INTERACTING INFLUENCES OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION, REJECTION SENSITIVITY, AND STATUS STRATIFICATION WITHIN PERSONAL NETWORKS

by

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(Under the Direction of Michele Lease)

ABSTRACT

This study examined the degree to which social stratification within friendship groups impacted the relationships between the cognitive component of rejection sensitivity (i.e., rejection expectancy) and the experience of relational aggression in the friendship group to predict trend-following conformity intentions. Using ego network methodology, 353 fourth and fifth graders reported on their experience of relational aggression within their friendship groups, their rejection expectancy, their conformity intentions, and the perceived norms of their friendship groups. The status stratification of each participant's self-reported friendship group was calculated by finding the standard deviation of social prominence within the personal network. Results suggested that relational aggression and status stratification significantly predicted trend-following conformity intentions when accounting for gender and race, with higher levels of both factors predicting an increased intent to conform to their group's trend-following norms. However, when controlling for the trendy norms of the friendship group, experiencing relational aggression and status stratification no longer demonstrated significant main effects in predicting trend-following conformity intentions. Instead, high levels of stratification predicted an increased likelihood of conforming to trend-following group norms but only when the child reported experiencing

relational aggression from at least one group member. Counter to expectations, rejection expectancy was not a significant predictor of trend-following conformity intentions. Implications in light of these findings are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: relational aggression, status stratification, rejection expectancy, conformity intentions, peer influence

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"I saw Cady Heron wearing army pants and flip-flops, so I bought army pants and flip-flops" (Waters, 2004). Quotes such as this one from the iconic movie, *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004), highlight the significant influence held by popular youth over the norms of their peer groups. Although popular movies such as *Mean Girls* often portray satirical and dramatized representations of "queen bees" who sit atop social hierarchies and use aggressive tactics to keep their position, they are consistent with actual representations of popularity hierarchies in children and adolescents (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998; Wiseman, 2002). How is it that some children and adolescents can successfully use aggression to increase their position in the hierarchy, while others' aggression results in rejection? The answer lies, at least partially, in skillful use of both prosocial and coercive strategies in gaining and maintaining a leading position within the status hierarchy (Hartl et al., 2020; Hawley, 2003)

Describing Popular Children

Characteristics of popular children. Popularity reflects an individual's visibility, prestige, or reputation within a peer group (Babarro et al., 2017; Cillessen & Rose, 2005; McDonald & Asher, 2018; van den Berg et al., 2020), and research suggests that popular children possess characteristics deemed desirable by those in the peer group (Adler & Adler, 1998; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Lease et al., 2002; Rose et al., 2011; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Ethnographic research suggests that the characteristics of popular children vary by gender. For example, some researchers found that boys' popularity is associated with their physicality (e.g.,

athletic ability and toughness), coolness, social skills, and cross-gender relationships; whereas, girls' popularity is associated with their access to trendy clothes and materials, physical appearance, social skills, and academic performance (Adler & Adler, 1998). Further, quantitative researchers note that physical appearance (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Rose et al., 2011; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006), social skills (Lease et al., 2002; Rose et al., 2011), athleticism (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006), and affluence (Lease et al., 2002; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006) are important contributors to popularity; however, the findings on gender differences have been mixed.

Along with characteristics commonly associated with popularity, it is also well-documented that popular children are not necessarily well-liked by their peers. Sociometric popularity, which is a measure of a child's likeability within a peer group, differs from perceived popularity (Cillessen & Marks, 2011; Cillessen & Rose, 2005; McDonald & Asher, 2018). First, popularity and likeability differ in their stability over time. Popularity is a reputation-based characteristic and remains relatively stable over time (Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Mayeux & Cillessen, 2008). On the other hand, likeability is based on personal preferences and is more susceptible to even the slightest changes in behavior (Cillessen, 2011; Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Mayeux et al., 2011; Mayeux & Cillessen, 2008).

Popularity and likeability are also associated with different adjustment outcomes. Well-liked children typically enjoy positive adjustment outcomes, including high-quality friendships (Cillessen & Rose, 2005), emotional adjustment (Cillessen & van den Berg, 2012; Rubin et al., 1998; Zettergren, 2003), high academic achievement (Cillessen & van den Berg, 2012; Guay et al., 1999), and low externalizing problems (Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). On the other hand, popular children tend to have a mix of positive and negative adjustment outcomes. Although

popular children might experience high-quality friendships, they are at an increased risk for academic difficulties (Rodkin et al., 2000; Schwartz et al., 2006), delinquency and risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors; Schwartz et al., 2006), and internalizing problems (Borowski et al., 2017; Litwack et al., 2012; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006).

Finally, popular children hold more influence than well-liked children over the norms and behaviors of the peer group (Adler & Adler, 1998; Cillessen, 2011; Gommans et al., 2017). Research indicates that adolescents are more likely to conform to popular peers than to peers who either are well-liked or who are unpopular (Gommans et al., 2017), which reflects an effort to fit in with or gain approval from socially prominent youth (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Behavioral profiles of popular children. Rooted in resource control theory, Hawley (1999) proposed that children and adolescents use both prosocial and coercive behaviors to gain access to social and material resources in the peer group. Based on this theory, Hawley (2003) and Hawley et al. (2002) found evidence to distinguish three types of popular youth based on behavioral profiles: prosocial popular youth, coercive popular youth, and bistrategic popular youth. According to their findings, prosocial popular youth exhibit primarily prosocial behaviors toward peers: building friendships, helping others, providing empathy and emotional support, and cooperating. Coercive popular children, on the other hand, exhibit primarily aggressive and hostile behaviors toward peers (Hawley, 2003; Hawley et al., 2002). The most socially successful popular children, however, were the bistrategic popular youth, who exhibit both prosocial and aggressive behaviors (Hawley, 2003; Hawley et al., 2002). These socially skilled children were able to effectively balance prosocial and aggressive behaviors to move up the social hierarchy (Hawley, 2003; Hawley et al., 2002).

Findings regarding the multiple behavioral profiles associated with popular youth have been replicated numerous times (Chen et al., 2022; French et al., 2022; Hartl et al., 2020; Kornbluh & Neal, 2016; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Lease et al., 2002; Puckett et al., 2008; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). For example, Hartl and colleagues (2020) followed a cohort of pre-adolescents over the span of three years to examine changes in prosocial and aggressive behaviors as they relate to popularity. Consistent with prior findings, researchers (Hartl et al., 2020) identified groups of prosocial popular youth, aggressive popular youth, and bistrategic popular youth. Their findings suggested that prosocial popular youth are well-accepted and well-adjusted over time (e.g., low levels of externalizing and internalizing problems), whereas aggressive popular youth have poorer outcomes on measures of acceptance and adjustment. Bistrategic youth do not exhibit levels of aggression and prosocial behavior that reach those of aggressive and prosocial popular youth, respectively; however, bistrategic youth are the highest-rated on measures of popularity and are less rejected and victimized than coercive popular children (Hartl et al., 2020).

Overall, findings suggest that popular children are those who possess characteristics that are desired by the group, such as athleticism, attractiveness, and access to material resources (Adler & Adler, 1998; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Lease et al., 2002; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006; Rose et al., 2011). Given that many popular youth display both prosocial and coercive behaviors, it is unsurprising that popular youth are not necessarily well-liked by their peers (Cillessen, 2011; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Mayeux et al., 2011). However, when distinguishing among types of popular youth, it would appear that some are able to strategically balance their use of prosocial and coercive behaviors to attain resources and maintain status, suggesting they are likely more socially-skilled than children at lower levels of the hierarchy (Hartl et al., 2020; Hawley, 2003;

Hawley et al., 2002; Kornbluh & Neal, 2016; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Lease et al., 2002; Puckett et al., 2008; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006).

Organization and Influence of Popular Groups

Popularity is the primary way in which child and adolescent peer systems are organized (Adler & Adler, 1998; Brown, 2011). Organization into status hierarchies occurs rapidly within social groups, and individuals situated at the top of such hierarchies enjoy access to more social and material resources than those at lower ranks (Koski et al., 2015). Those at the top of the status hierarchy also have strong influence over the norms and behaviors of the peer group (Adler & Adler, 1998; Gommans et al., 2017). Individuals who are particularly skilled at gaining social prominence and situating themselves atop the status hierarchy—thus, controlling resources and influencing the norms of the group—are those who rely on bistrategic strategies (i.e., both coercive and prosocial behaviors; Chen et al., 2022; French et al., 2022; Hartl et al., 2020; Hawley, 2003).

Status stratification and structure within groups. Groups differ in the degree to which they are stratified by status, or the difference in status between the group members. High levels of stratification reflect greater power imbalances among group members; whereas, low levels of stratification reflect more egalitarian groups. At the whole-network level, a highly stratified group represents a series of cliques (i.e., voluntary groups of children who hang out together during free time; Brown, 2011; Kindermann, 2007) situated at different rungs of the status ladder. For example, Adler and Adler (1998) suggested that children's social hierarchies consist of the "popular clique" being positioned at the top, followed by transient members of the popular group (i.e., "wannabes"), groups of children with average levels of popularity, and, last, groups of unpopular, rejected children.

In addition to stratification ocurring at the whole-network level, researchers have identified that status stratification can occur within cliques (Adler & Adler, 1998; Closson, 2009). Adler and Alder (1998) observed popular children's cliques to be highly stratified. That is, there were one or two leaders at the top of the clique hierarchy who held the most power in the group. Just below them were "second-tier" clique members, who were described as being the closest friends of the leader. Below this second tier was a third tier that comprised the bulk of the group. This subgroup was clearly not as socially prominent as the few in the top ranks, and their status was relatively fluid (Adler & Adler, 1998). In addition to status stratification occurring within popular cliques, researchers have suggested that stratification can occur within average and unpopular cliques, as well (Closson, 2009).

Clique structure might also be an important consideration when examining effects of hierarchy. Whereas stratification reflects the degree of power imbalance within the group, it does not delineate whether a group has a single prominent leader or if there are several high-status individuals vying for the top spot. A measure of the group's social structure can be found by subtracting the median status score from the mean status score of a group (Pattiselanno et al., 2015). Positive numbers correspond with a typical pyramid structure, reflecting a single leader at the top and less prominent individuals at the lower rungs. Negative numbers correspond with an inverted pyramid structure, reflecting a group that has one or two low status individuals at the bottom with several high-status individuals at the top. In other words, there is high stratification within the group but there is no clear leader. Finally, numbers closer to zero represent egalitarian structures (Pattiselanno et al., 2015). Although some researchers have indicated that the structure of the hierarchy (i.e., pyramid or inverted pyramid) has important associations with behavioral profiles of clique members (e.g., Pattiselanno et al., 2015), others have not replicated such findings

(e.g., Zarbatany et al., 2019). While the impact of structure is still being investigated, status stratification, nonetheless, has important implications for resource control and influence.

Resource control and influence within status hierarchies. Researchers postulate that the power imbalances that naturally occur in a stratified social network create more competition for resources (Garandeau et al., 2014; Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019). In an egalitarian network, social and material resources are shared equally. Conversely, within a stratified network, those at the top of the hierarchy exhibit greater control over valued resources than those at lower levels of the hierarchy (Koski et al., 2015; Zarbatany et al., 2019). For example, in the context of within-clique stratification, Zarbatany and colleagues (2019) found evidence to suggest that high status children within highly stratified cliques have greater success in controlling material resources (i.e., control over a novel toy) than their lower-status clique mates. This finding was particularly true for children who exert bistrategic resource control strategies (i.e., prosocial and coercive behaviors). Egalitarian cliques, on the other hand, are more prosocial in their exchanges and share access to resources more evenly than stratified cliques (Zarbatany et al., 2019).

The competition that ensues because of unequal access to resources can also create preferences for behaviors that are associated with greater resource control (Garandeau et al., 2014; Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019), thus impacting behavioral norms of the group. For example, Laninga-Wijnen and colleagues (2019) found that the level of hierarchy within a classroom predicted increases in aggressive popularity norms and slight decreases in prosocial popularity norms. Further evidence suggests that hierarchical classroom structures predict temporal increases in bullying behavior (Garandeau et al., 2014) and victimization (Babarro et al., 2017).

Children at the top of the status hierarchy typically utilize coercive strategies to *attain* their status and prosocial strategies to *maintain* their status and mitigate effects of coercion (Hawley,

2014). Within stratified social networks, children at lower levels of the hierarchy emulate the behaviors that are successfully used by children at the top of the hierarchy to attain their positions; thus, it is unsurprising that stratification predicts increases in aggressive behavior norms over time (Garandeau et al., 2014; Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019). In contrast, egalitarian groups exhibit lower levels of physical and relational aggression over time (Pattiselanno et al., 2015). In these groups, resources are shared more evenly across the group, thus attaining high status is not necessarily seen as an advantage. These groups experience less competition for resources as a result (Pattiselanno et al., 2015).

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of investigating the effects of status hierarchy both within the larger peer network (e.g., classroom) and within smaller groups (e.g., friendship groups or cliques). There is evidence to suggest that influence occurs within cliques (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Pattiselanno et al., 2015); however, the *mechanisms* of influence occurring within groups is still largely understudied (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children are subject to numerous mechanisms of influence that can produce changes in their behaviors. These mechanisms are theorized to emanate from within the child or within the group. Internal influences—occurring withing the child—refer to individual needs, traits, or vulnerabilities (e.g., rejection sensitivity). Mechanisms of influence within the group refer to either the interactions between group members (e.g., relational aggression) or the characteristics of the group itself (e.g., social stratification; Kindermann, 2016; Laursen, 2018). Given the substantial amount of time spent with and the importance placed on having and maintaining friendships in childhood and adolescence (Kindermann & Gest, 2018), it is unsurprising that many of these mechanisms of influence occur within the context of friendship groups (Kindermann, 2016; Laursen, 2018). Despite the importance of friendship groups in the context of peer influence, less is known about how these internal and group (e.g., interactions and characteristics) influence mechanisms interact to produce changes in behavior (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017).

Conformity behavior is likely motivated by individual characteristics and experiences within the group as well as friendship group characteristics. Individuals who experience threats of rejection or exclusion (i.e., relational aggression) within their friendship groups (Keltner et al. 2008; Laursen, 2018; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Shapiro et al., 1991), as well as those who are highly sensitive to cues of rejection (Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), might be motivated to conform to the norms of the group in an effort to prevent exclusion. This might be particularly true for children who are positioned within highly stratified friendship

groups in which there is a power imbalance that presents additional pressure to conform to group norms (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Laursen, 2018). Given relational aggression frequently occurs in highly stratified groups of popular children to control group norms, particularly trendy group norms (Correia et al., 2019; Lease et al., 2020), the primary focus of the current study was on the prediction of trend-following conformity intentions.

Relational Aggression in the Friendship Group

Numerous studies have identified the experience of or observation of relational aggression within a friendship group as an important motivator to conform to group norms (e.g., e.g., Keltner et al., 2001; Laursen, 2018; Morinville, 2021; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Predix & Lease, under review). Relational aggression serves to damage other individuals' social standing and relationships at the benefit of the aggressor (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Salmivalli et al., 2004). Although it often takes the form of indirect acts of hostility, such as spreading rumors (Björkqvist et al., 1992) or ostracizing individuals (Galen & Underwood, 1997), relational aggression can also be more direct, such as threatening to end a friendship (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Relational aggression is more direct in young children and becomes more indirect throughout development (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist et al., 1992; Shahaeian et al., 2017). As children develop more sophisticated language abilities, perspective taking, and emotional intelligence, they are better able to utilize verbal and relational forms of aggression to meet their goals (Ettekal & Ladd, 2018; Shahaeian et al., 2017). Relational aggression has been identified in children as young as four (Shahaeian et al., 2017). In young children, it typically occurs in the form of coercive statements meant to foster compliance. As they develop, older children are more effective at using relational aggression less overtly (e.g., exclusion) to meet their goals and manipulate the social network (Björkqvist et al., 1992). By the time they reach adolescence, teens

are better able to disguise the hostile intent of their relationally aggressive behaviors (Archer & Coyne, 2005), reducing the likelihood of punishment for their actions from both peers and adults. Children and adolescents who can use relational aggression without punishment are better able to influence norms within their friendship and peer groups.

Within child and adolescent peer groups, relational aggression serves as a mechanism of influence. Dominant, relationally aggressive children often use ridicule, exclusion, or gossip to punish norm violations within their groups (Keltner et al. 2008; Laursen, 2018; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Shapiro et al., 1991). For example, children use teasing and ridicule to increase adherence to norms within groups (Janes & Olson, 2002; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021). These relationally aggressive behaviors serve as a form of positive punishment for norm violations, reducing the likelihood of future norm violations and reinforcing the desirability of conformity (Keltner et al., 2001; Laursen, 2018).

Relational aggression directly influences the norm-following behaviors of individuals who are direct targets of the aggression and of those who observe the aggression. Teasing and ridicule are simultaneously humorous and aggressive statements that are often used to target norm violations within groups (Keltner et al., 2001; Shapiro et al., 1991). If the target of the ridicule alters their behavior, the aggression subsides, thus reinforcing their conformity (Keltner et al., 2001; Laursen, 2018). For example, in boys, homophobic teasing is often used to reinforce norms of masculinity within friendship groups by punishing behaviors that are inconsistent with what the group deems “masculine” (e.g., academic behaviors are not perceived as traditionally masculine; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021). Gossip is also used to communicate norms of groups (Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), and it typically includes a negative evaluation of an individual who is not present (Eder & Enke, 1991). Through gossip, the aggressor can signal to

the listening individual that they are "in the know" about norms and that such norm violations will be punished through mean, behind-the-back statements (Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Keltner et al., 2008). By witnessing another individual being targeted for a norm violation, the observer learns which behaviors to avoid to fit-in and not be victimized. This is also true for witnessing the ridicule of another child (Janes & Olson, 2002).

Recent evidence supports this notion that relational aggression both directly and indirectly influences the conformity intentions of children (Morinville, 2021). When investigating the conformity intentions of a sample of fourth and fifth graders, reports of witnessing friends exhibiting relationally aggressive behaviors to others within the friendship group, as well as reports of directly experiencing relational aggression from someone in the friendship group, were associated with an increased intent to conform to the trend-following norms of the friendship group. A similar association was not found when examining academic conformity intentions (Morinville, 2021). This suggests that relational aggression might be an effective mechanism for increasing conformity to norms related to popularity (e.g., trend-following) but not necessarily other types of norms, such as academic norms.

Taken together, relational aggression can be an effective tool used by children and adolescents to alter the behaviors of those around them (e.g., Keltner et al., 2001; Laursen, 2018; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021). Aggressing against a child who violated a norm signals to the child and to the rest of the group that such norms should be adhered to or risk victimization or rejection (Baumeister et al., 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Keltner et al., 2008). Additionally, the experience of relational aggression within the friendship group might interact with group characteristics, such as power dynamics, to induce conformity behavior.

Rejection Sensitivity as a Conformity Motive

Rejection sensitivity, or the tendency to "defensively expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection" (Downey et al., 1998, p. 1074), might serve as an additional motivation to conform in an effort to guard against rejection from the friendship group. Experiences of rejection from peers and caregivers can contribute to the development of rejection sensitivity, an internal working model that leads to heightened expectations of rejection in interpersonal relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et al., 1998; Feldman & Downey, 1994; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2005). Rejection sensitive individuals are hypervigilant for cues of rejection, and they often respond to rejecting cues with behavioral overreactions: hostile retribution (i.e., angry rejection sensitivity) or withdrawal (i.e., anxious rejection sensitivity). Regardless of whether the cue is signaling true rejection, or it is simply a misperception of rejection, it is internalized by the rejection sensitive individual as true rejection and typically results in a behavioral overreaction that can lead to actual rejection from others (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et al., 1998; Feldman & Downey, 1994).

When rejected individuals develop rejection sensitivity, they come to expect rejection in future relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et al., 1998; Feldman & Downey, 1994; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2005). This expectation of rejection is often associated with behavioral overreactions that often invoke true rejection from peers, thus perpetuating the cycle of rejection sensitivity (Downey et al., 1998; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck & Nesdale, 2013). Despite this, evidence suggests that these individuals are also more likely to engage in obliging (i.e., giving-in to others) and ingratiating (i.e., changing behavior to appear more favorable) behaviors to prevent rejection or gain acceptance (Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). When faced with potential rejection from significant others,

female adolescents and young adults with heightened rejection sensitivity demonstrated an increased willingness to ingratiate (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010) or go to extreme lengths to maintain their relationships (Purdie & Downey, 2000). Additionally, evidence suggests that rejection sensitive adolescents engage in more obliging and compromising behaviors in response to conflict within best friend dyads (Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014).

In addition to the role of rejection sensitivity in obliging and ingratiation, conformity has been investigated; however, the role of rejection sensitivity in conformity behaviors is less clear. Some evidence suggests that individuals with high levels of rejection sensitivity have a greater likelihood of exhibiting conformity behaviors in the face of rejection (Bäck et al., 2015). However, more recent research investigating the conformity intentions of rejection sensitive children within relationally aggressive friendship groups found that rejection sensitivity was associated with a decreased intent to conform to trend-following norms (Morinville, 2021). These paradoxical results in the prediction of conformity suggest that it might be necessary to consider group characteristics or to explore the distinct components of rejection sensitivity (i.e., cognitive and affective) in predicting conformity.

Mixed findings in the prediction of conformity behaviors might be due to the way rejection sensitivity has been conceptualized and measured. Traditionally, the evaluation of rejection sensitivity includes measuring anticipatory affect (i.e., level of anxiety or anger) and rejection expectancy and combining these scores as an estimate of overall anxious or angry rejection sensitivity (Downey et al., 1998). More recent findings suggest that the components of rejection sensitivity (i.e., anticipatory affect and rejection expectancy) might be distinct constructs (Innamorati et al., 2014; Lord et al., 2022; Preti et al., 2020; Rosenbach et al., 2021) that have differential contributions to various psychiatric and interpersonal constructs (Lord et al., 2022;

Rosenbach et al., 2021). Lord et al. (2022) and Preti et al. (2020) argued that by combining the anticipatory affect and rejection expectancy, overall rejection sensitivity scores might obscure potentially divergent or additive effects. In support of this, Predix and Lease (under review) found that the anticipatory anxiety and rejection expectancy components of rejection sensitivity frequently had opposing associations with various conformity intentions when evaluated separately. Specifically, whereas anxious anticipation was unrelated to trend-following conformity intentions, rejection expectancy significantly predicted a decreased trend-following conformity (Predix & Lease, under review). This decreased intent to conform to trend-following group norms might indicate that children who expect to be rejected see little reason in conforming to the norms of the group. This might be especially true for children who are situated in groups where there is an imbalance of power and threats of exclusion are commonplace.

Status Stratification in the Friendship Group

Conformity within cliques is posited to occur due to both selection and socialization processes. For example, children typically choose friendships with individuals who are similar to them (e.g., homophily; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017); however, they are also prone to the influence of group members. Socialization effects have been implicated in the development of prosocial behavior (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007), aggressive and bullying behavior (Garandeau et al., 2014; Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007), school engagement (Kindermann, 2007), and internalizing symptoms (van Zalk et al., 2010). Despite evidence for influence occurring within groups, socialization does not necessarily impact all groups and individuals equally, and the mechanisms of influence differ across types of groups.

One of the driving mechanisms behind behavior change lies in disequilibrium, which can arise in response to power imbalances (Laursen, 2018). Those with power have access to the most

resources (Hawley, 1999), and those not in power typically change to match the behaviors of those in power (Laursen, 2018). A state of uncertainty within a group, such as that which is associated with power imbalances, can promote compliance within groups and reduce expressions of individuality that stray from those norms (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017). Children situated within highly stratified friendship groups (i.e., large power differentials between the highest and lowest status group members) experience more influence pressures to conform than those situated within egalitarian groups (i.e., equal balance of power among group members; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Laursen, 2018). This is especially true when the norms are set by the highest status group members (Laursen, 2018).

Despite evidence suggesting the importance of considering stratification as an influence mechanism, studies have primarily focused on cliques, typically defined as voluntary groups of children who hang out together during free time (Brown, 2011; Kindermann, 2007). Researchers typically operationalize cliques as groups of 3-10 children, identified by an aggregation of peer-report of the groups of classmates or grade mates who hang out together (Cairns et al., 1998). Peers might be better observers of clique membership than parents or teachers, but they are not necessarily privy to the interactions that occur *within* the clique, given their exclusive nature (Adler & Adler, 1998; Closson & Watanabe, 2018; Zarbatany et al., 2019). Less research has focused on friendship groups; members of cliques are not necessarily friends with one another (Kindermann, 2007). Further, influence mechanisms within friendship groups might operate differently than in cliques. Examining influence mechanisms within children's friendship groups, especially identification of groups that relies on individuals' perceptions, is an important avenue for research.

One promising method for studying children's friendship groups is ego-network analysis. Such an approach is designed to allow for in-depth investigation of the characteristics and features

of the individual's personal network (e.g., egonet). The operationalization of one's personal network can be broad, including all connections a person has, or it can be limited to certain contexts, such as a person's friendship group (McCarty et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2018). For the purpose of this study, ego-network analysis was used to investigate each participant's personal experience within their self-reported friendship group.

Specific terminology is utilized within ego-network research. "Ego" refers to each participant in the sample and "alter" refers to each individual ego nominates within their network. In the present study, each participating child is referred to as an ego and the children they nominated as their friends are referred to as their alters. Once alters are identified, egos are able to report on the characteristics of and ties between their alters. Thus, an ego-network is created, consisting of the ties among and between ego and alters as well as the characteristics of the members of the egonet (McCarty et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2018). This process allows researchers a deeper understanding of each ego's experience within their immediate social environment.

As mentioned previously, children's friendship groups and cliques can be exclusive in nature. Important interactions between group members might be overlooked or are unknown by those who are not members of the group, including peers in the broader social network (Adler & Adler, 1998; Closson & Watanabe, 2018; Zarbatany et al., 2019). The benefit of using an ego-network approach is that individual experiences and group characteristics associated with trend conformity (i.e., rejection sensitivity, relational aggression, and status stratification) can be examined through the lens of each individual child. Ego-network analysis has been used to study peer influence on smoking behaviors in adults (Takagi et al., 2020), transportation choice (Pike & Lubell, 2018) and diet and physical activity among college students (Harmon et al., 2016), and academic adjustment in early adolescents (Shin & Ryan, 2014).

Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to examine the degree to which social stratification within friendship groups impacts the relationships between the cognitive component of rejection sensitivity and relational aggression in the friendship group to predict trend-following conformity intentions. In an effort to prevent exclusion, children who experience relational aggression within their friendship groups (e.g., Keltner et al. 2008; Laursen, 2018; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Shapiro et al., 1991), as well as those who are highly sensitive to cues of rejection (e.g., Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), might be motivated to conform to the norms of the group. This might be particularly true for children who are positioned within highly stratified friendship groups in which there is a power imbalance that presents additional pressure to conform to group norms (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Laursen, 2018). Given power imbalances and the use of relational aggression to control group norms are commonly observed in popular groups (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1998), the focus of the current study was on conformity to trend-following behavior, a type of behavior commonly associated with popularity.

It was expected that relational aggression and status stratification (i.e., large differences in social prominence of group members) would significantly predict trend-following conformity intentions (*Hypothesis 1*). Status stratification creates disequilibrium in the group (Laursen, 2018) which prompts children at lower levels of the hierarchy to conform to group norms (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017). Additionally, relational aggression is a mechanism of influence frequently used by children who are high in social dominance. Evidence suggests that relational aggression predicts changes in the behavior of those who witness or experience the aggression (e.g., Keltner et al., 2001; Laursen, 2018; Morinville, 2021; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Predix & Lease, under review). It is possible that the combination of relationally aggressive behaviors occurring

within a group might interact with power imbalances to produce increased pressures to conform to group norms. Thus, it was also expected that relational aggression and status stratification will interact to predict trend-following conformity intentions (*Hypothesis 2*).

Additionally, it was expected that increased rejection expectancy will continue to predict a decreased intent to conform to trend-following norms (*Hypothesis 3*). If rejection appears imminent, a child with high levels of rejection expectancy might see little benefit in changing their behavior if they anticipate rejection regardless of their conformity. However, it is possible that rejection expectancy might operate differently when other characteristics of the group are considered. For example, highly stratified groups tend to have high levels of uncertainty that promote compliance within groups and reduce expressions of individuality (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017). Thus, in highly stratified groups, children with higher levels of rejection expectancy might be more likely to signal an intent to conform than children in friendship groups that are less stratified. Thus, rejection expectancy was expected to interact with status stratification to predict trend-following conformity intentions (*Hypothesis 4*).

Additionally, prior research suggests that the norms of a group are essential in predicting the conformity intentions of group members; thus, an additional goal of this study was to investigate whether rejection expectancy, experiencing relational aggression, and status stratification continue to predict to trend-following conformity intentions once the norms of the group are considered. No formal hypotheses were proposed regarding these relationships given the exploratory nature of this goal. Although the primary goal of the current study was to investigate factors contributing to trend-following conformity intentions, examining how these factors operate in predicting other conformity intentions would be illuminating. Thus, a final goal of the current study was to compare rejection expectancy, the experience of relational aggression, and status

stratification in the prediction of academic and trouble-making conformity intentions. No formal hypotheses were proposed regarding these relationships.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited from the fourth and fifth grades of four semi-rural elementary schools in the southeastern United States. All students from the fourth and fifth grades at participating elementary schools were invited to participate. In addition to active parental consent, students were asked to provide verbal assent to participate. The consent rate of the current study was approximately 81%, which is consistent with the recommended consent rate of at least 80% for social network research (Neal & Neal, 2022). Out of the 353 participating children, 187 were girls and 197 were in the fifth grade. Additionally, 270 students were White, and 83 students were of underrepresented racial-ethnic groups (13.9% Black, 5.9% Hispanic, and 3% other ethnicities).

Procedures

Data reported in this study were collected as part of a larger study of preadolescent peer relations. Students participated in one-hour data collection sessions occurring across two days within their classrooms. Two researchers were present on each testing day; one researcher led the students through the data packet (i.e., read aloud each item in a timely manner) as the other researcher assisted students on an individual basis. Confidentiality was reiterated to students at the onset of data collection, and they were provided with additional sheets of paper to cover their answers as they completed questionnaires. Students who opted not to participate in the study read quietly or drew at their desks during data collection.

Students completed a variety of self-report and peer-nomination measures. All children within a grade-level whose parents provided consent for participation were included on the peer nomination roster. That is, students could only nominate participating peers within their grade-level. To nominate a child for a peer nomination item, participants located the child they wished to nominate on the roster of participating children, selected the child's corresponding number, and wrote it in the data collection packet. Children were permitted to nominate an unlimited number of peers for each item.

Measures

Relational Aggression of Children within the Friendship Group

Two types of information were used to identify whether students experienced relational aggression within their friendship group. First, each child's personal network (i.e., self-reported friendship group) was identified by having children list "a group of friends with whom you spend time and do a lot of things together." Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Kwon & Lease, 2009), children were able to nominate an unlimited number of same- and opposite-sex friends as belonging to their friendship group. Participants' friendship groups contained an average of 7.70 (*SD* = 2.72) alters.

Next, to create a variable that captured the experience of relational aggression from within the friendship group, children were asked to nominate peers who "spread rumors about *me* and tell friends not to play with *me*" (i.e., relationally aggressive to me). We then compared each participant's self-reported friendship group with their nominations of same-grade peers who were nominated as relationally aggressive to the ego. If a participant nominated a member of their personal network as relationally aggressive, then that alter was given a score of 1. If the alter was not identified as relationally aggressive, the alter was given a score of 0. Thus, each alter within

each personal network was given a relational aggression score of 0 or 1, indicating whether the friend was perceived by ego as being relationally aggressive. Children nominated an average of 0.38 (*SD* = 0.74) alters as being relationally aggressive.

Rejection Expectancy

The Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire – Short Form (CRSQ; Downey et al., 1998) was used to identify children's levels of rejection expectancy. Children read six short vignettes portraying ambiguous rejection experiences: three peer-related scenarios and three teacher-related scenarios. Following each vignette, children were asked to rate their anticipatory affect (i.e., levels of anxiety and anger) and rejection expectancy. Although the anticipatory affect items were completed, these scores were not used within the current study. To measure rejection expectancy, children rated their expectancy of acceptance based on the scenario on a scale ranging from 1 (YES!!!) to 6 (NO!!!). For example, one of the items read, "Do you think the kids you want to be with will choose you for their group?" Higher scores indicated a higher level of rejection expectancy. An average rejection expectancy score was obtained by summing the rejection expectancy reported within each vignette then dividing by six. The alpha level for rejection expectancy (α = .63) was acceptable in the current sample.

Status Stratification within the Friendship Group

To determine the status stratification occurring within each child's personal network, first, a social prominence score was calculated for each child. Specifically, the social prominence score was determined based on the proportion of eligible peers (i.e., those taking part in the study) nominating the participant as *cool, leader,* and *popular* (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2013). The *cool* item read, "This person is really cool"; the *leader* item read, "This person gets chosen by others as the leader. Other people like to have this person in charge;" and the *popular* item read, "Which

children are the most popular at school?" First, a proportion score for each item was calculated by dividing the number of nominations a children received by the total number of nominations possible. These individual proportion scores were then summed to create a social prominence composite score. The alpha-level ($\alpha = .87$) for the social prominence scale was acceptable.

Next, to determine friendship group stratification, social prominence scores for ego and each of their alters was used. Consistent with standard procedures used prior studies (e.g., Garandeau et al., 2014; Laninga-Wijen et al., 2019; Pattiselanno et al., 2019; Zarbatany et al., 2019; Zhao & Li, 2022; Zwaan et al., 2013), the status stratification of each child's personal network was calculated by finding the standard deviation of social prominence within the personal network (including ego's social prominence).

Intent to Conform

Intent to conform was measured using three hypothetical vignettes describing members of the friendship group engaging in a new behavior: trend-following (e.g., wearing new clothes or listening to new music), academic (e.g., studying for a test), or troublemaking (e.g., causing trouble; Kwon & Lease, 2009; Masland & Lease, 2013). For example, the trend-following (i.e., "trendy") vignette read, "Imagine that some kids started wearing something really trendy or listening to some cool new music. Most of the kids in your group have been talking about how cool it is. Some kids in your group have also started wearing it or listening to it". After reading each vignette, children were asked to indicate their likelihood of conforming to the norm on a scale ranging from 1 (Not at all likely) to 5 (Very likely). Then, they rated their likelihood of conforming to the norm given a *cost* (e.g., "Imagine that you wear other kinds of clothes or listen to other kinds of music. How likely would you be to switch to the new style or the new music instead?") on a 5-point scale (i.e., not at all likely to very likely). Although "group" was used within the vignette,

the directions instructed students to think of their "friendship group" when answering. Responses to the two items were summed, creating an intent to conform score for each norm. In our sample, the alpha levels for trend-following (α = .83), academic (α = .73), and troublemaking (α = .89) conformity intentions were acceptable.

Perceived Friendship Group Norms

Students reported on the perceived trendy, academic, and troublemaking norms of their friendship groups. For each group norm, students completed four items asking how many of the children in their friendship group like to take part in activities related to each norm. For example, one of the trendy items read, "How many of the kids in your group really like trendy clothes, new music, or cool shoes?' Students then indicated their response on a 4-point scale by selecting "*none*," "*some*," "*most*," or "*all*" of their friendship group. The average score for each of the four items was computed for trendy, academic, and trouble making perceived friendship group norms. In our sample, the trendy (α = .88), academic (α = .74), and troublemaking (α = .85) perceived friendship group norms were acceptable.

Overview of Data Analyses

Prior to testing the study hypotheses, independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to examine the effects of the primary covariates, gender (dummy coded as 1 = girl and 0 = boy) and race (dummy coded as 1 = White student and 0 = student of underrepresented racial-ethnic group), on all outcome variables, and Pearson's correlations were conducted to explore simple associations between study variables. Gender was included as a covariate given prior research indicating a stronger relation between components of rejection sensitivity and behavioral influence for girls than boys (Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Purdie & Downey, 2000). Race was entered as a covariate to account for possible differences in conformity intentions, given racial status (based on

the context's racial composition) can play a role in peer acceptance and rejection (Jackson et al., 2006).

The effects of rejection expectancy, relational aggression, and status stratification on trend-following conformity intentions were examined using linear regressions. Due to high heteroscedasticity, the RLM macro (Darlington & Hayes, 2017) for SPSS was used to run all regression models with fewer than two interaction terms. For models with two interaction terms, the PROCESS macro (Model 2; Hayes, 2018) for SPSS was used. Both RLM and PROCESS allow for heteroscedasticity-consistent standard error estimation following procedures outlined by Hayes and Cai (2007). Based on their recommendations regarding high leverage points, we utilized the HC4 variance-covariance matrix option to estimate the standard errors. In total, eight models were run for each conformity intention. Each model included gender and race as covariates.

When building regression models to predict trend-following conformity intentions, rejection sensitivity, relational aggression, and status stratification were initially entered into the model simultaneously (Model 1a; *Hypotheses 1 and 3*). Next, the interactions between status stratification and rejection expectancy (*Hypotheses 4*) and between status stratification and relational aggression (*Hypothesis 2*) on trendy conformity intentions were examined first in separate models (Models 2a and 3a) then within an omnibus model containing both interaction terms (Model 4a). To evaluate whether the relationships remained when considering the norms of the group, the four models were re-run with trendy group norms included as a covariate in each model (Models 5a, 6a, 7a, and 8a). This procedure was repeated with the academic and trouble-making conformity intention outcome variables and their respective group norms.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Exploring Covariates

Independent-sample *t*-tests were conducted to examine the primary covariates: gender (girls $n = 186$, boys $n = 166$) and race (White students $n = 259$, students of underrepresented racial-ethnic groups $n = 74$). Girls ($M = 6.64$, $SD = 2.36$) reported significantly higher trend-following conformity intentions than boys ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 2.75$), $t(320.88) = 4.61$, $p < .01$. Girls ($M = 7.03$, $SD = 2.07$) also reported significantly higher academic conformity intentions than boys ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 2.22$), $t(346) = 6.05$, $p < .01$. In contrast, boys ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 2.63$) reported significantly higher troublemaking conformity intentions than girls ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.89$), $t(294.71) = -3.55$, $p < .01$. Students of underrepresented racial-ethnic groups ($M = 6.85$, $SD = 2.53$) reported significantly higher trend-following than White students ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 2.63$), $t(124.67) = -3.38$, $p < .01$. Similarly, students of underrepresented racial-ethnic groups ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 2.09$) reported significantly higher academic conformity intentions than White students ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 2.27$), $t(125.02) = -3.07$, $p < .01$. There was not a significant difference in the troublemaking conformity intentions of White students ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 2.29$) and students of underrepresented racial-ethnic groups ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 2.30$), $t(116.36) = -0.79$, $p = .22$.

Simple Associations Among Study Variables

Correlations were conducted to examine the bivariate relationships between the predictor variables and the outcomes (Table 1). Rejection expectancy was significantly correlated with all three outcome variables; it was negatively correlated with trend-following and academic

conformity intentions and positively correlated with troublemaking conformity intentions. Experiencing relational aggression (RA) (i.e., "RA to Me") exhibited a significant, albeit small, correlation with trend-following conformity intentions, though it was not correlated with academic or troublemaking conformity intentions. Similarly, status stratification was significantly, positively correlated with trend-following conformity intentions, though it was not correlated with academic or troublemaking conformity intentions. Each of the friendship group norms (trendy, academic, and troublemaking) were significantly, strongly associated with their corresponding outcome variables. For example, trendy group norms and trend-following conformity intentions demonstrated a strong correlation ($r = .68$, $p < .01$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (n = 353)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Trendy ITC	6.03	2.63	--							
2. Academic ITC	6.37	2.25	.12*	--						
3. Trouble ITC	3.41	2.31	.17**	-.45**	--					
4. Rejection Expect.	2.71	0.96	-.16**	-.32**	.13*	--				
5. RA to Me	0.38	0.74	.17**	.06	-.05	-.01	--			
6. Stratification	0.07	0.04	.26**	.07	.04	-.10	.10	--		
7. Trendy Norms	2.78	0.87	.68**	.19**	.13*	-.17**	.19**	.36**	--	
8. Academic Norms	2.93	0.59	-.01	.43**	-.35**	-.28**	-.09	.05	.05	--
9. Trouble Norms	1.73	0.72	.18**	-.36**	.61**	.18**	.13*	.10	.19**	-.47**

Note. ITC = Intent to Conform. Rejection Expect. = Rejection Expectancy. RA = Relationally Aggressive.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Predicting Trend-following Conformity Intentions

The effect of rejection expectancy, experiencing relational aggression, and status stratification on trendy conformity intentions was analyzed using linear regressions (Table 2). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, experiencing relational aggression and status stratification

significantly predicted trend-following conformity intentions when accounting for gender and race (Model 1a). The impact of rejection expectancy on trendy conformity intentions within Model 1a was approaching significance ($p = .06$). Significant interactions were not observed in Models 2a, 3a, or 4a when accounting for gender and race (Hypothesis 3 and 4).

To investigate whether the study variables remained significant predictors of trend-following conformity intentions once the norms of the friendship group are accounted for, the models were re-run with trendy group norms included as a covariate. When the trendy norms of the friendship group were accounted for, none of the predictors remained significant (Models 5a); however, a significant interaction between experiencing relational aggression and status stratification emerged in Model 7a. Inspection of the slopes of this interaction (Figure 1) revealed that children who identified at least one friend as "relationally aggressive to me" had the highest trend-following conformity intentions when there was greater status stratification within the friendship group ($p < .01$). Although the trend-following conformity intentions of children who did not identify any friends as being relationally aggressive appear to decrease as a function of increased status stratification, this slope was not significant ($p = .16$).

Table 2

Results of Trend-Following Intent to Conform Regression Analyses

	Model 1a			Model 2a			Model 3a			Model 4a		
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*
Constant	5.87**	0.62		5.29**	0.98		5.98**	0.62		5.72**	1.00	
Gender	0.91**	0.29	.17	0.92**	0.30	.18	0.92**	0.29	.17	0.92**	0.30	.17
Race	-0.86**	0.33	-.14	-0.87*	0.34	-.14	-0.87*	0.33	-.14	-0.88*	0.34	-.14
Rej. Expect.	-0.28	0.15	-.10	-0.18	0.32	-.06	-0.27	0.15	-.10	-0.18	0.33	-.06
RAM	0.34*	0.17	.10	0.34*	0.17	.10	-0.23	0.58	-.07	-0.23	0.58	-.07
Status Strat.	13.98**	4.00	.19	18.20	12.15	.25	12.25**	4.31	.17	16.05	12.85	.24
Exp. X Strat.				-1.56	4.35	-.07				-1.40	4.51	-.06
RAM X Strat.							7.18	7.04	.18	7.08	7.13	.16
	R^2 = .15**			R^2 = .15**			R^2 = .15**			R^2 = .15**		
	F(5, 330) = 12.19			F(6, 329) = 9.89			F(6, 329) = 10.03			F(7, 328) = 8.34		
	Model 5a			Model 6a			Model 7a			Model 8a		
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*
Constant	1.04	0.59		0.30	0.82		1.17^	0.58		0.47	0.81	
Gender	0.30	0.23	.06	0.32	0.23	.06	0.29	0.23	.06	0.31	0.23	.06
Race	-0.53	0.28	-.08	-0.56	0.28	-.09	-0.54*	0.27	-.09	-0.57*	0.27	-.09
Trendy	1.97**	0.14	.65	1.98**	0.14	.66	2.00**	0.14	.66	2.01**	0.14	.66
Rej. Expect.	-0.09	0.12	-.03	0.06	0.14	.02	-0.07	0.12	-.03	0.17	0.25	.06
RAM	0.07	0.14	.02	0.17	0.26	.06	-0.99*	0.46	-.28	-0.98*	0.46	-.28
Status Strat.	-0.15	3.22	.00	10.49	8.38	.15	-3.55	3.41	-.05	6.43	8.81	.10
Exp. X Strat.				-3.96	3.00	-.18				-3.70	3.08	-.16
RAM X Strat.							13.23*	5.05	.33	13.01*	5.06	.31
	R^2 = .48**			R^2 = .49**			R^2 = .49**			R^2 = .50**		
	F(6, 329) = 62.58			F(7, 328) = 57.65			F(7, 328) = 56.92			F(8, 327) = 52.51		

Note. Rej. Expect. = Rejection Expectancy. RAM = Relationally Aggressive to Me. Status Strat. = Status Stratification. Trendy = Trendy Group Norms. *b* = Unstandardized coefficient. *β* = Standardized coefficient.
**p < .01; *p < .05

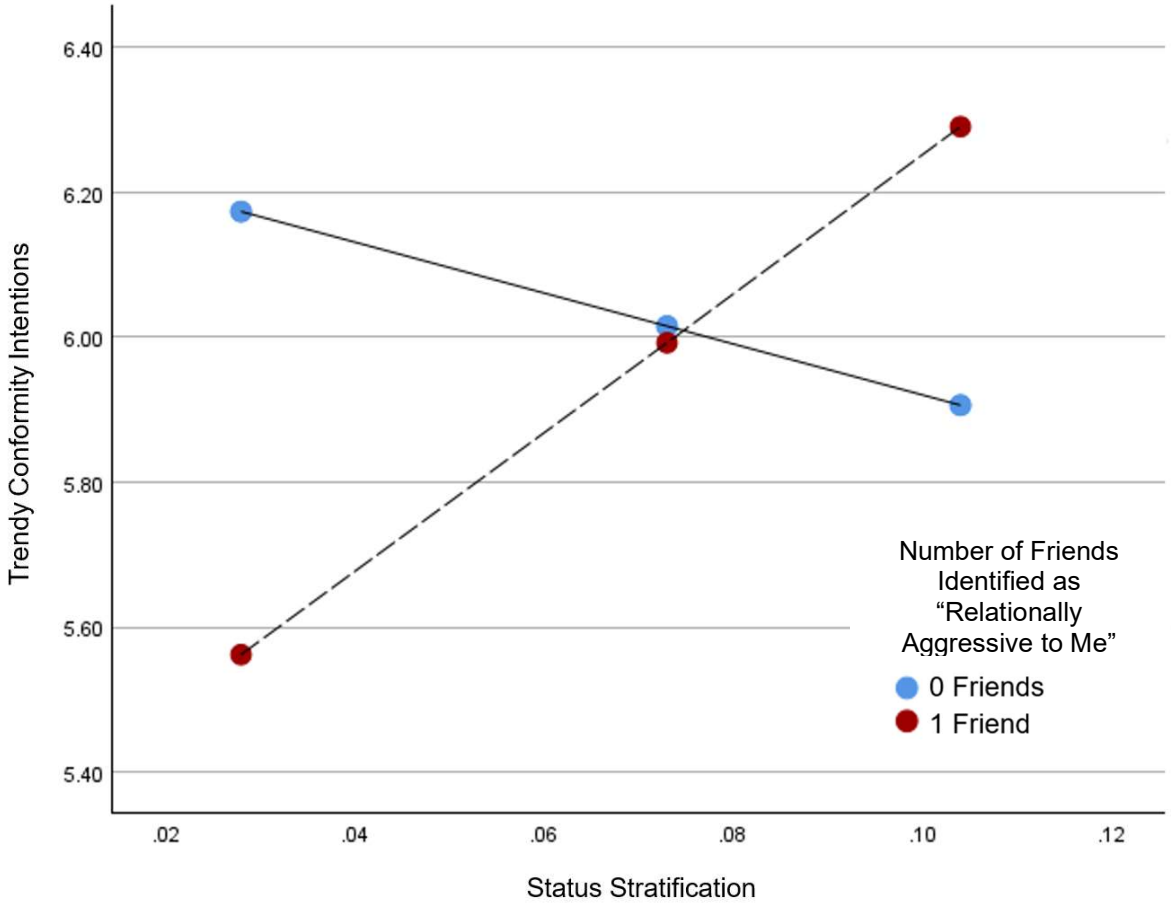

Figure 1

Changes in Trendy Conformity Intentions as a Function of Status Stratification and Experiencing Relational Aggression withing the Friendship Group

Predicting Other Conformity Intentions

Linear regressions were also used to investigate whether rejection expectancy, relational aggression, and status stratification predict other conformity intentions. Rejection expectancy was the only significant predictor of academic conformity intentions when accounting for gender and race (Table 3). Higher levels of rejection expectancy predicted a lower intent to conform to academic norms. Once the academic norms of the friendship group were accounted for (Models

5b, 6b, 7b, and 8b), rejection expectancy remained the only significant predictor of academic conformity intentions. No interactions emerged within any of the academic models.

Additionally, rejection expectancy was the only significant predictor of troublemaking conformity intentions when accounting for gender and race (Table 4). When interaction terms were not included in the model (i.e., Model 1c), status stratification was approaching significance (p = .08) in predicting troublemaking conformity intentions. Once the troublemaking norms of the group were accounted for (i.e., Model 5c), experiencing relational aggression emerged as the only significant predictor of troublemaking conformity intentions. No interactions emerged within any of the troublemaking models.

Table 3

Results of Academic Intent to Conform Regression Analyses

	Model 1b			Model 2b			Model 3b			Model 4b		
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*
Constant	8.38**	0.46		8.49**	0.77		8.38**	0.47		8.49**	0.79	
Gender	1.23**	0.23	.27	1.23**	0.24	.27	1.23**	0.24	.27	1.23**	0.24	.27
Race	-0.87**	0.27	-.16	-0.87**	0.27	-.16	-0.87**	0.27	-.16	-0.87**	0.28	-.16
Rej. Expect.	-0.67**	0.12	-.29	-0.72	0.25	.01	-0.68**	0.12	-.29	-0.72*	0.25	.25
RAM	0.03	0.15	.01	0.03	0.15	-.31	0.05	0.59	.02	0.05	0.59	.02
Status Strat.	-1.88	3.12	-.03	-3.55	9.94	-.06	-1.80	3.41	-.03	-3.46	10.30	-.06
Exp. X Strat.				0.62	3.23	.03				0.61	3.29	.03
RAM X Strat.							-0.34	7.00	-.01	-0.30	7.07	-.01
	R^2 = .21**			R^2 = .21**			R^2 = .21**			R^2 = .21**		
	$F(5, 332)$ = 19.60			$F(6, 331)$ = 16.21			$F(6, 331)$ = 16.28			$F(7, 330)$ = 13.84		
	Model 5b			Model 6b			Model 7b			Model 8b		
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*
Constant	4.00**	0.83		4.12**	1.06		3.96**	0.84		4.07**	1.07	
Gender	1.09**	0.21	.24	1.08**	0.22	.24	1.09**	0.22	.24	1.08**	0.22	.24
Race	-0.93**	0.26	-.17	-0.92**	0.26	-.17	-0.92**	0.26	-.17	-0.92**	0.26	-.17
Academic	1.32**	0.19	.35	1.32**	0.19	.35	1.33**	0.19	.35	1.33**	0.19	.35
Rej. Expect.	-0.46**	0.13	-.20	-0.50	0.27	-.22	-0.46**	0.13	-.20	-0.50*	0.27	-.22
RAM	0.14	0.14	.05	0.14	0.14	.05	0.31	0.60	.10	0.31	0.60	.10
Status Strat.	-2.42	3.04	-.04	-4.22	10.14	-.07	-1.90	3.33	-.03	-3.58	10.30	-.06
Exp. X Strat.				0.66	3.42	.03				0.62	3.43	.03
RAM X Strat.							-2.18	7.07	-.06	-2.14	7.11	-.06
	R^2 = .32**			R^2 = .32**			R^2 = .32**			R^2 = .32**		
	$F(6, 331)$ = 21.91			$F(7, 330)$ = 25.54			$F(7, 330)$ = 25.32			$F(8, 329)$ = 22.09		

Note. Rej. Expect. = Rejection Expectancy. RAM = Relationally Aggressive to Me. Status Strat. = Status Stratification. Academic = Academic Group Norms. *b* = Unstandardized coefficient. *β* = Standardized coefficient.
**$p < .01$; *$p < .05$

Table 4

Results of Troublemaking Intent to Conform Regression Analyses

	Model 1c			Model 2c			Model 3c			Model 4c		
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*
Constant	2.86**	0.53		3.26**	0.85		2.84**	0.55		3.23**	0.89	
Gender	-0.95**	0.25	-.21	-0.96**	0.25	-.21	-0.95**	0.25	-.21	-0.96**	0.25	-.21
Race	-0.13	0.29	-.02	-0.11	0.29	-.02	-0.12	0.29	-.02	-0.11	0.29	-.02
Rej. Expect.	0.27*	0.14	.11	0.13	0.30	-.03	0.27	0.14	.11	0.13	0.30	.03
RAM	-0.10	0.15	-.03	-0.10	0.15	.05	0.01	0.46	.00	0.01	0.46	.00
Status Strat.	6.16	3.48	.10	0.27	10.38	.00	6.52	3.81	.10	0.67	10.98	.01
Exp. X Strat.				2.18	3.82	.11				2.15	3.88	.11
RAM X Strat.							-1.47	5.40	-.04	-1.33	5.53	-.04
	R^2 = .06**			R^2 = .07**			R^2 = .06**			R^2 = .07**		
	$F(5, 332)$ = 4.98			$F(6, 331)$ = 4.20			$F(6, 331)$ = 4.15			$F(7, 330)$ = 3.59		
	Model 5c			Model 6c			Model 7c			Model 8c		
Variable	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*β*
Constant	-0.18	0.46		0.42	0.73		-0.22	0.48		0.37	0.75	
Gender	-0.32	0.21	-.07	-0.34	0.21	-.07	-0.32	0.21	-.07	-0.34	0.21	-.07
Race	0.45	0.28	.08	0.47	0.28	.09	0.45	0.28	.08	0.47	0.28	.09
Trouble	1.99**	0.17	.62	1.99**	0.17	.62	1.99**	0.17	.62	2.00**	0.17	.62
Rej. Expect.	0.02	0.11	.01	-0.21	0.23	-.09	0.01	0.11	.01	-0.21	0.23	-.09
RAM	-0.36**	013	-.12	-0.36**	0.13	-.12	-0.17	0.40	-.06	-0.18	0.41	-.06
Status Strat.	1.09	3.07	.02	-8.01	7.64	-.13	1.68	3.33	.03	-7.34	7.90	-.11
Exp. X Strat.				3.36	3.10	.17				3.31	3.11	.17
RAM X Strat.							-2.45	4.84	-.07	-2.23	4.99	-.06
	R^2 = .39**			R^2 = .39**			R^2 = .39**			R^2 = .39**		
	$F(6, 331)$ = 27.86			$F(7, 330)$ = 25.15			$F(7, 330)$ = 23.89			$F(8, 329)$ = 21.88		

Note. Rej. Expect. = Rejection Expectancy. RAM = Relationally Aggressive to Me. Status Strat. = Status Stratification. Trouble = Troublemaking Group Norms. *b* = Unstandardized coefficient. *β* = Standardized coefficient.
**$p < .01$; *$p < .05$

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to examine mechanisms of influence within the context of children's friendship groups. Specifically, we investigated the effects of specific individual characteristics (i.e., rejection expectancy), experiences (i.e., relational aggression from within the friend group), and group characteristics (i.e., status stratification) on children's trend-following conformity intentions. These characteristics have all been previously implicated in the prediction of trend-following behaviors and conformity intentions (e.g., Croft & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Keltner et al., 2001; Laursen, 2018; Morinville, 2021; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Predix & Lease, under review; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010); however, their impact and interaction within the context of friendship groups have been largely understudied.

The major goal of the study was to examine the impact of relational aggression and status stratification (i.e., large differences in social prominence of group members) in the prediction of trend-following conformity intentions. As expected, relational aggression and status stratification significantly predicted trend-following conformity intentions when accounting for gender and race, with higher levels of both factors predicting an increased intent to conform to their group's trend-following norms (Model 1a). In other words, experiencing relational aggression within the friendship group and being a member of a friendship group with high levels of power imbalance contribute to increased intentions of conforming to trend-following norms within the friendship group. These findings are consistent with research that indicates that children who are relationally victimized are more likely to conform to group norms (e.g., Keltner et al., 2008; Odenbring &

Johansson, 2021) and with research that indicates power imbalances within groups increase pressures to conform (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Laursen, 2018). However, when the trendy norms of the friendship group were accounted for, experiencing relational aggression and status stratification no longer demonstrated significant main effects in predicting trend-following conformity intentions. Instead, high levels of stratification predicted an increased likelihood of conforming to trend-following group norms but only when the child reported experiencing relational aggression from at least one group member.

The emergence of a significant interaction between social stratification and relational aggression in models accounting for the trend-following norms of the group highlights two issues. First, the social dynamics contributing to conformity intentions vary depending on the norms of the group. Second, this interaction highlights that relationally aggressive behaviors occurring within friendship groups interact with power imbalances to produce increased pressures to conform to group norms. When power imbalances do not exist, children who experience relational aggression within the friendship group are less likely to conform to trend-following group norms. These findings are consistent with prior literature highlighting the importance of relational aggression in influencing trendy norms within highly stratified groups of children (Correia et al., 2019; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017; Laursen, 2018; Lease et al., 2020).

Following existing studies, which indicated the cognitive and emotional components of rejection sensitivity impact conformity intentions in different ways, we also examined whether rejection expectancy would predict trend-following conformity intentions in models that accounted for group characteristics (e.g., group norms, social stratification). In the univariate context, rejection expectancy was significantly negatively associated with trend-following conformity intentions. This suggests that children who expect to be rejected believe there is little

gain to be had from changing their own behavior to meet changing trendy group norms. In the multivariate context, which took group characteristics and experience into account, rejection expectancy did not predict trend-following conformity intentions. Specifically, it was not a significant predictor of trend-following conformity intentions when interaction terms and trendy group norms were introduced to the model, nor did it demonstrate a significant interaction with status stratification. Although research highlights the importance of low levels of rejection expectancy in predicting trend-following conformity intentions (Morinville, 2021; Predix & Lease, under review), the current findings indicate that a child's experience of relational aggression within a stratified friendship group is more important than their expectation of rejection when predicting trend-following conformity intentions.

To compare whether these individual and group factors are exclusive to the prediction of trend-following conformity intentions, the roles of rejection expectancy, relational aggression, and status stratification were investigated in the prediction of academic and troublemaking conformity intentions. Overall, the results suggest that the individual factors and group dynamics underlying influence and conformity vary by behavioral domain. Unlike the trend-following models, status stratification did not help explain children's intentions of conforming to changes in their friend groups' academic or troublemaking behaviors. This lack of relationship potentially highlights that status stratification is more important for understanding influence and conformity dynamics for behaviors strongly associated with popularity and status (e.g., trendy behaviors) than for other types of behaviors (e.g., studying and troublemaking).

Unlike the trend-following models, rejection expectancy was the only significant predictor of academic conformity intentions after considering the child's gender, race, and their group's academic norms. These findings suggest that when children demonstrate low levels of rejection

expectancy, they are more likely to indicate a higher intent to conform to the academic norms of the group. Similarly, rejection expectancy was the only significant predictor of troublemaking conformity intentions when accounting for gender and race; although, the direction of the relationship was opposite to that of academic conformity intentions. Children who report high levels of rejection expectancy indicated a higher intent to conform to troublemaking group norms. However, when the troublemaking norms of the group were accounted for, rejection expectancy no longer significantly contributed to the prediction of troublemaking conformity intentions. Relational aggression emerged as a significant predictor when the troublemaking norms were accounted for, with troublemaking conformity intentions being the highest in children who do not report experiencing relational aggression within their friendship groups.

Our results indicate that the norms of the group appear to be an important consideration in the prediction of all three types of conformity intentions. Specifically, within the univariate context, each norm was strongly associated with its respective conformity intention. In the multivariate context, the respective group norms accounted for a significant amount of variance in each of the models and the addition of the norms into the models impacted the significance of several relationships. For example, a significant interaction between status stratification and relational aggression did not emerge in the prediction of trend-following conformity intentions until the trendy group norms were accounted for in the model. Additionally, once troublemaking group norms were accounted for, rejection expectancy was no longer a significant predictor though relational aggression emerged as a significant predictor. Accounting for this link between group norms and conformity intentions substantially changed our understanding of conformity. These findings indicate that group norms should be a major consideration when studying conformity intentions in specific domains.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current study advanced our understanding of conformity within stratified personal networks, it is not without limitations. Although it was a strength that the type of measure varied (e.g., peer nominations, hypothetical vignettes), the current study relied primarily on self-report measures that were collected at one point in time. Our understanding of these dynamics would be advanced significantly if we were able to establish temporal precedence among the variables. Second, as is the case with most studies that utilize peer nominations, participants in the current study were only allowed to nominate peers who had parental consent to take part in the study. Although the consent rate for the current study was consistent with recommendations for social network research (Neal & Neal, 2022), levels of stratification and relational aggression within friendship groups might have been impacted if key members of friendship groups were unable to be nominated. For example, if the "queen bee" or "Regina George" of the friendship group did not have consent to participate, data might not be reflective of true interactions occurring within the network. Further, the generalizability of the results is limited due to the semi-rural sample drawn from predominantly White schools. Last, the current study did not account for the potential impact of nesting by classroom or school.

In future research, it will be important to investigate the potential moderating impact of race on conformity intentions. Within the current study, race was accounted for as a covariate; however, it was significant in most regression models. Further, it will be important to investigate whether there are additional conformity pressures within highly stratified groups when there is also racial and ethnic mismatch of an individual within their friendship group, regardless of the race or ethnicity of the individual.

An additional avenue for future research is adding the consideration of the value a child places on their friendship group. Previous research suggests that the need to belong to (e.g., Bäck et al., 2015) and social identification with (e.g., Kown & Lease, 2009) friendship groups impact their conformity behaviors. If a child demonstrates a high need to belong or strong social identification with a friendship group, this might add additional conformity pressures beyond the stratification and relational aggression within a group. Further, a high need to belong or social identification with the group could be exacerbated by a child's rejection expectancy to predict conformity intentions, especially within groups with high levels of uncertainty of acceptance.

Last, previous research suggests that the shape of the hierarchy is also an important consideration (e.g., Pattiselanno et al., 2019) when investigating conformity pressures. Although status stratification was an important predictor of trend-following conformity intentions within the current study, stratification as it was measured in the current study accounted only for the degree of stratification as opposed to how the power is distributed in the friendship group. The degree of stratification does not indicate whether the group is a typical pyramid structure (e.g., one or two high-status peers at the top with multiple lower status peers at the bottom) or an inverted pyramid structure (e.g., many high-status peers at the top, with only a few lower status peers at the bottom). These conformity intentions might look different depending on the shape of status hierarchy.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the interacting effects of rejection expectancy, experiencing relational aggression, and status stratification within the friend group on children's trend-following conformity intentions. Our results highlight the importance of experiencing relational aggression within highly stratified friendship groups in predicting trend-following conformity intentions. These group-level characteristics appear to be especially important in predicting conformity

intentions related to norms that are associated with popularity (i.e., trendy) as opposed to those that are less associated with popularity (i.e., studying and troublemaking). Further, accounting for the link between group norms and conformity intentions substantially changed our understanding of conformity. These findings indicate that group norms should be a major consideration when studying conformity intentions in specific domains.

Results from this study provide important implications for school psychologists. Specifically, school psychologists frequently ask students whether they have friends when identifying students for social skills interventions or when determining their social functioning. This study highlights that, in addition to asking, "do you have friends?" it is important to investigate the nature of the interactions occurring within friendship groups. Psychologists should consider asking questions such as, "are you ever left out of or made fun of by your friends?" or "do you or one of your friends always seem to be in charge of your group?" or "is there anything you wish you could change about your friendship group?" Responses to these questions might provide insight to the interactions occurring within a friendship group that might require targeted intervention. Further, this research highlighted that some groups have clear leaders, and the stratification occurring within those groups creates additional pressures to conform, especially to the norms set by the leader. By understanding who the key players are within children's friendship groups, psychologists can aim to change norms within groups by selecting influential students for intervention.

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