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Adult-Directed and Peer-Directed Respect for Authority: Relationships With Aggressive and Manipulative Behavior

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Abstract

This study investigated whether respect for adult and peer authority are separate attitudes which have distinct relationships with aggressive and manipulative behavior. Items assessing admiration for and obedience toward parents, teachers, popular students, and friend group leaders were administered to 286 middle school students ($M_{age} = 12.6$ yrs). Factor analysis revealed two primary factors which corresponded to adult-directed and peer-directed respect orientations. Results suggested that adult-directed respect was associated with lower levels of aggression and social manipulation, whereas peer-directed respect was associated with higher levels of these behaviors. The role of peer-directed respect as a risk factor for negative social behavior in adolescence is discussed.

Feelings of respect for persons in authority, including admiration for authority figures and willingness to obey authority-directed commands, reflect a known attitudinal orientation which can influence individuals' judgments and behavior. Respect is operationalized in multiple ways, primarily as either adherence to social rules, concern for equality and acceptance of others, caring for others, or social power (Langdon, 2007). In this paper, we focus on the "social power" aspect of respect – deference to a person with higher social status, such as an authority figure. In adolescents, research has suggested that elevated feelings of respect toward adult authority figures, including parents, teachers, and police officers, are associated with lower levels of aggression and other forms of antisocial behavior (e.g., Rigby Mak, & Slee, 1989; Tarry & Emler, 2007; Vener, Zaenglein, & Stewart, 1977).

It is probable, however, that adults are not the only authority figures toward whom adolescents direct feelings of respect. Peers become an increasingly major influence on adolescents' social behavior, particularly during middle school (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966). Furthermore, adolescent peer groups often have established social hierarchies, with students of high perceived popularity often holding positions of social authority (Savin-Williams, 1979); popular peers and friend group leaders can wield power over group membership and activities in which the group engages. Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, and Veenstra (2010) suggested that popular youth may garner admiration from peers because being affiliated with or liked by those who are popular can bestow social benefits and increase one's status within the peer group.

Despite research demonstrating the importance of social power in adolescent peer groups, little research exists which examines adolescents' feelings of respect for peers with positions of social authority. In one study on peer authority, Laupa and Turiel (1986) demonstrated that fifth-graders were more likely to legitimize the authority of same-aged peers than the authority of a random adult. However, adults determined those peers' status by designating them as "conflict managers" in a peer-mediation program. As such, recognition of students' authority may have been an extension of respect for adult authority. In this study, we have focused on respect directed towards peers whose authority derives from their natural social influence within the peer group – specifically, adolescents who are perceived as popular or who are recognized as friend group leaders.

Typically, research has focused on the behavioral and personality characteristics of socially influential students (i.e., popular students) who garner the most admiration and obedience in their peer group (e.g., Closson, 2009; Hawley, Little, & Card, 2008; Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002). In contrast, less attention has been paid to the attitudes and behaviors of the classmates who admire or follow these influential students. Investigating peers' respect for popular adolescents and friend group leaders is likely to be informative over and above the investigation of these adolescents' personal and social characteristics. In particular, knowing about the characteristics of popular peers or friend group leaders does not explain why some youth are more or less influenced by these individuals. Popularity and status are perceived in relation to the rest of the peer group, and one's opinions about a peer's status depend on beliefs about others' perceptions of that peer. In contrast, respect for popular peers and friend group leaders is a personal orientation. Adolescents can agree with others that a certain peer is popular, but whether those adolescents are influenced by or try to emulate that peer might vary substantially according to their respect for that peer's position of social authority.

Respect for authority figures tends to generalize over different types of adult authority (Rigby, Schofield, & Slee, 1987); however, it is unclear whether this respect orientation generalizes to peer authority figures. That is, are adult-directed and peer-directed respect separate attitudes which vary within an individual? Adult-directed and peer-directed respect may also vary across gender: Gender differences have been found for adult-directed respect, with boys displaying slightly lower levels of adult authority legitimization in some cases (Cumsille, Darling, Flaherty, & Martinez, 2006). Limited research exists to date on gender differences in peer-directed respect; however, early adolescent boys are also more likely to pay attention to and support distinctions among individuals due to social dominance (Mata, Ghavami, & Wittig, 2009) and associate more positive traits and behaviors with popularity (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Thus, respect for peer authority may be a more salient factor in boys' social interactions and behavior.

If adult-directed and peer-directed respect are distinct attitudinal orientations, it is possible that peer-directed respect may differ from adult-directed respect in its associations with negative social behavior. Adults usually discourage negative behavior like aggression and dishonesty among adolescents; strong feelings of respect toward adult authority figures may increase the internalization of these social norms and decrease adult-discouraged behavior. However, messages about behavior are more mixed when coming from peer authority figures. Although some socially influential adolescents who are highly regarded by their peers do promote and exemplify norms of positive social behavior, many popular and socially influential adolescents are "bistrategic controllers" (Hawley et al., 2008). In other words, in addition to positive behavior, these students frequently employ manipulation, coercion, and aggression to influence peers (Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Closson, 2009; Hawley et al., 2008). Importantly, popular students and friend group leaders are perceived by peers to engage in aggressive behavior more often than less popular classmates (Cillessen &

Borch, 2006; Lansford et al., 2009), and this type of behavior is more accepted by peers if it is engaged in by popular students in their classroom (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008). Thus, holding socially influential peers in high regard may increase one's emulation of their negative behaviors, internalization of their behavioral norms, or desire to maintain the hierarchical structure of the peer group which has given them their position, all of which could increase one's own aggressive or manipulative behavior. Accordingly, whereas respect for adult authority is typically associated with lower levels of negative social behavior, strong feelings of peer-directed respect might be associated with higher levels of negative social behavior in adolescents.

The Present Study: Specific Aims

In the present study, we investigated adult-directed and peer-directed respect for authority and their associations with aggressive and manipulative behaviors in a sample of young adolescents. First, we sought to determine whether respect for those with greater social power is a single attitudinal orientation or whether adult-directed and peer-directed respect are separate dimensions.

Next, we investigated associations of adult-directed and peer-directed respect with negative social behavior. Although associations between direct physical and verbal aggression and adult-directed respect for authority have been established (e.g., Tarry & Emler, 2007), we know little about associations with indirect aggression or other covert social behaviors. Because research on adolescents' perceptions of socially influential peers suggests that these peers are perceived to be directly and indirectly aggressive and often employ manipulative strategies to control their social environment, we measured negative social behavior in three ways – direct aggression (overt physical and verbal behavior), indirect aggression (social exclusion; rumor-spreading), and socially manipulative behavior (e.g., lying, use of dishonest charm). We expected that these behaviors would show negative associations with adult-directed respect but would be positively associated with peer-directed respect. Finally, gender differences in adult-directed and peer-directed respect and their relationships with negative social behavior were also explored.

Method

Procedure and Participants

All procedures had IRB approval. Participants ($N = 286$) attended a public middle school (grades 6-8) in a small southeastern US city. Parents or guardians received a letter mailed from the school and a phone call, recorded by the principal investigator, from the school's automatic calling system with information about the study and consent procedures. Parents or guardians could withdraw students from the study with an included stamped postcard or by contacting the principal investigator by phone or email. Each student also gave verbal assent to participate prior to survey administration. This school followed a schedule in which students switched between six different classes throughout the day; students completed surveys during their math classes. Each student who assented to participate received a small prize (e.g., snack, keychain). Of 305 students who were enrolled in middle school math classes, six were withdrawn from the study by parents or guardians, one declined to participate, and an additional 12 students failed to complete the respect items because they were absent for one or more survey administration days. No significant gender or ethnicity differences were present between students who did and did not complete the survey.

The demographic distributions of the 286 participating students (M age = 12.6 years) were as follows: 50% female; 35% 6th graders, 37% 7th graders, 28% 8th graders; and 50% White,

24% African American with other ethnicities each comprising <15% of the sample. Gender and ethnicity distributions were representative of the county in which the school district was located.

Measures

Adult-directed and peer-directed respect for authority—The items assessing adult-directed and peer-directed respect were based in part on descriptions of items from measures used in prior studies of respect-related attitudes toward adult authority (Emler & Reicher, 1987; Rigby et al., 1987; Vener et al., 1977); others were created based on the conceptual definition of respect as social power. The wording of the adult-directed and peer-directed items mirrored one another whenever possible. Items were presented to students in a combined, randomly-ordered list. Participants responded according to how much they agreed with each statement on a 5-point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The list contained 7 adult-directed and 5 peer-directed items (Table 1). Information on factor analysis of the items is reported in the Results section.

Aggressive behavior—Direct aggressive behavior was measured using 8 items from the Aggression Scale (Orpinas & Frankowski, 2001; sample $\alpha = .85$); an example item is “I got into a physical fight.” Indirect aggressive behavior was measured using 8 items from the Revised Peer Experiences Questionnaire (Prinstein, Boegers, & Vernberg, 2001; sample $\alpha = .70$); an example item is “I gossiped about someone so that others would not like him or her.” Participants indicated engagement in each behavior over the past year on a 1-5 Likert scale for which 1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = A few times, 4 = somewhat often, and 5 = Pretty often (a few times a week). Mean scores were created for each scale.

Manipulative behavior—Socially manipulative behavior was measured using 15 items from the Youth Psychopathic Traits Inventory (Andershed, Kerr, Stattin, & Levander, 2002; sample $\alpha = .88$), which assessed participants’ engagement in manipulateness, dishonest charm, and lying behaviors. Participants responded according to how well each item applied to themselves; an example item is “Pretty often I act charming and nice, even with people I don’t like, in order to get what I want.” Responses ranged from 1 (“almost always untrue”) to 5 (“almost always true”) and were averaged to create a mean score.

Results

Factor Analysis of Adult-Directed and Peer-Directed Respect

We conducted a factor analysis with maximum likelihood extraction and varimax rotation for the 12 items assessing adult-directed and peer-directed respect. Examination of the scree plot of component eigenvalues indicated two main factors, which accounted for 24.4% and 18.0% of total item variance. The two-factor solution represented a significant improvement in fit over a one-factor solution, $\Delta\chi^2(2, N = 286) = 166.46, p < .01$. Table 1 presents factor loadings for the two-factor solution. The loading patterns suggested the existence of separate adult-directed and peer-directed respect orientations. Items were combined according to primary factor loading and averaged, creating two mean scores representing adult-directed ($\alpha = .73$) and peer-directed ($\alpha = .64$) respect orientations. The adult-directed and peer-directed scales were not significantly correlated with one another ($r = .07, p = .26$).

Descriptive Differences in Adult-Directed and Peer-Directed Respect

In general, participants reported higher levels of adult-directed respect ($M = 3.45$, or an average response of “neutral” to “agree” on the 1-5 scale; $SD = .65$) than peer-directed respect ($M = 1.97$, or an average response of “disagree”; $SD = .64$), $t(285) = 39.41, p < .01$. Independent samples t-tests indicated no gender differences for adult-directed respect,

although boys reported higher levels of peer-directed respect than girls, $t(284) = 2.85$; $p < .01$.

Relationships Between Respect Scales and Negative Social Behaviors

Scales representing peer-directed respect, direct and indirect aggression, and manipulative behavior were positively skewed and were transformed using the natural log function for analyses, after which their distributions approximated normality. To examine the relationships between respect and negative social behavior, we ran a simultaneous multiple regression model with correlated outcomes using *Mplus* 6.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2010). This approach allows for individual effects of predictors (adult-directed and peer-directed respect) on outcomes (direct aggression, indirect aggression, and manipulative behavior) while also accounting for shared variance between the outcomes, which were moderately correlated in this sample ($r = .39$ to $.48$, $p < .01$). To test for gender interactions, gender and centered interaction terms between gender and the respect variables were also added as covariates. Neither gender interaction term was significant; as such, they were not included in the final model (Figure 1). With the exception of the path representing direct aggression on peer respect ($\beta = .12$, $p = .02$ at entry), inclusion of gender in the model did not change significance patterns of the main effects, and estimates at entry did not differ from final model estimates by more than $.02$. Final model R^2 s for the outcome variables were as follows: $R^2 = .19$, $p < .01$ for direct aggression; $R^2 = .08$, $p < .01$ for indirect aggression; $R^2 = .17$, $p < .01$ for manipulative behavior.

Figure 1 presents final model results. Gender significantly accounted for variance in direct aggression (boys had higher levels) and indirect aggression (girls had higher levels). Adult-directed respect had significant and unique negative associations with all three outcome variables, indicating that lower levels of adult-directed respect were associated with higher levels of negative social behavior. Peer-directed respect showed significant positive associations with manipulative behavior and indirect aggression, but was not significantly related to direct aggression when gender was included in the model.

Discussion

The present study investigated adult-directed and peer-directed respect and their associations with aggressive and manipulative behaviors in a sample of young adolescents. Factor analysis supported the existence of two discrete factors representing adult-directed and peer-directed respect; these two scales were not significantly correlated with one another. These findings suggest that feelings of respect for authority in adolescents do not generalize across all forms of social authority; rather, they vary depending on whether respect is directed toward adults or toward socially dominant peers.

Boys and girls did not significantly differ in their levels of adult-directed respect. This finding was inconsistent with previous research, which found that boys were less likely than girls to legitimize the authority of adults (Cumsille et al, 2006). In contrast, boys reported slightly higher levels of peer-directed respect compared to girls. Gender differences in peer-directed respect may be related to the fact that boys are more likely to associate positive traits and behaviors with popularity during adolescence (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002) and to support distinctions among individuals due to social dominance (Mata, Ghavami, & Wittig, 2009); thus, boys may be more inclined than girls to show deference to those already in positions of high social status.

Adult-directed and peer-directed respect were differentially associated with engagement in direct and indirect aggression and manipulative behavior. As suggested by prior research, higher levels of adult-directed respect were significantly associated with lower levels of all

three types of negative social behavior. Also as hypothesized, peer-directed respect was positively associated with higher levels of each type of negative social behavior; however, the association between peer-directed respect and direct aggression became nonsignificant once gender was included in the model. Results suggest that placing socially authoritative peers in high regard may foster negative social behavior among adolescents, particularly covert forms of behavior like indirect aggression and manipulation; this is consistent with theories which propose that increased emphasis on affiliation with popular peers spurs youth to engage in behaviors that help them achieve suitable social status (Agnew, 2003).

Though the present study did not investigate positive social behaviors, it is possible that respect for influential peers may also show links to positive behaviors within certain peer groups. Although popular peers are, on average, perceived to engage more negative social behavior than their classmates, in contexts where youth respect peers with positive social skills and strategies, internalization of norms for positive social behavior might be encouraged. Thus, further investigations of context-specific pathways of respect are needed.

A few additional limitations should be noted. First, although the high rate of student participation minimized potential selection bias, the use of a single school sample highlights the need to replicate findings in other populations. Second, the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions. It is possible that causal associations work in the opposite direction (e.g., engagement in negative behavior could result in conflicts with parents or teachers, which might decrease respect for these figures), or that other variables not measured in this study account for the identified relationships (e.g., association with delinquent peers, expectations of peers' reactions). It is important, therefore, to examine these relationships from a longitudinal perspective, both to establish causal effects and to investigate changes across time.

The items in these scales were created for the study due to a lack of existing self-report measures of these constructs, particularly peer-directed respect; as such, these measures reflect a first attempt to assess these constructs within the same measure and may require additional validation. In particular, Cronbach's alpha for the peer-directed respect scale was somewhat low ($\alpha = .64$), although low alphas are not uncommon for scales with small numbers of items. Despite the fact that associations with negative social behaviors were in the expected direction, the alpha suggests that other sources of variance may be influencing responses to items and that the reliability of the respect scales could benefit from the inclusion of additional items. Furthermore, the relatively low number of items prevented investigation of sub-components of respect within each scale, such as admiration vs. obedience, beliefs vs. hypothetical behaviors, or differences in respect for popular peers vs. peer leaders. Future efforts should be made to examine additional items and other potential measures of respect orientations. For instance, as the items in the peer-directed respect scale were designed to measure respect in the context of social power toward individuals in positions of social authority, we did not investigate feelings of respect for less popular peers. However, examining adolescents' admiration for and willingness to follow less popular peers may also be informative; in particular, investigation of attitudes of respect toward popular and less popular peers may help to quantify distinctions among these adolescents' levels of social influence.

Additional analyses, conducted with this sample but outside the scope of this paper, suggested that self-perceived respect did not evidence the same relationships with a peer-nominated reputational measure of aggressive behavior as it did with self-reported measures. Although correlations of .01 between study variables and an unrelated scale included in the survey suggest that self-report common method variance did not significantly influence results (Lindell & Whitney, 2001), it is important to note that our measures are self-

perceptions of attitudes and behavior, which could be subject to cognitive distortions. It is thus important to investigate how relationships between respect and negative social behavior may change according to perspective.

Future Directions

Future studies exploring respect orientations and their correlates and consequences are needed. An important next step will be to investigate possible environmental correlates of respect orientation, such as exposure to deviant peers and susceptibility to peer pressure. It is possible that peer-directed respect may moderate the influence of popular, deviant friends on a student's own deviant behavior. Factors related to peer group dynamics, such as friendships with peers with social authority or personal desire for popularity, may also influence peer-directed respect.

Finally, in order to integrate knowledge of respect orientations into a prevention framework, it will be important to examine relations between respect orientations and known core competencies, such as self-regulation, decision-making skills, development of autonomous morality, and prosocial connectedness, that foster positive youth development (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Efforts to identify and reduce authority-directed respect for antisocial peers may have positive effects in the context of peer-led aggression prevention programming. Notably, the present study provides an important first step in delineating the unique contribution of adult- versus peer-directed respect for authority as salient to negative social behaviors of young adolescents.

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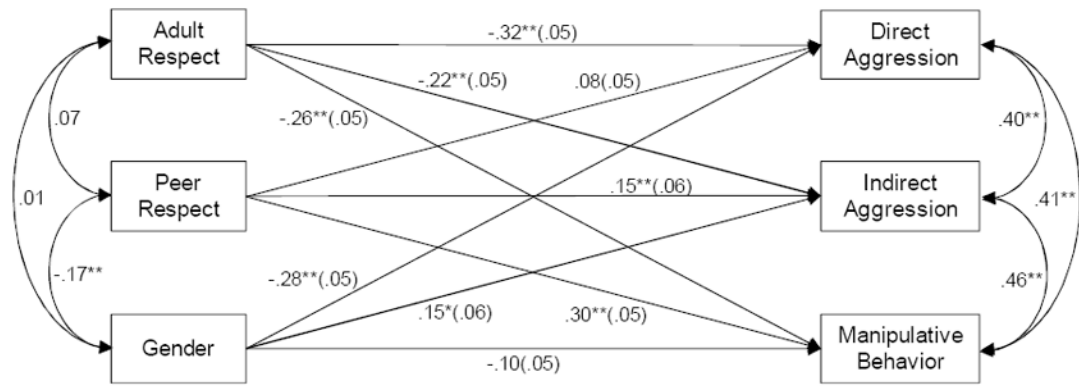


Figure 1. Simultaneous multiple regression model of negative social behavior on adult-directed and peer-directed respect. Parameter estimates represent standardized regression coefficients (single-arrow) or correlations (double-arrow) for the final model. Standard errors for regression coefficients are in parentheses. Gender was coded as 0 = boys, 1 = girls. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 1

Rotated Factor Loadings for Two-Factor Solution

Item	Factor	
	1	2
If my teacher told me to do something, I would definitely do it.	.73	-.00
Teachers should be able to tell their students what to do.	.64	-.13
If my parents told me to do something, I would definitely do it.	.59	.14
I really admire adults who are in charge, like teachers and police officers.	.57	.11
Parents should be able to tell their kids what to do.	.53	-.04
I would follow my parents' advice about choosing friends.	.40	.01
It's OK that adults are sometimes treated better than kids, because they deserve it.	.36	.23
I admire kids who are popular or who are the leaders of their group of friends.	.13	.69
If my friend was really popular, I would follow his/her advice about who else to be friends with.	-.01	.65
The leader of a group of friends should be able to tell other friends in the group what to do.	.08	.55
It's OK that popular kids are sometimes treated better than unpopular kids, because they deserve it.	-.08	.44
If the leader of my group of friends told me to do something, I would definitely do it.	.03	.31

Note. Factor loadings > .30 are in boldface. Factor 1 represents adult-directed respect and Factor 2 represents peer-directed respect.