COMMUNICATION PARALYSIS DURING PEER-GROUP EXCLUSION

Social Dynamics That Prevent Children and Adolescents From Expressing Disagreement

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Although successful entry into childhood peer groups is a prerequisite for development of self-concept, social skills, and school successes, little is known about real-world attempts to penetrate social group boundaries. The authors collected more than 600 adolescent accounts of group rejections, as well as regrets concerning the failure to voice disagreement. Narrative accounts revealed six reasons for failing to voice disagreement with the social exclusion of others: (a) group dynamics, (b) social fears, (c) uncertainty, (d) social inadequacies, (e) qualities of the excluded individual, and (f) low motivation. Seventy percent of these adolescents shared specific language they now regretted not using at the time. Two cognitive frameworks emerged: (a) group membership was perceived as fragile and (b) rejection stigma was perceived as contagious. A model describing negative social reasoning used by those who remain silent during the rejection of others is offered, as well as intervention strategies to stimulate prosocial group inclusion.

Keywords: childhood friendship; adolescent friendship; exclusion; group membership; groups; rejection; social stigma

I think that they excluded me because they just judge people by the outside, but those people are wrong. You should get to know people more.

—adolescent research participant

As children and adolescents seek to gain and sustain peer group inclusion, they typically anticipate, witness, or endure the painful language of peer exclusion. The childhood culture of cliques, clubs, and close relationships has produced for many children a steady stream of social isolation, loneliness, and humiliation (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998;

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Crick & Ladd, 1993; Giannetti & Sagarese, 2001). Some rejected children and adolescents experience other-directed rage, as exemplified by the prevalence of high-profile school shootings that are frequently accompanied by accounts of peer exclusion. A prime example occurred on March 5, 2001, when a 15-year-old California student who had been bullied and excluded by his classmates brought his father’s gun to school and killed 2 teenagers and wounded 13 others; the same issues were evidenced in the Columbine shooting in a Colorado high school, when on April 20, 1999, two teenagers who had been socially isolated and teased by peers created a plan to blow up their school and succeeded in killing 12 students and a teacher and wounding 23 others (Aratani, 2001). Other frequently rejected children and adolescents may engage in self-directed punishment, as the National Institute of Mental Health (2000) reported an alarming rate of successful suicide attempts among adolescents (the third-leading cause of death in young people 15 to 24 years of age, with a gender ratio of 4 male to every 1 female death). Despite the significance of this problem, the unexpressed pain inflicted on children and adolescents by peer-group rejection has remained understudied by communication, language, and relational scholars, in spite of strong lines of research from educational psychologists. Findings from educational scholars confirm the various dysfunctional effects of repeated peer-group exclusion throughout adolescence and adulthood (e.g., Asher & Coie, 1990; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). For repeatedly rejected children and adolescents, navigating peer groups may be a grim interpersonal experience. The loneliness caused by being a peer-group outsider stings (Paley, 1992).

In an attempt to acknowledge, value, and expand knowledge about the group experiences of children and adolescents (Keyton, 1994; Socha & Socha, 1994), we turn our attention to the interactional dark side of real-world youth groups. Complex peer-group interactions, including group rejection, constitute significant silent social stresses of growing up, as children and adolescents struggle to discover and master the successful language of inclusion requests (Erwin, 1993; Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990). A significant portion of every child’s life develops in the context of small social peer groups. To more fully understand their experiences in these groups, a focus on language and its effects on peer-group inclusion and exclusion in childhood and

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children’s peer groups. The authors are grateful to the 682 adolescent participants and their teachers and schools who generously shared personal experiences. The thoughtful suggestions, insights, and challenges of anonymous reviewers significantly enhanced our ability to give voice to these adolescents, and we are deeply grateful. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Dr. Sunwolf, Department of Communication, Santa Clara University, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053.
adolescence is warranted (see Bradac, Hopper, & Wiemann, 1989). Communication is a central tool for requesting or denying group inclusion, although a child's language skills may not keep pace with reoccurring childhood dilemmas involving social interactions with peers.

In this study, we sought to understand more about the experiences of silent peer-group members during acts of outsider exclusion. To begin, we review the literature studying social development and group rejection. Next, we foreground the larger social and developmental contexts in which childhood and adolescent groups are embedded by adopting a “bona fide group perspective” (BFGP) (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, 1996; Stohl & Putnam, 2003). We then take a grounded theory approach to analyze 682 firsthand accounts of exclusion events described by adolescents. Finally, we suggest a model that conceptualizes the consequences of anticipated social regrets for group members during peer rejection, as well as two cognitive frameworks (“rejection contagion” and “inclusion fragility”) for understanding the paralyzing social dilemmas some children and adolescents face when they are confronted with peer-group rejection with which they do not agree.

BITTERSWEET PEER POWER: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN PEER GROUPS?

“You can’t play” suddenly seems too overbearing and harsh, resounding like a slap from wall to wall. How casually one child determines the fate of another.

—Paley (1992, p. 3)

The social behavior of children and adolescents in peer groups is mediated by perceptual, cognitive, and emotional developmental stages (Erwin, 1993). Research about childhood social exclusion has primarily relied on data from children’s groups (i.e., 2 to 9 year olds) (Asher & Coie, 1990) or preadolescent groups (i.e., 10 to 12 year olds) (Adler & Adler, 1998; Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2000), although writers outside the field of psychology have collected rich anecdotal narratives about the hidden culture of aggression among teenage girls (e.g., Orenstein, 1994; Simmons, 2002). Consequently, we lay a foundation for this study by reviewing the literature on early social development of children, including the emergence of prosocial moral reasoning, followed by the differences between children’s social beliefs and their actual social behaviors. With this background, we then look at research concerning peer-group behavior, reporting research about the role of peer relations and rejection, peer-group entry behaviors, and intragroup socialization processes.
CHILDHOOD SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

To understand childhood social-group interaction, researchers should draw on prior research about the early development of social thinking and the role of social interaction in framing the social choices children perceive (childhood is used here, consistent with developmental literature, to include the experiences of children and adolescents). Between the ages of 6 and 12 years, children in the United States double the amount of time they spend with peers during their preschool years, typically spending more than 40% of their waking hours in the company of children their own age and status (Cole & Cole, 2001). The sense of self that children acquire within their own family contexts is no longer adequate, because new identities emerge from the perceived costs and rewards of unsupervised peer-group play. Significantly, peer-group activities are frequently devoid of direct adult leadership (e.g., school recesses, neighborhood play, or clique gatherings), allowing language and behaviors to emerge from children’s enacted social values. When adults are present, children may rely on rules imposed by the adults to resolve the conflicts of childhood social interactions (e.g., “Everyone gets a turn” or “Share your toys”).

Another feature of unsupervised peer-group play in childhood is that children increasingly engage in game play. What these games have in common are explicit rules with which every player is expected to comply (Cole & Cole, 2001; Roopnarine, Lasker, Sacks, & Stores, 1998), while allowing an increase in the number of children who can play together at one time (e.g., hide-and-seek, street baseball, or battle-type games). Piaget (1932/1965) argued that the appearance of rule-based games represented a dual significance: (a) the development of decreasing egocentrism and increasing social cognitions and (b) the creation of social community, in which children balance their own wishes against the group’s rules. Developmental scholars have further noted two significant markers of childhood social interactions: the emergence and refinement of prosocial moral reasoning (Coles, 1997; Damon, 1980; Kohlberg, 1984) and the paradoxical difference between children’s claimed social beliefs and actual behaviors (Damon, 1977; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

PROSOCIAL MORAL REASONING

As cooperation with others becomes possible through consensus about rules, peer groups become self-governing and members develop autonomous moral thinking (Cole & Cole, 2001). These developmental rules of peer-group play become effective because they are socially constructed, resulting from mutual consent. Two models of cognitive moral development are particularly informative about rule development in peer groups. Kohlberg’s (1984) six moral stages model of
childhood development spans the period from the end of the preschool years through adolescence: (1) obedience and punishment orientation, (2) hedonistic and instrumental orientation, (3) good-boy, good-girl orientation, (4) authority or law-and-order orientation, (5) social contract orientation, and (6) hierarchy of principles orientation. Stages 2 and 3 represent a period of conventional morality in which children internalize standards from their experiences, with children seeking approval in Stage 3; social duty and concern over harm to others emerges in Stage 4; abstract principles of right and wrong develop in Stage 5 as goals of creating social harmony and maintaining self-respect and respect of peers; and by Stage 6, children orient toward the highest relevant moral principle, shifting concern to self-condemnation for violating one’s internalized principles (Sroufe, Cooper, DeHart, & Marshall, 1996).

A second-stage model of cognitive moral development was offered by Damon (1975, 1977, 1980), who investigated children’s developing conceptions of prosocial justice in the United States, Israel, Puerto Rico, and Europe. He suggested six overlapping stages: (1) up to age 4 years children typically focus on their wants rather than offering reasons; (2) from ages 4 to 5 years self-gratification is still dominant, but children justify their decisions with appeals to arbitrary characteristics such as size and gender; (3) from ages 5 to 7 years concepts of equal rights to rewards emerge, with the only fair treatment being equal treatment; (4) from ages 6 to 9 years reciprocity dominates, with the belief that others should be paid back in kind for good or bad behaviors; (5) from ages 8 to 10 years moral relativity develops, with claims of others with special needs weighed heavily, as children struggle to resolve competing claims; and (6) after age 10 years considerations of equality and reciprocity are coordinated, taking into account multiple claims and contextual demands, although choices are firm and clear-cut. In fact, specific prosocial normative behaviors of children have been found to vary as a function of chronological age (Greener & Crick, 1999). Investigating third- through sixth-grade children, Greener and Crick asked participants to describe normative prosocial behaviors in their peer groups; content analysis revealed that interpersonal acts of inclusion (e.g., acts that initiate or sustain relationships) were cited by children significantly more often than acts that had been reported previously (e.g., sharing or helping).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHILDREN’S SOCIAL BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOR

In conjunction with the childhood development of social moral reasoning, researchers have examined the discrepancies and parallels between children’s actions and their claimed moral rules. Eisenberg and Fabes (1998) found that higher levels of moral reasoning were
positively related to higher levels of prosocial behavior, although Damon (1977) showed that children’s reasoning and behaviors matched only 50% of the time even though in 10% of the observations children exhibited more advanced behaviors than their hypothetical reasoning. Coles (1997) suggested the term moral intelligence, based on his work with the Girl Scouts of America. Coles argued that moral behaviors in elementary school are founded on favorable family and neighborhood experiences and that moral conduct may be significantly different than moral thinking in childhood. In his earlier work, Coles (1986) described how children struggle with questions of moral choices and actual behaviors and concluded that children and adolescents are constantly at work noticing what is just and what is unjust and are making choices based on those perceptions. As a result, there is evidence that children’s actions do not consistently correlate with their stated moral rules: Some behaviors appear more advanced than a child’s moral reasoning, and some children’s social behaviors are constrained by the models available in their families or neighborhoods.

**THE ROLE OF PEER RELATIONS AND REJECTION IN CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

Children and adolescents rejected from peer groups suffer in diverse ways, which may be related, in part, to the fact that rejection during social play is the forerunner of all the rejections to come for children (Paley, 1992), therefore rejection effects are individually compounded. Some children endure intense pain but grow from it, whereas other children report feeling socially paralyzed and crushed (Thompson & Grace, 2001).

Scholars have examined how childhood groups include some children more frequently than others, thus “operationalizing” popularity. When children’s groups are created, functional social structures emerge, from which it is possible to identify the degree of popularity children have among their peers. Research consistently shows that a conspicuous cause of peer rejection is aggressiveness (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993), with aggressive children demonstrating deficits in social information processing (overestimating their own social skills and underestimating how much their peers dislike them). Crick, Grotter, and Bigbee (2002) reported that physically aggressive children demonstrate hostile attributional biases when they encounter peer provocations; consequently, negative peer opinions about a child may trigger a self-perpetuating cycle of negative expectations and negative behavioral interpretations about rejected children. On the other hand, as pointed out by Socha and Socha (1994), children frequently emulate social structuring they observe adults enacting. Even unsupervised peer play is influenced by adult modeling.
Successful entry into peer groups affects the development of a child's self-concept, social skills, and success in school (Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990). Peer-group rejection has been found to be correlated with a number of outcomes, the strongest being early school withdrawal, delinquency, and greater distress from psychopathological symptoms in adulthood (e.g., Bagwell et al., 2000; Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987).

Social acceptance by peers matters to children. Matthews (1996) described ineffective attempts by elementary school children at gaining entry to existing playgroups and coping strategies (e.g., persisting, playing alone, or engaging in aggressive acts). Matthews suggested that inclusion-attempt variables included a child's desire for peer interaction, competence in critical learning abilities, and whether there is at least one other person with whom the child can interact. In addition to the inclusion strategies of the rejected child, there is evidence that a child's prior social status affects success in penetrating existing peer groups. Hodges, Malone, and Perry (1997) investigated 229 children in the third through seventh grades, finding that behavioral problems were more strongly related to children rejected by peer groups, if those children had fewer friends and were not well liked.

In addition to inclusion strategies and existing social status, rejection histories appear to affect a child's future attempts at group inclusion. Downey, Lebolt, Kincón, and Freitas (1998) investigated the rejection sensitivity of Hispanic and African American middle school students. Those who expected rejection demonstrated heightened distress following an ambiguously intentioned rejection by a peer. Furthermore, more rejection-sensitive children were more aggressive, engaged in more troubled interpersonal relationships, and declined in academic performance. Rejection histories trigger a self-sustaining reputational bias in that peer groups respond more favorably to popular than unpopular children's entry overtures, even when those children use similar entry strategies (Dodge, Schlundt, Schocken, & Delugach, 1983; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981).

CHILDREN'S GROUP-ENTRY BEHAVIORS

What do we know about how children attempt to gain group membership? Although there has been attention to children's intragroup processes, as reported above, little attention has been given to the strategies children use to gain entry to peer groups. What scholarship that does exist on the group-entry attempts of children has focused on the behaviors and strategies of younger children (nursery and preschool ages). The earliest work examining communication strategies to gain group entry was by Malley (1935), who used on-site observation at a nursery school. The pattern found to be most successful in gaining group entry consisted of a combination of “regard” (looking at another
child), regard and parallel play, and regard and vocalization. More recently, Forbes, Katz, Paul, and Lubin (1982) explored developmental and gender differences in the way that children sequenced their actions when attempting to join peer groups. Boys were more likely than girls to employ forceful strategies (e.g., displaying one’s own qualities, asserting superiority over group members, or criticizing group members). Following negative feedback from the group, boys were more likely than girls to engage in face-saving behaviors or appealing to playroom norms. By age 7 years, girls were more apt to accommodate to the group following rejection (e.g., making neutral comments to the group about themselves or asking permission to join the group). An earlier study by Phillips, Shenker, and Revitz (1951) examining the social interaction of newcomers in children’s groups found that the burden of communication was on the newcomer. They studied the group-entry attempts of 6- and 7-year-old female newcomers and found that the newcomer attempted to communicate with the other children rather than the group members initiating or even reciprocating those efforts. They also found that physical inclusion (presence) in groups does not necessarily translate into real inclusion (social acceptance).

SOCIALIZATION FOR MEMBERS OF CHILDHOOD GROUPS

The manner in which individuals are socialized into groups has important consequences for group dynamics and outcomes. Anderson, Riddle, and Martin (1999) pointed out, however, that little attention has been given by scholars to “group socialization,” the processes by which new group members become part of a group’s activities and identity. Socialization processes employed by members in one group affect the behaviors of those individuals in future groups, and positive group socialization creates models for effectively resolving group tensions (Anderson et al., 1999). As described below, studies have reported that childhood groups display gender preferences, favor leadership styles that include bullying as well as diplomacy, engage in uneven turn taking, have difficulty handling conflict or dividing tasks, and produce more effective task outcomes when leadership is distributed. Physical inclusion in childhood groups does not guarantee social inclusion.

Intragroup processes and factors, such as behavior modeling and gender preferences, have been found to influence peer-group behaviors of children. Gigliotti (1988) examined task group behaviors (for the simulated task of creating and operating a grocery store) in triads among children ranging in age from 3 to 8 years. Gigliotti reported that children of this age are ready for group interaction and capable of group skill training. The children’s simulated play behaviors suggested that social modeling had occurred. He concluded that young children are influenced heavily by relational behaviors that have been
previously modeled for them and that dysfunctional behaviors can be forestalled by contrary social modeling. Martin, Fabes, Evans, and Wyman (1999), studying 92 girls and 92 boys ranging in age from 41 to 82 months, found that children believed their own behaviors were more likely to be approved of when they played with same-sex peer groups, and that may have been one reason why they reported strong same-sex play preferences. They also found that children's gender preferences in free-play peer-group interactions became stronger with age, which is consistent with Greener and Crick (1999) on gender variables and prosocial behaviors. No studies, however, were found investigating the effects of gender on group rejection.

In addition to studies from educational psychologists, some scholars of group dynamics have examined children’s peer groups. Studying children’s task group leadership, French and Stright (1991) found that children favored leadership styles characterized as either diplomacy or bullying, frequently rejecting formal leadership roles in favor of members who dominated group discussions. More recently, Yamaguchi (2001) studied the emergence of leadership and group effectiveness in children’s cooperative learning groups. The intragroup competitive condition affected the emergence of leadership, in that one member dominated or bullied, taking over the group process. In the learning condition, prosocial leadership emerged, which tended to be shared and distributed throughout the task. Socha and Socha (1994) reviewed developmental literature concerning task events in children’s groups and reported that children spent the majority of their time doing group activities directed toward individual rather than group skill development, with “talk” sometimes discouraged. Process issues that occurred in children’s task groups that Socha and Socha observed included uneven turn taking, simultaneous talk, shouting suggestions, whispering and planning in dyads, marginalizing some group members, difficulties handling conflict and dividing tasks, and inability to efficiently use time.

Peer-group socialization processes include directly or indirectly communicating to members which outsiders are desirable and which are unacceptable as future group members. Peer groups re-create or maintain group identity as they exercise their power to exclude others. Researchers have neglected this important peer-group event (allowing the group’s boundary to be penetrated by a new member). A notable exception to the lack of attention to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion behaviors is the recent work of Horn (2003), who investigated adolescents’ reasoning about issues of social exclusion on the basis of social reference groups and the factors that influence such reasoning. Using a framework of social cognitive domain theory, which proposes that individual reasoning processes influences social judgments, Horn surveyed 319 high school students about hypothetical scenarios involving a member of a high-status or low-status group being
denied school resources (scholarship or a free school trip) or group membership (cheerleading, basketball, or student council). Horn reported that 9th- and 11th-grade students viewed the exclusion from social groups on the basis of some other peer-group membership (high or low status) as wrong, although they evaluated the denial of group membership to outsiders (exclusion) as less wrong than the denial of various resources to social outsiders. When they were faced with ambiguous scenarios, participants relied more often on their personal knowledge of specific outsiders than they did on stereotypes. Our research extended Horn’s findings by drawing on adolescents’ accounts of actual experiences and behaviors involving peer-group exclusion.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

There is little systematic information about peer-group behaviors in settings where no adults are present. In particular, we know little about the social interactions of adolescents from their perspective. Our goal was to examine the social dynamics that result when a childhood or adolescent peer-group member disagrees with a rejection act and to determine if participants’ previous rejection experience (high, normal, or low) influences their choices.

A BFGP offers a useful anchor from which to explore real-world childhood group rejection-inclusion dynamics. The BFGP challenges the view of groups as fixed containers, suggesting, instead, that groups exist in dynamic interrelationship with their environments (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, 1996). It also foregrounds for researchers the permeable nature of group boundaries, suggesting that group boundaries are negotiated by members (Putnam & Stohl, 1996) and, hence, are socially constructed through interaction. The BFGP has not, to date, been applied by scholars investigating the social interactions of childhood groups. This perspective suggests that the attempted penetration of peer-group boundaries will have consequences not only for an outsider who wishes to join but for the insiders as well (e.g., the formation and re-formation of group identity as well as for managing the tensions between individual members’ values and the group’s collective actions). Based on the BFGP, the following two research questions were generated:

*Research Question 1:* Do members of childhood peer groups sometimes disagree with the social exclusion of other children but choose to remain silent about that disagreement?

*Research Question 2:* If peer-group member disagreement with rejection of a peer exists, what reasons do adolescents give to explain why they do not voice disagreement with such rejection?
Given that research indicates that prior social experiences influence a child’s perception of his or her self-worth, social skills development, and sense of connectedness with others, it follows that children or adolescents who have previous rejection experiences themselves may be more or less likely to voice disagreement with the group rejection of another peer. As a result, the following research question was generated:

*Research Question 3:* What is the relationship between the experience of being excluded from peer groups and the reasons adolescents give to explain why they do not voice disagreement with the rejection of an excluded peer?

Finally, research about “regret” indicates that it is a necessary companion to social choice making and it emerges as an inescapable consequence of making decisions. People often reflect on roads not taken. Landman (1993) described functions and consequences of regret, including provoking excessive hesitation and admitting personal deficiency or poor judgment. Although one group researcher has recently applied Landman’s model of social choices and regret to adult group decision making (Sunwolf, 2001), no research to date has investigated the emergence of regret from social exclusion events in peer groups. As a result, we were interested in if adolescents and children had mental “scripts” for prosocial language they wished they had used at the moment of group rejection of another child. Therefore, the following research question was posed:

*Research Question 4:* Do adolescents have cognitive access to words or behaviors they retrospectively wish they had used to voice their disagreement with their own group’s rejection of someone else?

**METHOD**

For this study, we developed a questionnaire for adolescents that had as one of its goals the gathering of firsthand data from students about their thoughts and attributions for remaining silent when they disagreed with peer-group exclusion of someone else. The attempt to elicit “attributions” as data from children for social outcomes has been employed previously (e.g., Crick & Ladd, 1993, investigating the attributions and anxieties of rejected, popular, and average children concerning social events).

**PARTICIPANTS**

This study examined responses from 682 adolescents (377 boys, 301 girls, 4 undeclared); the adolescents (Grades 9-12) were from one
private high school ($n = 139$), two public high schools ($n = 481$), and two continuation high schools ($n = 50$) that were conveniently selected from large urban school districts in northern California and were located in diverse communities composed of various linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The entire sample ranged in age from 13 to 19 years, with the median age being 14 years. Most students were in the ninth grade, a grade that bridges the memory events of social interaction and rejection in middle school and high school. On the basis of their self-reported ethnic identities, 41.3% were Caucasian or White, 18.8% were Asian American, 24.2% were Hispanic American, 5.7% were African American, and 10.0% were other. We collapsed the four ethnic minority groups into a single category of “non-White.”

DATA GATHERING

Adolescents by definition tend to be more sensitive and have more recent memory access to childhood group-rejection experiences than adults (including college students), so we elected to gather data from this group. Our sample was developed after receiving permission to distribute questionnaires to students from school district administrators, principals, and classroom teachers. Subsequently, parental and student consent were collected after written explanations of the study (as approved by a university human research participants committee) were distributed to them. Students were told that their involvement was voluntary and that no extra credit was offered, and it was further explained that they could withdraw at any time. The authors appeared at the schools and were introduced by the regular classroom teacher (who remained in the classroom); we then administered the questionnaires during normal class periods. The study was introduced as one interested in how people respond to “social dilemmas” that arise when somebody wants to join a group but is left out. If students did not receive parental permission or consent to participate, they worked on a written task at their desks (previously designed by their teachers). Classrooms typically contained 30 to 40 students; the highest number of nonparticipating students in any single class was 6. The entire questionnaire required approximately 15 minutes for most adolescents to complete.

MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENT

The data from this study were part of a larger investigation on childhood social exclusion. The entire questionnaire consisted of free-response and closed-ended items. The questions preceding the items examined for this study were open-ended, asking participants to describe a time they were excluded from a group and then to describe a time they excluded another child who attempted to enter their group.
Here, we analyze only the data from the next two questions on the survey instrument: (a) “Sometimes we are part of a group that excludes somebody—even though we don’t really agree and afterwards we regret that we didn’t say anything. Think about a specific time when this happened. What happened? As you look back, what about the situation do you think kept you from speaking up?” and (b) “How often have you experienced being left out [circle one]: never, not often, the same as most people, more often than other people, constantly.”

CODING

*Coding scheme.* An original coding scheme was developed for certain narrative questions in this investigation. Taking a grounded theory approach that sought to build generalizations from the data collected (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000), we began an initial cycle of data analysis by reading each of the exclusion accounts for emerging themes that addressed what words adolescents used to conceptualize their own failures to voice their disagreements with peer-group exclusion. We developed conceptual categories from similar words and phrases, including accounts that seemed similar, even though different words may have been used. The classification scheme was revised several times, with seven robust categories emerging: (a) group dynamics, (b) social fears, (c) personal inadequacies, (d) inadequacies of the rejected child, (e) lack of motivation to intervene, (f) uncertainty about reasons, and (g) other.

*Unit of analysis.* Some accounts contained more than one reason (e.g., “Not being the most popular, not having the guts, and not having other people support me.”). Given that we were interested in the frequency of all the reasons of which participants were aware, the unit of analysis in this study became the “codable reason” rather than the “participant.”

*Training sessions.* Two undergraduate senior students (one male and one female) who were communication majors individually coded the responses. They first practiced with a sample that used the same questionnaire (data generated only for purposes of training), and then they discussed their differences only during practice sessions. The training sessions took a total of 12 hours, including individual practice. A written four-page dictionary defining categories and offering examples was developed for coder use. The students coded every reason appearing in a response.

*Intercoder reliability.* A reliability sample of 20% of the actual data was developed and given to both coders. Reliability coefficients were
calculated by determining the percentage of agreement between coders, and the final intercoder reliability was high for all categories, ranging from a low of .90 to 1.00. Correcting for chance agreement with Scott’s (1955) pi did not lower these values below .90 (social fears, personal inadequacies, inadequacies of the rejected child, don’t know, and “other” reasons were 100%; group dynamics were 96%; lack of motivation to intervene was 90%).

RESULTS

Of the 682 participants in this study, 544 (79.8%) answered the question concerning accounts of failing to voice their disagreement with a peer-group’s exclusion of another child who requested inclusion. There were no significant differences between those who chose not to answer the question and those who did, across either gender or ethnicity (18.6% of the boys and 16.7% of the girls did not answer this question; 19.5% of the Whites and 16.6% of the non-Whites did not answer this question). Questionnaires that did answer the question were occasionally indecipherable, and other questionnaires contained two or more codable reasons within a single sentence (\(N = 728\)). Table 1 offers representative responses for each of the coding categories to the stimulus question about why adolescents did not speak up. Table 2 offers representative responses to the second part of this question, which asked participants what they wished they had said or done at the time. Table 3 reports the frequency distributions for the coding categories in this study by ethnicity. Table 4 reports the distribution of adolescents’ reasons for not speaking up during peer-group exclusion compared with their personal experiences of being rejected by groups and their ethnicity.

Research Question 1 and Research Question 2: Do members of childhood peer groups sometimes disagree with social exclusion but choose to remain silent? If so, why? Almost 80% of participants (79.8%) did report accounts of withholding disagreement during peer-group exclusion. Exploring the reasons they offered for their social silence (see Table 3), group dynamics (32%) and social fears (29%) were reported significantly more often than all other categories, \(\chi^2(6, N = 728) = 387.50, p < .001\), and these two categories were consistent across gender and ethnicity. The next most frequent category represented participants’ confusion or lack of certainty about the failure to voice disagreement (don’t know, 10%), with personal inadequacies (8%) and qualities of the rejected child (8%) rarely appearing. No significant differences for ethnicity were found (see Tables 3 and 4), with Whites and non-Whites appearing within several percentage points of one another, even in the largest categories.
Table 1
*Examples of Adolescents’ Reasons for Withholding Disagreement About Peer Group Exclusion*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Category</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Sample Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group dynamics</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Peer pressure.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I wasn’t the leader.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I wanted to fit in the group.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of being excluded.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of being rejected.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t want to be excluded with the other person.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No one else felt the way I did.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t want to have a lot of people mad at me.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One was OK, but a group of people was too much.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear that they would do the same to me.</td>
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<td>I wanted to kick it with certain cool people.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t want the group to tease me.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling outnumbered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social fears (29%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t want to be different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t want to be made fun of.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being an outcast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being scared of what other people would think.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being uncool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was afraid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Just worried.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Didn’t want to look stupid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I worried about my reputation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>I don’t know why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dunno.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I’m not sure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal inadequacies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>My shyness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I wasn’t paying attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No voice for myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not having the guts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities of excluded person</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>I didn’t like her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They wouldn’t fit in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>She wouldn’t be happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They get on my nerves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They use drugs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They are never honest or say rumors that aren’t true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low motivation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Doesn’t matter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Had no effect on me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t want to get involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If I don’t know him, I wouldn’t care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>I don’t think I’m better than other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More convenient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t know what to say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My parents would be mad.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Stimulus question: Sometimes we are part of a group that excludes somebody—even though we don’t really agree and afterward we regret that we didn’t say anything. Think about a specific time when this happened. *As you look back, what about the situation do you think kept you from speaking up?*
Research Question 3: What is the relationship between the experience of having been excluded and the reasons for withholding disagreement?

An adolescent’s experience of having been excluded from groups did not account for the reasons offered for withholding disagreement with the group’s rejection of someone else. Table 4 presents the relationship between participants’ perceptions of their personal frequency of being rejected by peer groups and their reasons for not voicing their disagreement when a group to which they belonged was rejecting someone else. Although only 5% of all participants claimed to have little motivation to speak up during the rejection of someone else (e.g., “It had no effect on me” or “It didn’t matter that much”), the adolescents who claimed that they were “never or not often” left out of peer groups accounted for 16 of the responses, compared with only 2 of the adolescents who claimed to be “more often or constantly” left out. Of the codable reasons, 58% were offered by participants who were never or not often left out, 28% by those who felt they were left out about the same as others, and 14% by those who were more often or constantly left out. Of the reasons from participants who experienced high peer-group exclusion ($n = 100$), almost half ($n = 42$) claimed that some variable of group dynamics prevented them from saying anything, and more than one quarter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Response</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wish I could of said that looks don’t matter because she was nice. Just tell them that it isn’t fair to judge them that way, and you shouldn’t ignore them, you never know what they’re like till you talk to them. I wish I make my group think different about her not because of the way she dress. Told her she could be my friend. I wish I had said something to defend her. . . . I know how hard and sooo sad you become when no one reaches out or understands . . . it hurts. I wish I would said, “No it’s alright, you can stay, you are my friend.” I wish to say, “You can join us.” I wish I would have tried harder to get them included. I wish I had told the group to be quiet and include the person. I wish I had spoken up and had made it clear to everyone that we could use him on our project. I wish I would have been the bigger man and worked with the person excluded. I wish I had said, “Hold on, let me talk to my friend,” or invited my friend to hang out with us so they could really get to know him. I wish I would have gone with that person and left my friends. I wish I could have convinced my group to let him stay. There is no such thing as “cooties.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Stimulus question: Sometimes we are part of a group that excludes somebody—even though we don’t really agree and afterward we regret that we didn’t say anything. Think about a specific time when this happened. What do you wish you had said or done at that time?

Table 2
Examples of Adolescents’ Regretted Unspoken Language of Disagreement During Peer Group Exclusion of Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Response</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wish I could of said that looks don’t matter because she was nice. Just tell them that it isn’t fair to judge them that way, and you shouldn’t ignore them, you never know what they’re like till you talk to them. I wish I make my group think different about her not because of the way she dress. Told her she could be my friend. I wish I had said something to defend her. . . . I know how hard and sooo sad you become when no one reaches out or understands . . . it hurts. I wish I would said, “No it’s alright, you can stay, you are my friend.” I wish to say, “You can join us.” I wish I would have tried harder to get them included. I wish I had told the group to be quiet and include the person. I wish I had spoken up and had made it clear to everyone that we could use him on our project. I wish I would have been the bigger man and worked with the person excluded. I wish I had said, “Hold on, let me talk to my friend,” or invited my friend to hang out with us so they could really get to know him. I wish I would have gone with that person and left my friends. I wish I could have convinced my group to let him stay. There is no such thing as “cooties.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Stimulus question: Sometimes we are part of a group that excludes somebody—even though we don’t really agree and afterward we regret that we didn’t say anything. Think about a specific time when this happened. What do you wish you had said or done at that time?
claimed social fears ($n = 27$), resulting in 69% of high-exclusion reasons being accounted for by these two factors. Almost as high, however, were the reasons for the low-exclusion group ($n = 254$ or 60% for group dynamics and social fears, of a total of 422 reasons).

**Research Question 4: Do adolescents regret withholding disagreement?** Seventy percent of participants described regrets and were further able to share specific language and behaviors, retrospectively, that they wished they had engaged in at the time of group rejection of others. These responses were not coded for this study, because our exploratory goal was to determine if adolescents had access to behaviors or language that they wished they had used to communicate their disagreement at the time. Specific responses were adaptive and prosocial, as described in Table 2 (e.g., “I wish I could of said that looks don’t matter because she was nice”), and empathic (e.g., “I wish I had said something to defend her, I know how hard and so sad you become when no one reaches out or understands, it hurts”), with elements of personal social risk (e.g., “I wish I would have gone with that person and left my friends”).

**DISCUSSION**

Overall, the results of this study suggest that childhood peer-group membership was perceived by some adolescent participants as fragile, such that they self-silenced personal, social, and moral codes during specific events where a group boundary was being renegotiated with outside others (see Table 1). One adolescent’s reasoning for withholding disagreement reflected this concern: “I didn’t want to be excluded with the other person.” Other participants offered accounts that demonstrated a perception that the negative social stigma associated with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Category</th>
<th>White n</th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>Non-White n</th>
<th>Non-White %</th>
<th>Total n</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group dynamics</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social fears</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal inadequacies</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities of excluded person</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low motivation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 728$ (codable reasons). Percentages rounded up at 0.5.
Table 4
Distribution of Adolescents’ Reasons for Not Speaking Up During Peer Group Exclusion, Compared With Personal Experience of Group Rejection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for Not Speaking Up</th>
<th>Frequency of Being Excluded by Peer Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never + Not Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group dynamics</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social fears</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal inadequacies</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities of excluded person</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low motivation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequency of being excluded
\[ n = 422, 58\% \quad n = 206, 28\% \quad n = 100, 14\% \]

Note. \( N = 728 \) (codable reasons). Percentages rounded up at 0.5.
certain group outsiders might also become attached to someone who protested group exclusion (defending a rejected outsider). These two social beliefs may operate in the real world to “paralyze” the voices of group members, disabling children and adolescents from enacting their own social moral reasoning. At the same time, a group loss occurs. Although the rejection of outside group members is one way in which groups affirm their identities and boundaries, childhood peer groups are deprived of the benefit of a diversity of social-moral viewpoints, as well as the enrichment that ensues from the social resources of new members. This may be particularly important for childhood groups, in which an important task is the opportunity to develop and test values and viewpoints.

Approximately 20% of the adolescents in this study did not report an account of withholding disagreement during peer-group exclusion. There are several possibilities, including, at the outset, the fact that some participants may not have experienced or were not socially alert to memorable social rejection events involving others. Furthermore, however, it may be that some participants experienced group agreement with rejection of outsiders and simply did not experience (or remember) disagreeing with the rejection decision. Peer-group seduction may occur for some group members in childhood, blurring the formation and identification of personal disagreement with group events.

The results of this study suggest six important findings. First, no ethnic differences appeared in reason giving about a social interaction event that might be expected to be influenced by in-group and out-group experiences with race. Second, frequency of previous personal experiences with peer-group rejection did not account for the reasons offered for failing to speak up for another person being rejected. Third, two interaction-oriented variables (group dynamics and social fears) significantly accounted for 62% of the reasons adolescents shared for feeling paralyzed to communicate disagreement with a group's rejection of someone else. Fourth, 1 out of 10 responses described uncertainty about why they had not communicated their disagreement. Fifth, 70% of participants who had been silent during their group's rejection of someone else were able to share specific language or behaviors they regretted not using at the time. Sixth, in a social event centered around the group entry request of a specific child, rarely were the positive or negative qualities of the outsider child offered as a factor in the decision to remain silent. We review these findings and possible implications below.

Some participants constructed reasons for their lack of communication during peer-group dilemmas that were group directed (31%) or socially directed (29%), yet were rarely based on specific behaviors or qualities of the rejected child (8%) (see Tables 3 and 4). In fact, even when the rejected child was perceived in a positive light (e.g., “being nice”), had an existing positive relationship with the silent group
member (e.g., was already his or her friend), or was perceived to be getting rejected for the same qualities the silent group member possessed (e.g., fat and tomboyish), participants' social fears prevented them from speaking (see Table 1). Participants explained that they did not speak up because they did not want to be seen as “different” or “uncool” or as “looking stupid.” When participants described a fear of being ridiculed or losing positive social reputations, they were describing choices grounded in the fear of something valued being lost.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE PROCESSES IN GROUPS

When children or adolescents avoid voicing disagreement with peer-group decisions to exclude others it raises the question of whether they may be inaccurately perceiving that they are in the minority (e.g., “I didn’t want to have a lot of people mad at me; one was okay, but a group of people was too much”). Another group member may also have been silently contemplating the same dilemma concerning the consequences of voicing disagreement (e.g., “I wanted to fit in the group”).

Adult decision-making groups confront the consequences of unshared issue-relevant information on group outcomes in which highly salient unshared information and the absence of advocacy during discussion impairs group processes (Seibold, Meyers, & Sunwolf, 1996). Stasser (1992) examined the effects of hidden information and the presence or absence of advocacy in group discussions and found that information that would support a superior decision alternative was frequently never uncovered. Childhood peer groups, of course, may offer little opportunity for “group discussion” of exclusion events, which typically occur at unanticipated moments.

Prior research on majority and minority influence processes in adult groups may shed some light on our findings. What we know about majority-minority subgroups has been based on research focusing on group argument in groups in which open discussion about decisions was the primary task (Meyers, Brashers, & Hanner, 2000). In a recent review of majority influence processes in adult groups, Meyers and Brashers (1999) reported that the majority not only generally exerts more influence than minority subgroups but also that strategies of influence include social pressure, ridicule, or direct derision (see also Nemeth and Wachtler, 1983, who examine creative processes in task groups). The adolescent participants in our study described social fears that mirror those that emerge in adult decision-making groups. Furthermore, paralleling the adolescent accounts of withholding disagreement in this study, research on adult groups has found that member agreement is, at times, at the surface level only, with individual members maintaining private disagreement with group decisions (Meyers & Brashers, 1999). Adult group members who surrender or “converge” with the majority in a group may secretly maintain their own
positions; outward convergence rather than internalization of group decisions, consequently, occurs for some minority group members (Meyers & Brashers, 1999). Such majority-minority group effects may be more problematic in peer groups of children or adolescents in which members have a social task rather than a decision-making task and in which formal rules for discussing group rules are largely absent.

Given that childhood is a time of social development, it follows that other members of children’s or adolescents’ groups will benefit from considering minority viewpoints. Nemeth (1986) reported that groups exposed to minority viewpoints, in comparison with those that were not, demonstrate more divergent reasoning processes and consider more solutions. Research on adult decision-making groups confirms that minorities have a difficult task influencing majorities, however, and that minority persuasive appeals have greater impact if the arguments are of high quality, come from more than a single member, and are part of an interactive process rather than a one-way comment (Meyers & Brashers, 1999). One explanation for the failure of children to voice disagreement with social rejection may be the fact that exhibiting such behaviors may be a difficult task for children or adolescents who lack significant experiences with effective group argument models.

Lack of accessibility to socially acceptable language of peer dissent may be a correctible obstacle, if models of morally voicing dissent become more prevalent (e.g., at home, at school, in adult-supervised social groups, and on teams). The anticipated consequences of relying on the models of social dissent that they have access to may simply be too frightening for some children and adolescents.

INCLUSION FRAGILITY AND REJECTION CONTAGION

Overall, two social perceptions emerged from the adolescents’ reasons: (a) the belief that childhood group inclusion is fragile and (b) the belief that the stigma of rejection is contagious. Participants shared perceptions that their own group membership might be so fragile that merely speaking up in support of a nonmember could cost them group membership (e.g., “fear of being rejected,” “fear they would do the same to me,” or “I didn’t want to be excluded with the other person”). At the same time there was the perception that the negative social stigma associated with a rejected child might be contagious. This “rejection-Velcro effect” seems to suggest that some children and adolescents believe the language of support for a group-rejected child or adolescent could cause the rejected child’s negative social stigma to “stick” to anyone who offered support. Figure 1 draws on the results of this study concerning perceived group pressures and social fears to offer a preliminary model of the negative reasoning processes of some adolescents who remained silent during their group’s rejection of
another child. Specifically, the model identifies the triggering event (peer-group rejection of an outsider attempting to gain entry), the negative counterfactual thinking of a peer member who disagrees with the rejection, and the emergence of two hypothetical consequences (e.g., rejection contagion and inclusion fragility) that may block some children and adolescents from voicing their disagreement with group exclusion. When children and adolescents feel paralyzed and cannot voice divergent social values, they engage in “downward counterfactual thinking” (see Roese & Olson, 1995), producing thoughts about negative consequences that might result from words of disagreement (see Figure 1). Narrative imaginings plunge individuals into thinking about outcomes that have never happened—but might yet happen—and commonly appear in predecisional moments faced by adults (Landman, 1993). Anticipated regret can be overwhelming for children and adolescents making complex social decisions that have real-life consequences. Kahneman (1995) reports a compelling observation that the anticipation of regret is a significant factor in making all decisions.

The results from this study further suggest that some children and adolescents may fail to speak up during peer-group exclusion because they perceive a lack of the “power to” produce intended effects through language (Ng & Bradac, 1993). For such youths, a feeling of language paralysis may emerge when they observe social exclusion, which may be further bolstered for children or adolescents who have not experienced peer-group exclusion events that they felt were significant or important. They may experience situational “language powerlessness,” perceiving that they can neither protect their own valued group membership status nor facilitate group inclusion for hopeful outsiders. Crocker and Major (1989) found that social stigma and self-esteem are so critical in the developmental process that self-protective behaviors concerning social stigma are created and enacted. Children and adolescents may differ significantly in their developmental abilities (social and emotional intelligence) to tolerate group rejection or in their confidence in their social-persuasive skills to retain or regain membership. At the same time, children and adolescents who do not voice their disagreements may be experiencing “language consequences,” as they accurately perceive and weigh costs and rewards their words might trigger.

LIMITATIONS

As with any study of real-world social interactions, the results from this study should be viewed with caution. First, there exist limitations due to external validity threats. Specifically, although the narratives of these adolescents may parallel those of other teenagers in the Western world, generalizing beyond the contexts of the lives and environments
of these participants remains uncertain. This sample represents only adolescents from classrooms in a limited regional area of a western U.S. state, and we do not know if any accounts of exclusion occurred in other parts of the country; in addition, these accounts may not be representative of events in the sampled schools. This sample has particular strengths, however, in that it equally represents boys and girls, public and private schools, and less than 42% of the adolescents were Caucasian or White. The wide variety of exclusion account contexts shared (e.g., playground groups, classrooms, teams, and friendship groups) strengthens the ecological validity, suggesting that the results mirror many real-life situations faced during childhood in penetrating group boundaries.

Second, there are cautions due to potential internal validity threats. The self-report method carries limitations when used to infer actual behaviors. What adolescents reported as reasons may not be what they actually experienced at the time. Furthermore, participants were asked to recall events that were painful for themselves or for someone else, and their accounts may have defensively minimized or exaggerated their perceptions at the time and may have stemmed from their biased system of attribution making. At the same time, this design has strengths, because asking young adolescents, compared with adults, to recall events in their lives puts them considerably closer in time to those accounts.

Another concern is that the experience of filling out the questionnaire may have caused some participants to feel sad or experience self-doubt. Other variables may have accounted for the unwillingness of
children and adolescents to communicate moral disagreement with group exclusion (e.g., aggressive behaviors, prior unsuccessful entries into the target group, group revenge for perceived wrongdoing, or emotional needs or energy levels at the time). Several aspects of the design attempted to create a safe holding environment for the adolescents: (a) teachers were aware of the content, were present in the classroom, and planned to talk to the students as a class afterward; (b) participants were in a familiar classroom with other students, which allowed them to talk to their friends about their feelings and stories; and (c) parents were aware of the content of the questionnaire and the planned day of administration so that they could offer support to their children. One participant described a beneficial outcome from reflecting on this type of social communication paralysis, explaining, “I don’t know why I didn’t speak up, but I’m a better person now, because when I look back I hate that I didn’t—so I do now, and I want to.”

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN CHILDHOOD PEER-GROUP EXCLUSION

For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.

—Kipling (1894/1995)

During social play, children learn the strength of belonging to a group, as well as the vulnerability that faces loners. Thompson and Grace (2001) argued that one dynamic “law” influencing the group life of children is that “You must belong to a group” (p. 82). Thompson and Grace claimed that every child wants three things out of life: connection, recognition, and power; consequently, group inclusion becomes so critical that rejected children frequently create groups of their own. Popularity, however, remains a scarce resource.

The desire for connection typically propels children to strive for belongingness, yet, at the same time, to protect their own group belongingness if it seems threatened. The dual needs for recognition and social power may ignite intragroup conflict, as well as the public conflict of rejecting others (Simmons, 2002). When outsiders attempt to penetrate symbolic boundaries of childhood peer groups, “boundary storms” result. These symbolic storms (around socially constructed and maintained group boundaries) may be short-lived or drawn out and difficult to weather, leaving aftermaths of visible cracks or invisible social fault lines. Future research should investigate further the in situ dynamics and aftermath of attempts to gain group entry into peer groups.

Theoretically, this study advances our understanding from a BFGP about how adolescents interpret the natural social contexts in which
their peer groups are embedded. Responding to the renewed call of Stohl and Putnam (2003), this study squarely addresses boundary issues as a “problematic” in group research, including the ways in which internal group boundaries are formed and maintained.

Two cognitive frameworks for understanding the paralyzing social dilemmas some children and adolescents may face during peer-group rejection are offered (inclusion fragility and rejection contagion) (see Figure 1) that suggest directions for future studies of childhood social interactions. From a BFGP, more needs to be understood about peer-group context, especially the circumstances under which membership in specific peer groups is perceived by some children as being either fragile or strong. All childhood peer groups are embedded in more complex social structures. Furthermore, we know little about how a childhood peer group communicates the rules of membership to its members. An extension of the findings of this study would include investigating the accounts of children and adolescents who have spoken up for a rejected child and the peer-group consequences that resulted.

Although this study was retrospective, the results suggest areas for prospective study in which the effectiveness of interventions designed to foster inclusion and discourage exclusion are examined. Studying elementary classrooms with students representing a range of socioeconomic, religious, ability, and ethnic backgrounds, Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelare, Corrigan, Goodman, and Mastin (1998) attempted to discover if teachers could alter group social patterns by enforcing Paley’s (1992) “you can’t say you can’t play” rule, which was designed to support social inclusion. First, classrooms in which teachers invoked the rule of inclusion consistently demonstrated a positive change in overall social inclusion behaviors of students, but the rule itself was not a cure-all; enactment of the rule emerged over time and as a result of student discussions about how to include others. Second, for the inclusionary group rule to work, students had to initiate it by attempting inclusion. Teachers needed to teach at least two critical skills for the inclusionary rule to be adopted by students: (a) for group outsiders, creating models for acceptable ways of asking to be included, and (b) for group insiders, encouragement for noticing that another child is on the periphery, perhaps nonverbally communicating a wish to be included.

A second direction suggested by these results is a focus on how language is used to enact or protest social peer-group exclusion. Exclusivity is frequently achieved in peer groups through negative linguistic tactics such as gossiping, rumormongering, bossiness, and meanness, in addition to restricted entrée (Adler & Adler, 1998). Are there specific applied strategies to stimulate prosocial group inclusion language in peer groups? It has long been recognized that the language repertoires from which individuals can select words to meet the demands of complex social situations limit or expand effective choices (Giles &
Children and adolescents are limited by the language models for the social problem solving to which they have been exposed. Childhood groups are largely embedded in the educational system, which Sroufe et al. (1996) suggested is an active agent of socialization. As Anderson et al. (1999) argued, positive group socialization creates greater future commitment of members to confronting and resolving the multiple issues and tensions involved in participating in group activities.

The results of this study confirm the importance of specific constructs of the BFGP, such as the way groups negotiate their boundaries across time and space (Stohl & Putnam, 2003). At the same time, these findings suggest applications for adults who teach, supervise, parent, or counsel children and adolescents. Recent studies on childhood social rejection suggest proactive interventions directed toward in-group members rather than waiting to “coach” the overly rejected outsiders. Thompson and Grace (2001) offered several suggestions, including cocreating new language rules with kids (such as “uncool to be cruel”), creating thoughtful patterns of reacting to common social dilemmas, and providing repeated opportunities for children to use them. Although a number of recent books have emerged offering specific applied interventions for creating inclusion (largely based on social linguistic tools), there is a dearth of research examining the contextual and longitudinal variables of the effectiveness of interventions. For notable exceptions, see the following: Aronson (2000), teaching compassion after Columbine; Bluestein (2001), examining neurological, environmental, developmental, sociopsychological, and interpersonal factors that contribute to the emotional climate of an educational institution; Fried and Fried (1996), applied strategies for dealing with bullies and victims in the school yard; Giannetti and Sagarese (2001), coaching children to survive the jungle of school cliques; and Paley (1999), rewarding and building on the natural empathic responses of children.

These findings provide a direction for continued investigation of the centrality and importance of the language by which exclusion or inclusion is accomplished and negotiated. What are the consequences for children or adolescents who voice their disagreement with social exclusion and what are the outcomes for peer groups when initially excluded outsiders are invited in? Inclusion requires more than adult-enforced rules, which are too often quick-fix solutions. Such solutions are not benign; they can make enduring solutions harder to implement later. One fourth grader argued that new rules of social inclusion at school have to be started by teachers in kindergarten, pointing out that it was already “too late” to give fourth graders a new social rule (Paley, 1992). One adolescent participant shared a poignant regret (together with an imagined social cure), remembering the group rejection of someone else: “I wish I would have left the group and made my own, in which everyone was welcome.”
REFERENCES


