

Abstract

Children's perceived control about friendship and its relationships to mutual friendships in the context of peer-group integration was examined using data from an ongoing research project. As a major theoretical framework an action-theory model of perceived control was employed (e.g., Skinner, 1995). The theory differentiates among three types of beliefs. Agency beliefs represent children's perceptions of their access to specific action means. Means-ends beliefs represent children's perceptions of the usefulness of specific action means. Goal Difficulty represents a global perception of contingencies and responsiveness of the context. The theory posits that the effects of perceived control on outcomes are mediated by goal-directed behaviors. Based on the literature of children's coping three important behavioral strategies were identified: Problem Solving, Seeking Help, and Action Omission.

The major goal of the study was to examine the influence of sociometric status on perceived control. The study focused on accepted (i.e., popular and average) and rejected children. Children's sociometric status is related to both own competence and contingencies of the peers' responses on their actions (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994). Previous findings showed that friended-rejected children have equally optimistic views of both perceived control and friendship quality as accepted children, although their friends evaluate friendship quality lower than accepted children's friends and rejected children themselves (e.g., Brendgen, Little, & Krappmann, 2000). It was predicted that rejected children's illusory-high perceived control is negatively related to their friends' views of friendship quality while these relationships are reversed for accepted children. Children's failure to participate in mutual friendships was expected to be related to low perceived control. As an alternative predictor of children's failure to participate in friendships their evaluations of Goal Importance were assessed.

642 elementary-school students' (grades 3 to 6, M age = 10.3) sociometric status was assessed by peer-nomination procedures (Coie et al., 1982). Both perceived control and action strategies were assessed by the Multi-dimensional Control, Agency, and Means-ends beliefs Inventory for Friendship (Little & Wanner, 1997). Friendship quality was measured with the Friendship Inventory (Little et al., 1997). Analyses involved structural equation modelling.

Only a single mean-level difference supported the hypothesis that children who fail to participate in mutual friendship relationships are characterized by *low* perceptions of control. Instead, the findings showed that children's perceptions of Goal Difficulty and external means-ends beliefs were inversely related to their sociometric status. This is in line with the assumption that children's sociometric status represents the developmental basis for children's friendships (e.g., Bukowski, et al., 1996).

Unexpectedly, the findings suggest that the functioning of contingency beliefs (i.e., means-ends beliefs and Goal Difficulty) in regulating action differed across groups of children who have problems in their peer relationships and children who are well-adjusted (i.e., friended-popular and friended-average children). For the friendless groups means-ends: Adults, Goal Difficulty, Action Omission, and Seeking Help were more highly correlated compared to friended-accepted groups. These patterns of relationships suggest that for many friendless children low perceived control was related to maladaptive action. Similar patterns of relationships among these constructs evinced for friended-rejected children but means-ends: Self were involved instead of means-ends: Adults. The centrality of means-ends: Self vs. means-ends: Adults in regulating action may explain why children succeeded to participate in friendships or why they did not. For friended-rejected children means-ends: Self, Goal Difficulty, Action Omission, and Seeking Help also were negatively related to the friends' views of friendship quality.

The findings supported that rejected children's illusory-high agency beliefs were indirectly through direct problem-solving strategies related to the friends' negative evaluations of friendship quality. In contrast, for accepted children both agency beliefs and direct problem-solving strategies were positively related to the friends' views of friendship quality.

The findings ruled out that failure to participate in friendships was due to low motivation because friendless and friended children equally endorsed the importance of friendships. In conclusion, the findings pinpoint to the importance of contingency beliefs in the regulation of action in the domain of friendship during middle childhood.