evans & Eder, 1993; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). These differences point to the need to look beyond similar profiles of behavior and to also consider the social dynamics that contribute to the behavior. To facilitate the development of interventions to address girls involvement in relational and overt aggression, there is a need for additional research that focuses specifically on the social dynamic processes that differentiate among girls who are aggressive leaders, girls who are bully–victims, and girls who are non-aggressive victims.

Killya-Jones et al. (2007-this issue) examine 7th grade middle school students' perceptions of their own level of aggression in relation to the level of aggression of the peer group in which they are embedded. This work is grounded in two conceptually rich theoretical frameworks in the study of behavioral development. First, based on social psychological foundations regarding social comparisons and the development of identity, these researchers suggest children's social norms and perceptions of their own behaviors are influenced by the social groups in which they are a member. Second, building from research on homophily (i.e., behavioral similarity) in children's peers groups, these investigators propose that early adolescents in middle school are likely to affiliate with peers who have levels of aggressive behavior that are similar to their own. The authors further distinguish between assimilation (i.e., group members will assimilate their self-report of their behavior

to correspond with the behavior of their associates) and the contrast hypothesis (i.e., group members will contrast their own behavior with the normative standard set by the other members of their immediate peer group). Using these conceptual guides, these investigators hypothesize that when a student is a member of a group for whom aggression is characteristic and extreme within the broader social ecology, he or she is likely to use the level of aggression of the group and not the level of classmates in general as the standard for judging his or her own behavior. As the authors propose, this process, known as "norm-narrowing," would be supported if self-reports of aggression were found to be lower than peer-reports of aggression for students who are members of high aggressive groups.

The results of this study indicated that there was considerable homophily in 7th grade peer groups as students who affiliated together were more similar to each other in terms of their levels of aggression than they were to peers outside of their own groups. Further, social comparison effects were found for students who were members of mixed-sex groups. Consistent with a norm narrowing hypothesis, boys who were members of mixed-sex groups judged their aggression to be lower than the ratings of aggression they received from their grade-level mates. This suggests that these boys are using the level of aggression of their peer group rather the broader standard of the grade level as their norm for comparison. In contrast, girls in mixed-sex groups perceived themselves as being more aggressive than they were perceived by grade-level mates. While these girls are not perceived to be as aggressive as the boys in their groups, it is possible that they may take on the identity of the group in their conceptions of their own behavior. These findings demonstrate the importance of the "social embeddedness" of children's social behavior. How youth are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves is influenced by their social affiliations. To the degree that it influences social norms and standards for behavior, the concept of "norm narrowing" may play an important role in behavioral regulation and involvement in deviant behavior for some youth. While there is much more work that needs to be explored and investigated within this line of inquiry (e.g., why mixed-groups only? why gender differences?), the current findings suggest that intervention efforts should take into consideration how the peer group context contributes to youths' views about the acceptability of aggressive behavior.

Cillessen and Mayeux (2007-this issue) investigated peer status and aggressive behavior in relation to the transition to middle-school and high-school. Several studies have shown that each of these transitions is a time of academic and social vulnerability for adolescents (Cadwallader, Farmer, & Cairns, 2003; Eccles, 1999; Roeser & Peck, 2003; Seidman & French, 2004). Yet, little work has focused on how students' peer status and aggression prior to these transitions are linked to their expectations for the transition or their perceptions of their adjustment following the transition. This is an important issue because how youth perceive these transitions may influence their social choices and behavioral patterns as they try to establish new roles and relationships in an unfamiliar and perhaps foreboding social context (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Eccles, 1999; Kinney, 1993). Several studies have demonstrated that increased levels of aggression, problem behavior, and defiance of adult authority are linked to increases in peer status following school transitions (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Evans & Eder, 1993; Merten, 2005). Further, while youth may view the transition as an opportunity to recreate themselves and establish new friendships and social roles, there are clear institutional and social constraints that may

inhibit these opportunities (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Estell, Farmer, Irvin, et al., 2007). Consequently, youth's peer status and level of aggression prior to these transitions may be linked to their peer status, level of aggression, and perceptions of academic and social adjustment in the new context. By focusing on these key factors prior to and following school transitions, Cillessen and Mayeux provide a new viewpoint to help guide the development of prevention and promotion programs to support adolescents during these critical periods of adaptation.

The findings of this study demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between aggression and peer status. Collectively the results indicate that students' expectations and perceptions are linked to their peer status and their level of aggression prior to the middle school and high school transitions. Yet, these associations vary somewhat according to gender and grade level. Perhaps most important for the purpose of this discussion, several interactions were identified between perceived popularity and aggression in relation to academic functioning. Consistent with cluster analytic studies which identify subtypes of youth in relation to their academic, social, and behavioral adaptation (e.g., Estell, Farmer, Irvin, et al., 2007; Farmer, Irvin, Thompson, Hutchins, & Leung, 2006), different combinations of level of aggression and perceived popularity are differentially associated with academic functioning in both middle and high school. But there are also clear differences in terms of gender and type of aggression for 6th grade and 9th grade. Further, while the results of this study indicate that social preference (i.e., sociometric status) is linked to social functioning, the current work indicates that perceived popularity is critical for understanding the social dynamics of aggression and the corresponding implications for supporting academic as well as social adjustment during the adolescent years. In this vein, this study highlights the importance for taking into consideration combinations of academic, behavioral, and social characteristics in the development of interventions and understanding them in relation to the key social and developmental tasks that students encounter during the transition to middle and high school (see also Eccles, 1999; Seidman & French, 2004).

Considerations and implications for intervention development

Many interventions designed to address aggressive behavior in school have centered on a skill deficit/social marginalization framework and have focused on youth who are considered to be socially incompetent. While this perspective is certainly warranted, the articles in this special issue highlight the need to expand this approach and also consider the contributions of all youth and the broader classroom and school social dynamics that contribute to aggressive behavior. A comprehensive discussion of the implications of these articles for intervention would be quite lengthy and beyond the scope of this review. Thus, we have constrained our comments to focus on three specific areas of intervention that are of high interest to school psychology and allied disciplines. These areas are (1) the implementation and effectiveness of social skills training programs; (2) the functional analyses of aggressive behavior from a social dynamics perspective; and (3) the development of positive behavioral support programs that are responsive to the social and developmental context of aggressive students. We briefly consider each of these intervention issues from a social dynamics perspective and from the implications of the research presented in this issue.

Implications for social skills training programs

Building from the linkages between social difficulties and aggression, social skills training has been viewed as a primary intervention approach for aggressive youth. However, research has consistently shown that social skills interventions have limited to moderate effectiveness in terms of improving the social behavior and peer relations of aggressive and disruptive students (DuPaul & Eckert, 1994; Maag, 2006; Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999). The limited effectiveness of social skills training is likely to be due in part to issues of matching treatment to the skill deficit, problems in treatment integrity, and lack of programming for generalization (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). However, we expect that one of the key limitations of social skills training programs is that they tend to focus mainly on the behavioral and/or cognitive social skills of the individual and do not address the contributions of school social dynamics. The articles in this special issue clearly demonstrate that classrooms and schools establish their own "societies" which impact the social opportunities of students and constrain their ability to significantly change their behavior (see also Garner, Bootcheck, Lorr, & Rauch, 2006).

From this perspective, social skills interventions may be strengthened by taking into consideration the target student's social role, reputation, and peer affiliations and by also focusing on the classroom social hierarchy, interactional dynamics, and the social values and norms of both the student's peer group and the broader school social context (Farmer, 2000; Hymel et al., 1990; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). The point here is that interventions that are aimed at individual students are not likely to have a sustained impact if the social context is operating in ways that support the problem behavior and impede the opportunity for behavioral change.

A general expectation in the peer rejection/social skills training framework is that as aggressive youth learn and use less aggressive strategies they would naturally be better accepted by peers and this would reinforce and sustain more competent behaviors. One problem with this view is that it assumes that aggression does not yield social rewards for youth who use it to meet their social goals. As the work of Hawley et al. (2007-this issue) suggests, competence is in the "eye of the beholder" and aggressive strategies can be part of a configuration of skills that support social dominance in the peer culture. Therefore, to the degree that some children competently use aggression to influence classmates and establish their dominance within the social hierarchy (Roseth et al., 2007-this issue), peers' deference to some aggressive classmates not only reinforces such students' behavior but also sends a message to others that aggression can be an effective strategy. Further as Cillessen and Mayeux (2007-this issue) find, aggressive youth who are perceived as being popular by peers expect that they will be socially successful as they transition into a new social context. This is consistent with work by Yoon, Hughes, Cavell, and Thompson (2000) which found that non-rejected aggressive children as compared to aggressive-rejected children believe that aggression leads to positive outcomes and that they can use aggression to meet their social needs. Clearly, some aggressive children do reap social benefits from their aggressive behavior, they realize that they can use aggression effectively, and they are likely to be resistant to social skills interventions that require giving up this perceived advantage.

To broaden this point, some aggressive children are bullies while others are bully-victims (Pelligrini & Long, 2002; Perren & Alsaker, 2006). As Putallaz et al. (2007-

this issue) find, these distinct social roles are differentially associated with sociometric status. Although both controversial and rejected status children are more likely to use overt and relational forms of aggression, rejected status youth are more likely to be victims. Therefore, while controversial youth may feel protected from the negative consequences of aggression, why wouldn't rejected status youth be inclined to adopt new social skills and change their behavior? The answer to this question may rest in part in their role in the social dominance hierarchy, their social reputations, their patterns of affiliation, and their referents for behavioral norms. As Killya-Jones et al. (2007-this issue) suggest, children develop behavioral norms by making social comparisons with members of their immediate peer group or with salient individuals in the broader social context. Socially marginalized aggressive children are likely to affiliate with peers who are socially marginalized and who have lower levels of teacher rated social competence (Estell et al., 2003; Estell, Farmer, Pearl, et al., in press; Farmer et al., 2002; Farmer, Estell, Bishop, et al., 2003; Farmer, Estell, Leung et al., 2003). In addition, these youth are likely to perceive highly aggressive peers as being cool (Rodkin et al., 2006). Thus, their immediate peer group may reflect and support less competent behaviors and they may view aggression as a route to social prominence. Further, they are more likely to be taunted and teased by peers and it may be difficult for them to escape from the interactional patterns and social reputations that promote their negative social roles (Farmer, Xie, et al., 2007; Hymel et al., 1990). Therefore, while such youth may be willing to develop new social skills they are likely to experience a barrage of social forces that help to maintain their less competent aggressive patterns.

Consequently, while there is clear evidence that many aggressive youth have social skills problems and can benefit from social skills training, this approach is likely to be incomplete when it is not paired with other strategies which address social dynamics that contribute to the student's behavior (Farmer, 2000). This requires careful consideration of the student's social role, interaction patterns, and peer affiliations in relation to the classroom/school social structure and the associated interactional dynamics among students. To do this, it is necessary to conduct functional behavioral assessments that focus on social dynamics and to develop corresponding positive behavioral support plans.

Functional behavioral assessments and the social dynamics of aggression

In response to federal legislation (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997) and a growing focus on empirically validated interventions, schools are increasingly using functional behavioral assessments and positive behavioral support programs to address aggressive and disruptive social behavior (Gresham, 2003; Sugai, 2007). Building from research based on applied behavioral analysis with students with severe disabilities, four distinct functions of aggressive and problematic social behavior have been identified: attention seeking, escape and avoidance, the generation of sensory reinforcement, and access to tangible items or events (Carr, 1994). However, as others have argued, (e.g., Sasso, Conroy, Stichler, & Fox, 2001; Sutherland, Carter, Farmer, Hoover, & Kostewicz, in press), the social behavior of students with high incidence disabilities and students who are typically developing is quite complex and cannot be reduced to immediate antecedents and consequences. Further, as each of the studies in this

issue shows, there are factors beyond the immediate proximal context of a specific behavior that help to promote and sustain patterns of aggression in children and adolescents. In addition, depending on the characteristics of the student, the social network that he or she is embedded, and the broader classroom or school social hierarchy, the same behavior may take on different developmental meaning and be supported and sustained in different ways (Farmer, Estell, Leung et al., 2003; Hawley et al., 2007-this issue; Killya-Jones et al., 2007-this issue). By focusing only on proximal factors, it is possible to overlook more developmentally meaningful information.

To assess differences in the function of similar patterns of aggressive behavior in youth who do not have severe disabilities (i.e., children with high incidence disabilities, children who are considered to be typically developing), there is a need to take into consideration how they engage and are engaged by the social context. This requires looking beyond the antecedents and consequences of a specific behavior and focusing on patterns of social synchrony in relation to the classroom and school structure (Farmer, Xie, et al., 2007). To do this, information should be gathered about the student's social role, her or his interactions patterns with a range of peers (e.g., friends, enemies, and everyone else), her or his peer group affiliations, and the general interactional dynamics that impact the social values, beliefs, and behaviors within the school ecology (Farmer, 2000; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Sutherland, et al., 2007). These are not domains that are typically assessed in functional analysis. However, the necessary measures and assessment protocols are available in allied disciplines that study youth's social development. Accordingly, there is a strong need for school psychologists and special educators to work with developmental and clinical psychologists and prevention scientists to establish functional assessment procedures that blend a focus on the proximal mechanisms of aggression (i.e., antecedents, consequences) with social contextual and developmental factors (e.g., interactional patterns, social roles, peer groups, hierarchical social structures). It is likely that information along these lines can help to support social skills interventions and positive behavioral support programs that can reach beyond the immediate context and contribute to the positive realignment of the development trajectories of youth who have chronic patterns of aggressive behavior.

Social dynamics and positive behavioral support programs

Behavior plays a critical role in human development as individuals are designed to be adaptive to their social and ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Cairns, 1979; Gottlieb, 1992). Such adaptation requires linking internal capabilities and propensities (e.g., biological, cognitive, emotional, psychological) with external factors (e.g., behavioral, organizational, social learning) that shape how the individual experiences the ecology in which he or she develops (e.g., family, peer group, neighborhood) (Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996). Behavior provides this linkage as it operates as an interface between internal and external states in development (Cairns, 2000). In this role, behavior is open to rapid reorganization and can quickly change in relation to changes in either internal or external factors (Farmer, Xie, et al., 2007). However, change in behavior can be ephemeral if other factors in the developmental system do not reorganize to accommodate change in behavior (Farmer, Farmer, et al. in press). This perspective is

fundamental to understanding the importance of considering social dynamics when conducting functional behavioral assessments and developing positive behavioral support programs.

As veteran teachers of self-contained classrooms for students with behavioral disorders know, the behavior of even the most aggressive youth can be brought into control with careful management of antecedent conditions and consequences. However, aggressive behavior may quickly resurface if a new student is introduced into the social context or if the student moves to another setting, particularly when other children in the context are viewed as a threat to the student (see Farmer & Cairns, 1991; Farmer, Stuart, Lorch, & Fields, 1993). Such scenarios illustrate how behavior is highly responsive to the social context. In addition, they also point to the limitations of just managing the proximal conditions of the behavior. In the development of positive behavioral support programs, researchers have pointed to the need for social validity (i.e., the degree to which the target behaviors are viewed as socially meaningful or significant by teachers, parents, and other stakeholders) (Gresham, 2003). While social validity is necessary, it is not sufficient if the aim is to reduce the likelihood that a child will be aggressive two or three years beyond the point intervention. It is necessary to go beyond changing the behavior in the immediate context and to also promote the reorganization of the child's developmental system and the corresponding developmental trajectory (Farmer, Farmer, et al., in press).

We propose that there is a need to consider developmental validity in the establishment of positive behavioral support programs. By this we mean that it is necessary to identify key social development factors that are associated with the target behavior and to assess how they change in relation to changes in the student's behavior. If they do not change then it may be necessary to intervene with them directly. As the articles in this special issue suggest, such factors include the student's social role, social interaction patterns, peer affiliations, hierarchical social structures in the school, and the social and behavioral norms of the peer group and the broader peer ecology. The articles in this issue also illustrate the importance of the developmental context and suggest that key transitions such as the transition to school, the beginning of a school year, and the transition to middle and high school are times that peer social context can be particularly provocative to evoke increased levels of aggressive interactions among students.

In conclusion, the articles in this issue provide new perspectives on the social dynamics that contribute to aggression in school. We expect they will prompt new insights into the development of aggression and will point to the need to look beyond the role of children who are chronically aggressive and to also consider how all children within the school ecology may play a role. To this end, we hope this issue can stimulate new ideas about intervention and can help to bridge collaborative efforts between developmental researchers and school psychologists.

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