TRANSLATING SOCIAL MOTIVATION INTO ACTION: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF NEED FOR APPROVAL TO SOCIAL OUTCOMES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This research examined how 2nd grade children’s need for approval from peers influenced their social behavior (prosocial behavior, overt and relational aggression, and avoidant behavior) as well as how peers respond to them (popularity, victimization, and exclusion) across a one year span. Need for approval was conceptualized as either the motivation to gain approval or avoid disapproval from peers. Children ($N = 526$, $M$ age $= 7.95$, $SD = .33$) reported on their need for approval and their teachers reported on children’s social outcomes. As anticipated, having an approach orientation, as reflected in positive need for approval, is adaptive by promoting positive outcomes (i.e., popularity) and protecting against negative outcomes (i.e., aggression, victimization, and exclusion). Conversely, an avoidance orientation is more disadvantageous because it places children at risk for negative outcomes (i.e. diminished popularity and heightened aggression, victimization, and exclusion). The current study shows that children’s approach-avoidance orientation contributes to their peer relationships over time, providing specific targets for interventions that optimize children’s peer relationships.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

During elementary school, children become socialized into a world outside of the home, causing the peer group to become a highly salient context for development that shapes child behavior, beliefs, and even personality characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harris, 1995; Ladd, 1999). Given that successful peer relationships promote healthy development (Criss et al., 2009; Mize & Pettit, 1997; Perdue, Manzeske, & Estell, 2009; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004), it is important to understand how children are motivated within the context of these relationships. One factor that may motivate children is their need for approval from peers. Understanding how a child’s need for approval motivates them to interact with peers in specific ways may inform efforts to foster positive peer relationships and prevent negative social outcomes. The goal of this study was to explore how need for approval contributes to children’s own social behavior and how their peers respond to them.

Need for Approval as a Motivational Construct

Several theories of motivation suggest that individual differences in behavior are regulated by two systems: an approach system, which is sensitive to reward, and an avoidance system, which is sensitive to punishment (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003; Gray, 1990). Approach-avoidance dispositions are manifested across a variety of domains, including temperament, personality, affect, and coping (Gable et al., 2003). In recent years, researchers have begun to investigate how approach-avoidance dispositions are translated into the types of goals that children adopt within a social context. Drawing from theories of achievement goal motivation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Molden & Dweck, 2006), three types of social goals have been distinguished (Rudolph, Abaied, Flynn, Sugimura, & Agoston, in press;
Ryan & Shim, 2008): mastery goals, which focus on developing relationships or learning new social skills (e.g., getting to know other kids better, learning how to be a good friend), performance-approach goals, which focus on demonstrating competence and receiving positive social judgments (e.g., being seen as popular, having “cool” friends), and performance-avoidance goals, which focus on avoiding demonstrating a lack of competence and receiving negative social judgments (e.g., avoiding being viewed as foolish or as a “loser”). Within an achievement context, previous research suggests that an approach motivation is linked to both mastery and performance-approach goals, whereas an avoidance motivation is linked to performance-avoidance goals (Elliot & Thrash, 2002).

Consistent with this approach-avoidance framework, individual differences in need for approval have been conceptualized in terms of two dimensions (Rudolph, Caldwell, & Conley, 2005). Positive need for approval, presumably driven by an approach orientation, reflects the motivation to elicit social rewards in the form of positive judgments that enhance self-worth (i.e., feeling proud of oneself in the face of social approval). Negative need for approval, presumably driven by an avoidance orientation, reflects the motivation to avoid eliciting social punishment in the form of negative judgments that diminish self-worth (i.e., feeling ashamed of oneself in the face of social disapproval). In previous research, Gable (2006) found that approach motives and goals were associated with satisfaction in social relationships whereas avoidance motives and goals were associated with social isolation, implying that need for approval may have important consequences for interpersonal relationships.

Developmental theories of the self provide a basis for understanding why need for approval might be important for motivating children within an interpersonal context. Mead’s symbolic interactionist theory suggests that the appraisals of significant others, in this case peers,
are integrated into one’s self-concept (Mead, 1934). During childhood, this process occurs as children begin to base their sense of self-worth on the actual or perceived appraisals of their classmates (Caldwell, Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, & Kim, 2004; Cole, Jacquez, & Maschman, 2001; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Harter, 1998). Whereas a global sense of self-worth reflects a generalized evaluation of the self, contingent self-worth arises when a child’s sense of self is dependent upon their competence in a given domain (Harter, 1986; Swann, 1996). Indeed, previous research supports the idea that global self-worth and contingent self-worth represent distinct but associated constructs (Rudolph et al., 2005). In particular, Crocker and Wolfe’s (2001) review of research on contingent self-worth reveals that social approval may be especially motivating to children because of intense affective responses that result from events in the social domain. Thus, children’s need for approval may be seen as a specific type of contingent self-worth in which feelings about oneself are dependent upon whether children receive social approval or disapproval.

*Contributions of Need for Approval to Interpersonal Relationships*

The present research tested the proposition that approach-avoidance motivation, as reflected in positive and negative dimensions of need for approval, will be translated into particular patterns of interacting with peers. Providing a broad framework for understanding approach-avoidance behavior within an interpersonal context, Caspi, Elder, and Bem (1988) proposed three orientations that describe how children interact within their social worlds: (1) “moving towards the world,” as reflected in positive approach behavior; (2) “moving against the world,” as reflected in negative approach behavior; and (3) “moving away from the world,” as reflected in avoidant behavior. Each of these orientations may, in turn, shape peer responses that are oriented either toward, against, or away from the child.
**Predicting positive approach outcomes.** In the present study, positive approach outcomes were conceptualized in terms of prosocial behavior and peer popularity. Prosocial behavior is generally defined as voluntary acts intended to help or benefit others (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, & Chapman, 1983) although prosocial behavior can benefit the helper as well as the receiver (Brown, Gary, Greene, & Milburn, 1992; Ellison, 1991; Gecas & Burke, 1995), perhaps by fulfilling the basic psychological need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Moreover, prosocial children often are more well-liked than children who are not prosocial (Bowker, Rubin, & Burgess, 2006; Coleman & Byrd, 2003; de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Veenstra et al., 2008). Thus, high positive need for approval may motivate children to act in prosocial ways because helping others serves to fulfill their goal of obtaining positive appraisals through increased popularity. Conversely, children with high negative need for approval may be unlikely to approach peers in positive ways due to a fear of being rebuked, and thus may be less popular.

**Predicting negative approach outcomes.** Negative approach outcomes were conceptualized as overt and relational aggression and overt and relational victimization. Overt aggression is defined as direct behaviors intended to harm others through physical damage or threat of physical damage, whereas relational aggression is defined as indirect behaviors intended to harm others through manipulation of social relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In parallel, peers may orient themselves against other children through overt or relational victimization. In light of research suggesting that bullies are not viewed favorably by peers (Asher & Coie, 1990) and have problems in their friendships (Hektner et al., 2000), it is likely that positive need for approval suppresses overt and relational aggression, which would interfere with children’s ability to nurture their relationships and elicit positive feedback. Similarly, peers
may be less likely to victimize children with a positive need for approval because of their efforts to interact in positive ways.

Negative need for approval may similarly inhibit overtly aggressive behavior because interacting with peers in conflictual ways could elicit negative appraisals. Children with high negative need for approval also may be less likely to become targets of overt peer victimization. Because these children seek to avoid social situations that result in negative judgments, they may be unlikely to respond or retaliate to aggressive advances, thereby not providing a bully with the intense physical or emotional reaction they desire. However, negative need for approval actually may promote relational aggression. Because children high in avoidance motivation do not have access to socially competent behavior (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Rudolph et al., 2005), they may seek to buffer themselves from negative judgments by forming partnerships with some peers through relational aggression. In one study, Bosson and colleagues (2006) found that sharing negative attitudes about a third party established in-group/out-group boundaries and boosted self-esteem. This and other research suggests that relational aggression can promote in-group cohesiveness when ganging up on a collective victim (Dunbar, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Similarly, if children engage in relational aggression, they could become the targets of relational victimization as peers seek to retaliate through the same means of manipulating social relationships.

Predicting avoidance outcomes. Avoidance outcomes were conceptualized as avoidant behavior (i.e., anxious solitude and social helplessness) and peer exclusion. It has been theorized that anxious solitude, or children’s passive anxious withdrawal from peers (Coplan, 2000; Rubin, 1982), results from conflicting motivations – normative social approach and abnormally high avoidance orientation (Asendorpf, 1990). Social helplessness, or children’s lack of displayed
persistence and effort as well as diminished feelings of competence in social situations, also may be indicative of a more general avoidance of social situations as these types of avoidant behavior tend to co-occur with peer exclusion (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; McElwain, Olson, & Volling, 2002). Positive need for approval is likely to inhibit avoidant behavior, which would orient children away from peers and decrease their likelihood of obtaining positive appraisals. Children with high positive need for approval also are less likely to be excluded by peers because they seek to nurture their relationships through positive interactions and would be seen as desirable interaction partners. Conversely, high negative need for approval may prompt children to withdraw from social situations to avoid the detrimental effects of negative peer appraisals (Johnson, LaVoie, Spenceri, & Mahoney-Wernli, 2001; McElwain et al., 2002). These children also are likely seen as undesirable interaction partners because they tend to shy away from social situations, and thus may be more excluded by peers.

**Study Overview**

The goal of the present research was to examine the contribution of need for approval to positive approach, negative approach, and avoidance social outcomes (i.e., social behaviors and peer responses) over a one-year period. A prospective design was used to follow children from the 2nd – 3rd grade. This developmental stage was targeted because children are beginning to learn more about social norms, self-presentation strategies, and how to understand social situations, which may influence subsequent peer interaction experiences (Asher & Gottman, 1981; Banerjee, 2002; Howes, 2001). To validate the idea that positive and negative dimensions of need for approval, respectively, map onto children’s social approach versus avoidance motivation, we examined the concurrent association between the two dimensions of need for approval and social development (i.e., mastery), social demonstration-approach (i.e.,
performance-approach), and social demonstration-avoidance (i.e., performance-avoidance) goals. Following theory and prior research (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), it was expected that positive need for approval would predict more social development and demonstration-approach goals whereas negative need for approval would predict more demonstration-avoidance goals.

We also examined possible sex differences in the contribution of need for approval to social outcomes. Previous research indicates that girls and boys differ systematically in several relevant peer processes. Girls tend to be more interdependent or communal, whereas boys tend to be more independent and agentic (Cross & Madson, 1997; Helgeson, 1994; Hibbard & Buhrmester, 1998). Similarly, girls tend to be more prosocial (Holmgren, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998) and to use more relational aggression, whereas boys tend to use more overt aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997). Because the norms for these types of social motivation and behavior differ across sex, it is possible that social motivation will have different implications in girls and boys.

To summarize (see Figure 1), we hypothesized: (1) approach motivation, as reflected in positive need for approval, would predict: more positive approach outcomes (prosocial behavior and popularity), less negative approach outcomes (overt and relational aggression and overt and relational victimization), and less avoidance outcomes (avoidant behavior and exclusion), and (2) avoidance motivation, as reflected in negative need for approval, would predict less positive approach outcomes, less direct negative approach outcomes (overt aggression and overt victimization), more indirect negative approach outcomes (relational aggression and relational victimization), and more avoidance outcomes. We did not form specific hypotheses regarding sex differences, but we examined sex as a potential moderator of these social pathways.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Participants were 526 2nd graders (279 girls, 247 boys; \( M \) age = 7.95, \( SD = .33 \)) and their elementary school teachers in several Midwestern towns. Children were from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (67.1% White, 32.9% minority; 33.8% qualified for a subsidized school lunch program). Parents provided written consent and children provided oral assent. Consent forms were distributed to 724 children through schools and at parent-teacher conferences. Of these children, 576 (80%) received consent to participate. Comparison of participants and nonparticipants revealed no significant differences in age, \( t(723) = .63, ns \), sex, \( \chi^2(1) = .15, ns \), ethnicity, \( \chi^2(1) = .59, ns \), or lunch status (full payment vs. subsidized), \( \chi^2(1) = .35, ns \). All teachers of participating children completed surveys.

Child and teacher data were collected during the 2nd (Wave 1; \( W_1 \)) and 3rd (Wave 2; \( W_2 \)) grades. Longitudinal data were available for 526 (91%) participants. Children with and without data at both waves did not significantly differ in age, \( t(574) = 1.92, ns \), sex, \( \chi^2(1) = .47, ns \), ethnicity, \( \chi^2(1) = 1.04, ns \), lunch status, \( \chi^2(1) = .23, ns \), or most of the key study variables, \( ts(574) \leq 1.76, ns \). However, children without longitudinal data showed significantly higher levels of \( W_1 \) positive need for approval, \( t(574) = 2.06, p < .05 \), and overt aggression, \( t(574) = 3.06, p < .01 \), and lower levels of prosocial behavior, \( t(574) = -2.20, p < .05 \), than did children with longitudinal data.

Procedures

Participants completed surveys approximately one year apart during the winter of 2nd and 3rd grades. Questionnaires were administered in small groups (up to 4 children) in their classrooms. All survey items were read aloud by trained research assistants while participants
listened and circled their responses. Teacher surveys were distributed and returned at school. Children received a small gift and teachers received monetary reimbursement for participation.

**Measures**

*Need for approval.* Children completed the Need for Approval Questionnaire (Rudolph et al., 2005), which consisted of two subscales. The positive need for approval subscale assessed the extent to which peer approval and acceptance augment a child’s sense of self-worth (4 items; $\alpha = .77$; e.g., “Being liked by other kids makes me feel better about myself.”). The negative need for approval subscale assessed the extent to which peer disapproval and rejection weaken a child’s sense of self-worth (4 items; $\alpha = .75$; e.g. “I feel like I am a bad person when other kids don’t like me.”). Children rated how true each item was on a 5-point scale. Scores represent the mean of the items on each subscale.

To confirm the validity of the two-dimensional structure of need for approval, a maximum likelihood confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using AMOS 7.0 (Arbuckle, 2006). Two latent variables were created representing positive and negative need for approval; the four items on each subscale served as indicators. This model provided an excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2 (21, N = 526) = 37.41, p < .05$, $\chi^2/df = 1.78$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, incremental fit index (IFI) = .98, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .04. The two latent variables were modestly positively correlated ($\Phi = .13, p < .05$). Moreover, this model fit the data significantly better, $\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 430.77, p < .001$, than a one-factor model in which all eight indicators loaded onto a single latent variable representing general need for approval, $\chi^2 (21, N = 526) = 468.17, p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 22.29$, CFI = .54, IFI = .55, RMSEA = .20.

*Social goals.* Children completed a measure of social achievement goals (Rudolph, Abaied, Flynn, Sugimura, & Agoston, in press) that was based on Dweck and colleagues’
(Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Molden & Dweck, 2006) social-cognitive theory of motivation and specific applications to the social context (Erdley et al., 1997; Ryan & Shim, 2008). Items tapped the extent to which children endorsed development goals, which involve developing social competence and learning about relationships (8 items; \( \alpha = .81 \); e.g., “I like to learn new skills for getting along with other kids.”), demonstration-approach goals, which involve demonstrating social competence by gaining positive social judgments (6 items; \( \alpha = .81 \); e.g., “My goal is to show other kids how much everyone likes me.”), and demonstration-avoidance goals, which involve demonstrating social competence by avoiding negative social judgments (7 items; \( \alpha = .80 \); e.g. “I try to avoid doing things that make me look bad to other kids.”). Children received the prompt: “When I am around other kids…” and rated how true each item was on a 5-point scale. Construct validity has been established for this measure through associations between social goals and multiple indexes of social adjustment (Rudolph et al., in press). Scores represent the mean of the items on each subscale.

*Prosocial and aggressive behavior.* Teachers completed the Children’s Social Behavior Scale (Crick, 1996). The prosocial behavior subscale assessed the extent to which children actively engage in inclusive and empathic behaviors towards peers (3 items; \( \alpha = .88 \); e.g., “This child is friendly to most kids, even those s/he does not like very much.”). The overt aggression subscale assessed the degree to which children engage in direct, physical aggression intended to harm others (4 items; \( \alpha = .96 \); e.g., “This child hits, kicks, or punches peers.”). The relational aggression subscale assessed how much children engage in manipulation of peer relationships intended to harm others (5 items; \( \alpha = .91 \); e.g., “This child spreads rumors or gossips about some peers.”). Teachers rated how true each statement was about the child on a 5-point scale. Validity
of this measure has been previously established (Crick, 1996). Scores represent the mean of the items on each subscale.

**Avoidant behavior.** Teachers completed two measures of avoidant behavior. First, they completed a measure (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004) adapted from the Teacher’s Report Form (Achenbach, 1991) and Child Behavior Scale (Ladd & Profilet, 1996). This measure assessed the extent to which children exhibit anxious solitude (6 items; e.g., “This child plays alone more than most other children.”). Teachers rated how true each statement was about the child on a 5-point scale. Teacher assessment of anxious solitary behavior has been validated through convergence with peer behavioral nominations (Coplan, 2000; Ladd & Profilet, 1996; Rubin & Clark, 1983).

Second, teachers completed a measure of social helplessness (Fincham, Hodoka, & Sanders, 1989; Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1992). This measure assessed the degree to which children exhibit helpless social behavior within peer interactions (12 items; e.g., “This child withdraws or doesn’t notice when other children attempt friendly overtures towards him/her.”). Teachers rated how true each statement was about the child on a 5-point scale. Previous research has revealed adequate internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity for this scale (Fincham et al., 1989; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1992). The two measures of avoidant behavior were significantly correlated, $r = .62$, $p < .001$, suggesting that they tapped a similar construct. Thus, an avoidance composite score ($\alpha = .92$) was computed by standardizing and averaging across the 18 items, with higher scores indicating more avoidant behavior.

**Popularity.** Teachers provided ratings of children’s popularity with peers on a 7-point scale. Validity for this approach has been substantiated through correlations with peer reports of popularity (Jacobsen, Lahey, & Strauss, 1983), as well as through associations with child-reported peer perceptions (Rudolph & Clark, 2001; Rudolph, Hammen, & Burge, 1997).
Victimization. Teachers completed the Social Experiences Questionnaire (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) to assess children’s exposure to overt and relational peer victimization. Six items assessing overt victimization and 5 items assessing relational victimization were added to the original measure to provide a more thorough examination of victimization (Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, Hessel, & Schmidt, in press). The overt victimization subscale assessed the extent to which children are exposed to physical harm or threat of physical harm (11 items; \( \alpha = .94; \) e.g. “How often does this child get hit, punched, or slapped by another kid?”). The relational victimization subscale assessed the extent to which children are exposed to harm through manipulation of peer relationships (10 items; \( \alpha = .95; \) e.g. “How often do other kids leave this child out on purpose?”). Teachers rated how often children experienced each type of victimization on a 5-point scale. Teacher reports of victimization have been shown to correspond with both child and peer reports (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Putallaz et al., 2007). Scores represent the mean of the items on each subscale.

Exclusion. Teachers completed a measure of peer exclusion adapted from the Child Behavior Scale (Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004; Ladd & Profilet, 1996). This scale assessed the degree to which children are excluded by their peers (7 items; \( \alpha = .93; \) e.g., “Peers refuse to let this child play with them.”). Teachers rated how true each statement was about the child on a 5-point scale. Teacher reports of peer exclusion converge with child and peer reports (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003). Scores represent the mean of the items.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive data for girls and boys across waves. All variables were generally moderately stable over time. A multivariate analysis of variance was conducted with sex as the between-subjects factor and wave as the within-subjects factor. This analysis revealed a significant multivariate main effect of sex, $F(10, 515) = 24.11, p < .001$, a significant multivariate main effect of wave, $F(10, 515) = 4.70, p < .001$, and a nonsignificant Sex X Wave interaction, $F(10, 515) = 0.65, ns$. Univariate tests revealed a significant main effect of sex for prosocial behavior, $F(1, 524) = 13.63, p < .001$, relational aggression, $F(1, 524) = 17.46, p < .001$, and relational victimization, $F(1, 524) = 6.57, p < .05$, reflecting higher scores for girls, and a significant main effect of sex for overt aggression, $F(1, 524) = 28.57, p < .001$, and overt victimization $F(1, 524) = 29.26, p < .001$, reflecting higher scores for boys. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that girls display more prosocial behavior (Holmgren, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1991) and tend to be more relationally aggressive (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) than boys whereas boys tend to be more overtly aggressive than girls (Crick, Casas & Mosher, 1997). Univariate tests also revealed a significant main effect of wave on negative need for approval, $F(1, 524) = 18.72, p < .001$, and popularity, $F(1, 524) = 5.78, p < .05$, reflecting higher scores at $W_1$ than $W_2$. Similarly, a main effect of wave was found for peer exclusion, $F(1, 524) = 7.57, p < .01$, reflecting higher scores at $W_2$ than $W_1$.

Construct Validity of Need for Approval

Three hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine whether the two dimensions of need for approval mapped onto a social approach-avoidance goal orientation
(see Table 2). In each regression, positive and negative need for approval were entered simultaneously to examine unique effects; separate regressions were conducted to predict each type of social goal. Given the intercorrelations among social goals (Ryan & Shim, 2008), the models adjusted for the alternate goals at the first step. As expected, positive need for approval significantly predicted both social development and demonstration-approach goals. Negative need for approval significantly predicted demonstration-avoidance goals. These results mirror previous findings regarding a correspondence between approach-avoidance orientation and social goals (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), and support the idea that the two dimensions of need for approval map onto an approach-avoidance orientation.

**Correlational Analyses**

Table 3 presents $W_1$ intercorrelations among the variables. For both girls and boys, with just two exceptions, the four dimensions of social behavior and peer responses were significantly correlated in the expected directions. These correlations were generally moderate in size, suggesting that these dimensions represent distinct yet related constructs. Positive need for approval was significantly positively associated with negative need for approval among girls. Among boys, positive need for approval was significantly negatively associated with avoidant behavior, and negative need for approval was significantly positively associated with avoidant behavior. Negative need for approval also was significantly negatively associated with boys’ popularity. There were no significant zero-order correlations between need for approval and social outcomes in girls.

**Overview of Central Analyses**

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses was conducted to examine the independent and interactive contributions of $W_1$ need for approval and sex to $W_2$ social behavior
(prosocial behavior, aggression, and avoidant behavior) and peer responses (peer popularity, peer victimization, and peer exclusion). The two dimensions of need for approval were entered together to examine unique effects. The first step included prior ($W_1$) levels of social outcomes, the second step included the mean-centered main effects of $W_1$ positive and negative need for approval and sex, and the third step included the two-way interactions (positive need for approval $\times$ sex and negative need for approval $\times$ sex)\(^1\). Significant interactions with sex were decomposed to examine the extent to which need for approval predicted each outcome in girls and in boys.

*Predicting Social Behavior*

The first set of analyses examined the prediction of prosocial behavior, overt and relational aggression, and avoidant behavior (see Table 4). Results revealed significant main effects of sex on $W_2$ prosocial behavior, overt aggression, and relational aggression. As discussed in the descriptive analyses, girls exhibited higher levels of prosocial behavior and relational aggression than did boys, whereas boys exhibited higher levels of overt aggression than did girls. Results also revealed significant main effects of $W_1$ negative need for approval on $W_2$ relational aggression and $W_2$ avoidant behavior. As expected, negative need for approval predicted heightened subsequent relational aggression and avoidant behavior.

A significant positive need for approval $\times$ sex interaction was found for overt aggression. Decomposition of this interaction (see Figure 2) revealed that $W_1$ positive need for approval significantly predicted $W_2$ overt aggression in boys ($\beta = -0.16, t(245) = -2.87, p < .01$) but not in girls ($\beta = 0.06, t(277) = 1.22, ns$). Specifically, in boys, positive need for approval predicted less

\(^1\) The positive need for approval $\times$ negative need for approval interaction term was nonsignificant in all analyses and was not included in the final models.
subsequent overt aggression, suggesting that having an approach motivation protected boys against elevated levels of overt aggression. Girls exhibited low levels of overt aggression regardless of their positive need for approval.

**Predicting Peer Responses**

The second set of analyses examined the prediction of peer popularity, peer victimization, and peer exclusion (see Table 5). Results revealed a significant main effect of sex on \( W_2 \) overt victimization, indicating that boys experienced more overt victimization than did girls. Results also revealed a significant main effect of \( W_1 \) positive need for approval on \( W_2 \) peer exclusion. As expected, positive need for approval predicted less subsequent peer exclusion. Results also revealed a significant main effect of \( W_1 \) negative need for approval on \( W_2 \) overt and relational victimization, and a marginally significant effect on \( W_2 \) peer exclusion. Specifically, negative need for approval predicted heightened overt victimization, relational victimization, and peer exclusion.

A significant positive need for approval \( \times \) sex interaction was found for popularity, overt victimization, relational victimization, and peer exclusion. Decomposition of these interactions (see Figures 3a – d) revealed similar patterns for each of the peer responses. Specifically, \( W_1 \) positive need for approval significantly predicted (a) \( W_2 \) popularity in boys (\( \beta = 0.14, t(245) = 2.61, p < .01 \)) but not in girls (\( \beta = -0.07, t(277) = -1.25, ns \)); (b) \( W_2 \) overt victimization in boys (\( \beta = -0.15, t(245) = -2.42, p < .05 \)) but not in girls (\( \beta = 0.07, t(277) = 1.12, ns \)), (c) \( W_2 \) relational victimization in boys (\( \beta = -0.15, t(245) = -2.49, p < .05 \)) but not in girls (\( \beta = 0.06, t(277) = 1.06, ns \)), and (d) \( W_2 \) peer exclusion in boys (\( \beta = -0.23, t(245) = -4.13, p < .001 \)) but not in girls (\( \beta = 0.01, t(277) = 0.11, ns \)). Thus, in boys, positive need for approval predicted more subsequent
popularity and less subsequent victimization and exclusion, whereas girls’ levels of popularity, victimization, and exclusion were similar regardless of their positive need for approval.

A significant negative need for approval X sex interaction was found for popularity. Decomposition of this interaction (see Figure 4) revealed that W₁ negative need for approval significantly predicted W₂ popularity in girls ($\beta = -0.11, t(278) = -2.02, p < .05$) but not in boys ($\beta = 0.06, t(246) = 1.02, ns$). Specifically, in girls, negative need for approval predicted less subsequent popularity. Boys’ level of popularity was similar regardless of their negative need for approval.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Engaging in healthy peer interactions is an important step in normative social development. Children’s motivation to cultivate constructive relationships with peers is likely a complex process. The current study examined how need for approval operates as a motivating factor for children’s specific social behaviors (prosocial behavior, overt and relational aggression, and avoidant behavior) as well as their peers’ responses to them (peer popularity, overt and relational peer victimization, and peer exclusion). Positive need for approval, a focus on social reward in the form of positive appraisals, may be representative of an approach orientation in which children are motivated to direct themselves towards social situations in order to elicit positive feedback. An approach orientation may be beneficial as it encourages children to adhere to social norms and to adopt social goals that promote harmony with peers. Conversely, negative need for approval, a focus on social punishment in the form of negative appraisals, may be representative of an avoidance orientation in which children are motivated to direct themselves away from social situations in order to avoid eliciting negative feedback. An avoidance orientation may be disadvantageous as it causes children to focus on evading social interactions and to adopt social goals that promote avoiding displays of competence (or a lack thereof).

Motivational Implications of Need for Approval

Previous research suggests children’s social orientation influences the types of achievement goals they adopt in a classroom context (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). To establish need for approval as a motivational construct, we examined whether positive and negative dimensions of need for approval mapped onto children’s approach- and avoidance-oriented social goals. The
need for approval measure employed in the current study replicated the pattern of association with social goals previously found, in particular, positive need for approval predicted more social development and demonstration-approach goals, whereas negative need for approval predicted more demonstration-avoidance goals. This finding is critical to understanding that need for approval may be one way in which an approach-avoidance orientation manifests itself as an outward display of sensitivity to reward (approach) or punishment (avoidance). Our pattern of results suggests that need for approval motivates children socially and influences how they interact with peers in accordance to underlying systems of social orientation.

**Social Implications of Need for Approval**

*Social consequences of approach orientation.* As expected, an approach orientation, reflected in higher levels of positive need for approval, predicted moving towards the social world as opposed to against or away from it, and peers responded in kind. Specifically, approach orientation predicted more positive approach outcomes (heightened popularity in boys), less negative approach outcomes (diminished overt aggression and overt and relational victimization in boys), and less avoidant outcomes (diminished avoidant behavior across the sample and peer exclusion in boys). Thus, an approach orientation is adaptive in that it promotes positive social outcomes and protects against several negative social outcomes. As children seek out positive appraisals from others in order to enhance their feelings of self-worth, it makes sense that they would do so by approaching others in positive ways as opposed to treating peers poorly or shying away from them altogether.

It makes sense that children who want to obtain positive self-appraisals and who approach peers in genuine ways would do so by being helpful, altruistic, empathic, or selfless; however, the present study did not find support for the idea that an approach orientation predicts
more prosocial behavior. This result could be due to our measure of prosocial behavior, which included three items that tap into active, explicit including and inviting behaviors (e.g. “When this child notices that another kid has been left out of an activity or group, he/she invites the kid to join the group.”). This measure does not capture other ways in which children interact positively with peers such as sharing school supplies, taking turns playing a game, helping a child who has fallen, or working together to solve a problem. Positive need for approval may motivate children to act in a variety of prosocial ways within the context of peer interactions because helpful, responsive, and kind interactions would ensure that they gain the desired positive judgments from others, an idea replicated in research with adults (Yoeli, 2009).

Although it was hypothesized that an approach motivation would predict more positive approach outcomes and less negative approach outcomes, as supported by the study findings, it is possible that an approach motivation actually predicts more negative approach outcomes under certain conditions. Previous research suggests that the approach motivational system is linked to anger (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). In particular, anger could directly result from disrupted approach behavior, such as when an approach goal is blocked or thwarted (Fox, 1991; Frijda, 1986; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). For example, Rudolph and colleagues (in preparation) found that parent-reported inhibitory control interacted with approach-avoidance orientation, measured as child reported need for approval and social goals. Specifically, within the context of poor inhibitory control, approach motivation predicted heightened aggression over time. Thus, children who are oriented towards their peers but have diminished ability to self-regulate and suppress inappropriate behavior are more likely to interact with peers aggressively in pursuit of rewards, as opposed to interacting in positive ways to gain approval. It is important to recognize
that although in general an approach orientation may be more adaptive than an avoidance orientation, it may still influence children to interact with peers in less than optimal ways.

Social consequences of avoidance orientation. Also as expected, an avoidance orientation, reflected in higher levels of negative need for approval, predicted less positive approach outcomes (diminished popularity in girls), more direct and indirect negative approach outcomes (heightened relational aggression, overt victimization, and relational victimization across the sample), and more avoidant outcomes (heightened avoidant behavior and peer exclusion across the sample). Thus, an avoidant orientation places children at risk for maladaptive peer interactions. Children high in negative need for approval not only retreat from or avoid social situations, but also seek to interact with peers in less adaptive ways (i.e., through relational aggression) in order to avoid negative self-appraisals. This pattern of findings suggests that although children with an avoidance orientation may not be perceived by adults to have impaired social functioning because they may be quiet, not get into trouble, or frequently play by themselves, these children have serious interpersonal problems that may undermine their subsequent normative social development.

Although it was thought that avoidant children may be more at risk for relational than overt forms of victimization, they were actually more likely to be victimized by their peers in general. These results suggest that avoidant children may be chosen as salient targets of bullying. An avoidant social orientation could lead children to have fewer friends or to be less accepted by others (Smith, 2004), making it unlikely that others would protect them from bullying. Avoidant children also may be less socially skilled due to a lack of experience with social situations and a need to avoid negative feedback. Deficient social skills, in turn, place children at greater risk for becoming victims (Card & Hodges, 2008). Avoidant children also are likely to be seen as “easy
targets” by aggressors because they are least likely to defend themselves and may reward aggressors through signs of suffering in the face of clear negative judgments about themselves (Card & Hodges, 2008).

Sex differences in social motivation. Although several of the findings applied consistently across sex, most of the interaction effects suggested that positive need for approval protected boys against negative outcomes. One possible reason the results were not replicated in girls is that girls’ mean scores on the negative outcome measures (i.e., overt aggression, peer victimization, peer exclusion) were low regardless of their level of need for approval. Another possible explanation is that need for approval more strongly motivates boys than girls. Although typically thought to be agentic or independent (Cross & Madson, 1997; Helgeson, 1994), need for social approval in boys may reflect a desire to obtain a positive reputation with peers through observable behavior, and thus boys are more strongly adhering to social norms in terms of being less overtly aggressive and more popular. Girls’ communal nature may cause them to be more involved in nurturing their social relationships and less concerned with the type of self-appraisals they are incurring.

Origins and Malleability of Need for Approval

The current study contributes to existing literature on children’s peer relationships by elucidating the role of need for approval as a motivational construct. The prospective longitudinal design shows that an approach-avoidance orientation influences peer interactions through both the behaviors of the child and how peers respond to them. This research raises questions about the emergence of need for approval as well as the malleability of approach-avoidance orientations and how they might be influenced by external factors.
Theories of self-concept propose that one of the origins of self-worth is the internalization of the judgments of others (Harter, 1998). Need for approval is likely an implicit construct that may not manifest itself until children are initially exposed to peer interactions in a school context. In this regard, children’s reports of their need for approval may be, in part, a response to the ways in which peers have already responded to them. Thus, peer responses may have influenced children’s need for approval prior to our first measurement (i.e., 2nd grade), which may in turn influence children’s social outcomes at Wave 2 (i.e., 3rd grade). Consistent with this idea, in a sample of 190 grade school students from minority backgrounds, Storch and colleagues (2003) found that victimization experiences significantly predicted subsequent social avoidance. This finding suggests a transactional process in which, for example, negative peer experiences are internalized, resulting in rumination about and fear of others’ negative evaluations, which in turn fosters avoidant social interactions.

It is also possible that other factors influence the emergence of need for approval. A child’s temperament may determine which behavioral system (approach or avoidance) is more sensitive to external cues. Previous research has found that high infant frustration predicts subsequent extraversion in childhood (Rothbart, Derryberry, & Hershey, 2000) suggesting that temperament may influence later approach goals. Similarly, it would be fruitful for future research to examine how early care experiences (parenting, child care placement) or socioeconomic disadvantage influence a child’s need for approval, with ramifications for their broader social interaction style.

Future research also is needed to further explore the stability and malleability of need for approval over time. First, examining how need for approval influences social behavior and peer responses over a broader longitudinal timeframe would shed light on whether an approach
motivation continues to be adaptive and an avoidance motivation continues to place children at risk for negative social outcomes as they continue through school. Second, analysis of individual trajectories across time also may be an important avenue for future research that sheds light on the malleability of motivation. Specifically, if a child has an avoidance orientation but notices negative outcomes such as increased victimization and peer exclusion, does the child change tactics and move towards the social world with more of an approach orientation? If so, what mechanisms allow this shift to occur and how does it influence a child’s feelings of self-worth?

Conclusion

The findings of the current study provide a detailed account of how a child’s approach or avoidant social orientation, as indicated through need for approval, contributes to their own subsequent social behavior and peer responses to them. In light of findings suggesting that an approach orientation is adaptive, whereas an avoidant motivation is disadvantageous, this research takes an important first step toward delineating how a child’s social adjustment might be specifically influenced by their motivation to gain positive approval or avoid disapproval from peers. The current findings also have practical implications in terms of their benefit in guiding educational programs used to promote positive peer relationships and reduce problems with bullying.
## Tables

### Table 1

*Descriptive Data*

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*Note.* **p < .01. $^a$Sex difference at p < .001. $^b$Sex difference at p < .01. $^c$Sex difference at p < .05.
Table 2

Correspondance between Need for Approval Dimensions and Social Goal Orientation

<table>
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<th>Demonstration Approach</th>
<th>Demonstration Avoidance</th>
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<td>Positive</td>
<td>( \beta = 0.29 )</td>
<td>( t = 7.26^{***} )</td>
<td>( \Delta R^2 = 0.16 )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>( \beta = -0.07 )</td>
<td>( t = -1.84 )</td>
<td>( \Delta R^2 = 0.02 )</td>
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*Note. \**p < .001.*
Table 3

Wave 1 Intercorrelations

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Note. Intercorrelations presented above the diagonal are for boys; intercorrelations presented below the diagonal are for girls.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Table 4

*Predicting Wave 2 Social Behavior from Positive and Negative Need for Approval and the Need for Approval x Sex Interactions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
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<th>W₂ Overt Aggression</th>
<th>W₂ Relational Aggression</th>
<th>W₂ Avoidant Behavior</th>
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<td>.17</td>
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*Note.* W₁ is wave 1 data, W₂ is wave 2 data. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Table 5

*Predicting Wave 2 Peer Responses from Positive and Negative Need for Approval and the Need for Approval x Sex Interactions*

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<td>-0.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. W1 is wave 1 data, W2 is wave 2 data. *p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Figure 1. Theoretical model of the influence of need for approval on social outcomes.
Figure 2. $W_1$ positive need for approval $\times$ sex interaction predicting $W_2$ overt aggression, adjusting for $W_1$ overt aggression.
Figure 3. $W_1$ positive need for approval x sex interaction predicting (a) $W_2$ popularity, (b) $W_2$ overt victimization. Analyses adjust for $W_1$ social outcomes.
Figure 3 (cont). W₁ positive need for approval x sex interaction predicting (c) W₂ relational victimization, and (d) W₂ exclusion. Analyses adjust for W₁ social outcomes.
Figure 4. $W_1$ negative need for approval x sex interaction predicting $W_2$ popularity, adjusting for $W_1$ popularity.
REFERENCES


