



Interpersonal Rejection and Social Motivation in Adolescence: Moderation by Narcissism and Gender

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ABSTRACT

Research on interpersonal rejection is voluminous, but less is known about perceived rejection in relation to social goals among peers during adolescence, especially while also considering factors that may moderate these associations. In a correlational design, we surveyed a diverse sample of middle school students to examine concurrent (Study 1; $N=269$) and short-term longitudinal (Study 2; $N=321$) links between rejection and adolescent communal (affiliation, closeness) and agentic (status, influence) goals, and narcissism and gender as moderators in the associations between rejection and social goals. Rejection was negatively related to (Study 1) and predicted decreases in (Study 2) communal goals. Narcissism was positively related to and predicted increases in agentic goals, and moderated the association between rejection and agentic goals (in both studies). One moderated effect of gender was found: perceived rejection predicted decreases in agentic goals for girls, but increases in agentic goals for boys. Our findings mostly align with existing research on interpersonal rejection in youth, and extend this literature by demonstrating that perceived rejection is meaningfully related to changes in trait-like social goals among peers, suggesting it may alter not only situation-specific cognitions, but also globalized goals, or motivations for peer interaction. The findings also call for further research on individual differences in associations between rejection and social goals, along with other outcomes.

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Affiliation is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). From early childhood onwards, positive peer relationships are important for healthy development. For instance, peer acceptance is positively related to social skills, emotional well-being, prosocial behaviors, and academic engagement (e.g. Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Parker, Rubin, Erath, Wojslawowicz, & Buskirk, 2006). On the other hand, rejection or being disliked or excluded by others violates the need for affiliation and negatively affects social-emotional development in many ways (e.g. Bagwell et al., 1998; Prinstein & Aikins, 2004). Rejection may occur in response to preexisting behavioral problems, but it also independently contributes to subsequent adjustment difficulties beyond individual risk factors, such as increased aggression, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem and depression (e.g. Ladd, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

Clearly, rejection is an established interpersonal stressor with a myriad of negative effects on psychological and behavioral functioning. However, though some studies have assessed social goals as predictors of peer-reported social status in cross-sectional designs, we are not aware of any studies assessing perceived rejection in association with adolescent social goals representing globalized social motivations among peers (see below), especially in longitudinal data and while also considering potential moderators in these associations. Since social goals are related to the development of social behaviors among peers (e.g. Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014), this

research advances understanding of interpersonal rejection in adolescent personal and social development.

While meaningful across development, during adolescence interpersonal rejection may have especially negative effects on adjustment, as interaction with peers becomes increasingly subjectively important and intimate, youth spend considerable time with peers (Buhrmester, 1996; Larson & Richards, 1991), and rejection may become chronic and relatively stable over time (e.g. Cillessen, Bukowski, & Haselager, 2000). Also during this time, freedom to pursue personal goals increases and peer interactions become important for well-being (Bukowski, Buhrmester, & Underwood, 2011), suggesting both rejection and social goals are relevant in adolescent development. Rejection is known to affect situation-specific social cognitions (e.g. encoding of situational cues, intent attributions, response construction; Dodge et al., 2003; Lansford, Malone, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010) and may also have long-lasting effects on various relational self-system processes involving beliefs and cognitive representations of the self in relationships with others (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016), likely also including social goals entailing information about the self in relation to others (for the detailed present conceptualization of social goals, see below).

Presently, we examined perceived rejection in association with adolescent social goals among peers, to understand rejection in relation to concurrent (Study 1) and subsequent (Study 2) social goals as indices of social motivations among peers, the primary socialization agents during adolescence. Further, for a more detailed understanding of perceived rejection in relation to social goals, we also examined individual differences in these associations by assessing narcissism (related to differences in interpersonal functioning in adolescence) and gender (related to differences in several peer relational processes) as their moderators. As discussed below, these constructs have been previously associated with social goals and can extend understanding of rejection in adolescent development beyond its main associations with social goals.

Interpersonal rejection, and agentic and communal goals among peers

Social goals are examined with numerous conceptualizations across psychology (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). In the present study, we examined goals as trait-like globalized social motivational orientations among peers, or as goals ‘targeted for attaining, maintaining, or avoiding specific end states for the self in relation to peers’ (Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005, p. 699). In this assessment, social goals represent trait-like cognitions (vs. goals for specific peer situations; see Erdley & Asher, 1999), stored in the long-term memory based on situation-specific cognitive processing (Crick & Dodge, 1994). These trait-like, or globalized goals reflect individual differences in social, or interpersonal motivations among peers and thus, can help to explain *why* youth may react to rejection in certain ways. In the present assessment grounded in the interpersonal circumplex model (e.g. Dryer & Horowitz, 1997; Locke, 2015), goals are examined in terms of agency and communion, considered to represent fundamental human motivations generally referring to interest in the self, independence, dominance, and mastery versus relational needs, affiliation, and intimacy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Locke, 2000; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). In the present and past research with youth, agentic goals entail globalized motives for social status among peers and are related to high self-esteem, narcissism, aggression, peer rejection and popularity, whereas communal goals entail globalized motives for closeness with peers, related to temperamental affiliation, prosocial behaviors, peer acceptance and low aggression (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012; Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012; Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2020; Salmivalli, Ojanen, Haanpää, & Peets, 2005; Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008).

Existing research in youth warrants alternative hypotheses regarding the specific way in which rejection is associated with interpersonal goals. First, rejection is positively related to aggression (see Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006), moderates its effects on other externalizing and behavioral difficulties (e.g. Bierman & Wargo, 1995), and is mutually associated with aggression across time (Dodge et al., 2003; Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014; Parker & Asher, 1987). These

findings suggest that antagonistic behavior may cause and be increased by peer rejection, which may increase aggression and goals for status related to and pursued via aggression (e.g. Caravita & Cillessen, 2012; Hawley, 2006; Ojanen et al., 2012). However, rejection during adolescence is also positively related to social withdrawal (e.g. Gest, Graham-Bermann, & Hartup, 2001; Salmivalli et al., 2005). Withdrawn youth may be disliked by peers, and especially when chronic, rejection may decrease motivation to be prosocial, or to interact with others altogether, potentially inhibiting the development of social skills and increasing social withdrawal via learned expectations of negative peer interactions (Coie et al., 1990; Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, 1990). This research suggests rejection may be related to low and potentially decreasing levels of both agentic and communal goals, as both have been negatively related to social withdrawal among peers (Ojanen et al., 2005). Indeed and supporting both research lines, peer rejection is found to independently (beyond child characteristics) contribute to the development of both externalizing and internalizing difficulties in youth (Ladd, 2006).

Experimental studies on interpersonal motives following rejection in adults are relevant to the present study, though notably with methodological distinctions that make direct comparisons to adolescent research difficult. In some studies, participants react to laboratory-based experiences of rejection with increased hostility and aggression (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001), and in other studies with increased withdrawal and decreased emotional responding and prosocial behavior (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007). Yet, the social reconnection hypothesis suggests rejection increases the likelihood of prosocial engagement aimed at reconnecting or affirming one's relational worth, especially if there is an opportunity to connect with individuals separate from those eliciting rejection (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). This would suggest interpersonal rejection would increase prosocial behaviors and communal goals, but this is not entirely supported by correlational research in younger samples. For instance, rejection has been linked to low levels of prosocial behaviors consistently across studies (e.g. Rubin et al., 1990; Salmivalli et al., 2005; Stenseng et al., 2014). In part, differences between youth and adult literatures may be due to differences in methodology: whereas rejection exposure in laboratory usually comprises individuals outside of participants' social network and assesses immediate reactions, developmental psychology focuses on peer- or self-reported rejection amongst familiar peers that presumably entail longer-term dynamics. It is possible, for example, that rejection by familiar people 'hurts' more than by unfamiliar individuals and thus, is linked to higher aggression or social withdrawal, rather than prosocial behaviors signaling social reconnection.

Based on the above research, we believed rejection would be associated with lower rather than higher levels of communal goals among peers and would also potentially predict decreases in these goals over time, during adolescence. Whether the specific psychological processes include, for example, increased resentment, hostility, and an overall antagonistic orientation toward peers induced by rejection, or learned expectations for rejection and developing internalizing difficulties, both of these plausible orientations suggest lower rather than higher communal goals, or motivations for closeness and affiliation, among peers.

Regarding rejection and agentic goals, a direct link may not exist between these constructs. Rather, individual differences in this association may exist based on variables like gender and narcissism. Specifically, if rejection elicits social withdrawal, negatively related to agentic goals (Ojanen et al., 2005), we could expect a negative association with agentic goals. However, to the extent that rejection reflects a sense of lower social standing, rejected youth may be motivated to enhance status and thus display higher degrees of agentic goals instead. Agentic goals are positively linked to aggression, which may be used to obtain social status among peers (Hawley, 2006; Ojanen et al., 2005). Yet, at the bivariate level, agentic goals have been unrelated to social preference (i.e. being relatively high on sociometric likeability and low on dislikability; Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014), suggesting that a direct association between rejection and agentic goals may not exist. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine variables that may produce individual differences in, or moderate the association between rejection and social goals.

Rejection and social goals: moderation by narcissism and gender?

Rejection may not be related to adjustment similarly for all individuals, but less is known about individual differences in the links of rejection with adolescent social cognition and specifically social goals. We examined narcissism as a moderator in this context based on adolescent literature linking narcissism with high agentic and low communal goals among peers during adolescence and adults (e.g. Findley & Ojanen, 2013; Thomaes et al., 2008), and based on established rationale for this framework in related work on adults (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). We assessed narcissism involving perceived grandiosity, entitlement and superiority in the self (though various forms of narcissism may be studied; e.g. Miller, Lynam, Hyatt, & Campbell, 2017), using the Childhood Narcissism Scale developed for the general population (Thomaes et al., 2008). Overall, narcissism is negatively related to empathy (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984) and positively to exploitation of and aggression toward others, in youth and adults (Barry, Grafeman, Adler, & Pickard, 2007; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). It also predicts increases in agentic goals, especially those reflecting desired dominance (Findley & Ojanen, 2013; Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2020), suggesting those high in narcissism are especially motivated to seek social status.

Narcissists expect others to perceive them with the same degree of superiority that they see themselves, yet may be vulnerable to threats to their sense of self (Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011; Pincus et al., 2009). Thus, reactions to rejection likely differ as a function of narcissism. Indeed, during adulthood, individuals high in narcissism are especially likely to react to rejection with hostility and aggression (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Those low in narcissism, in turn, may be less likely to strive for status following rejection, which may thwart one's confidence in achieving it. These accounts suggest narcissism likely moderates the association of rejection with social goals, such that rejection may be positively related to and predict increases agentic goals for those high narcissism, but negatively related to and potentially predict decreases in these for those low in narcissism. We aimed to test this in the current study.

We also examined gender as a potential moderator in the associations between rejection and social goals. Taking a traditional definition of gender most frequently used in peer relations literature, across ages, women and girls are more relationally oriented than men, scoring higher in communal goals and prosocial behaviors (Block, 1983; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Thus, they may react to rejection with greater strivings to improve acceptance (i.e. with higher communal goals), or be especially hurt by it, resulting in lowered desires to connect (i.e. low communal goals). Men and boys, in turn, are more (directly) aggressive, value status, and generally endorse agentic goals more than women and girls (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Ojanen et al., 2005; Schwartz & Rubel, 2005), though when girls are aggressive it is more likely to be via relational means and relational victimization is more harmful for girls (Crick et al., 2002). This literature suggests that rejection may be related to especially low or high levels of communal goals for girls, whereas for boys, it is likely linked to increased agentic goals (though its links to situation-specific cognitions are similar across gender; Dodge et al., 2003). Given the impact of rejection on development, it is worthwhile to try to understand its links to social goals in detail. Thus, we explored gender as a moderator in these associations.

Present study

To advance understanding of interpersonal rejection and motivation in adolescents, we conducted two studies examining perceived rejection in relation to agentic (social status) and communal (closeness) goals among peers, and narcissism and gender as moderators in these associations. We examined these associations in cross-sectional data (Study 1), replicated Study 1 findings by repeating the cross-sectional analyses in an independent sample (Study 2), and extended these findings to longitudinal data (Study 2), needed to best understand *development* of social goals over time. To summarize the hypotheses described in more detail above, across the cross-sectional

and longitudinal associations, we primarily expected rejection to be related to (and predict decreases in) communal goals. We also expected that the association between rejection and agentic goals would be non-significant, but would depend on narcissism and gender.

In these studies, we assessed *perceived* rejection. Although some youth over- or under-report their experiences of rejection (see, e.g. David & Kistner, 2000), research has long recognized that *perceptions* of peer status may influence affect and behaviors regardless of actual experience (e.g. Hymel & Franke, 1985; Leary, 2001) and mediate associations between peer-nominated rejection and adjustment difficulties (Panak & Garber, 1992). Thus, we believe assessment of perceived rejection is valuable in this context. Further, the present study samples were relatively diverse, which we believe strengthens the contributions of the findings to existing research on adolescent social goals, primarily conducted in European, and/or middle-high socioeconomic status samples.

Study 1

In this study, we examined cross-sectional associations among perceived rejection and social goals during adolescence, and narcissism and gender as moderators in these associations.

Participants and procedure

Participants included 269 adolescents (Mage = 12.75; SDage = 1.14; grades 6-8; 173 girls; 41.3% Black/African American, 21.6% Hispanic, 15.6% Caucasian, non-Hispanic, 13.8% Multi-ethnic, and .8% other; eight students did not know or report their ethnicity) from a middle school in the southeastern United States. Students were recruited by distributing consent forms during classes at school, and were given school supplies and entered into a raffle for gift cards for participating. Surveys were administered at school during school hours. Both parental and adolescent consent was obtained. The data for this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Measures

Social goals

The 33-item Interpersonal Goals Inventory was used to assess adolescents' agentic (status, dominance) and communal (closeness, affiliation) social goals for peer interaction. This measure was developed for use in childhood and adolescence (see Ojanen et al., 2005) based on the Interpersonal Circumplex measure of values by Locke (2003). It includes eight subscales measuring interpersonal goal orientations, in which each entail a quadrant of a vector or a combination of aligning quadrants (i.e. agentic, agentic-communal, communal, communal-submissive, submissive, submissive-separate, separate, agentic-separate). Participants first read the frame of 'When around your peers, how important is it to you that...' and then rate their level of agreement with each of the 33 items (e.g. 'others respect and admire me'). Items were positively worded on a scale of 1-5 (1 = 'not at all important to me'; 5 = 'very important to me'). The subscales were internally consistent ($\alpha = .66-.78$) and following research with this instrument, these scales were used to compute Agentic and Communal Vector Scores (Locke, 2003): Communal Vector = Communal - Separate + [.707*(Communal and Agentic+Communal and Submissive-Separate and Agentic-Separate and Submissive)]; Agentic Vector = Agentic - Submissive + [.707*(Communal and Agentic+Separate and Agentic - Communal and Submissive - Separate and Submissive)]. These scores capture overarching, or globalized goal orientations, or motivations for social status (agentic goals) and closeness (communal goals) among peers.

Table 1. Correlations, means, and standard deviations of study 1 variables.

	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
1. Agentic Goals	1				-.19	1.73
2. Communal Goals	.16**	1			1.39	1.85
3. Rejection	.02	-.19**	1		3.82	2.55
4. Narcissism	.22**	-.03	-.16**	1	3.34	.75

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Perceived rejection

Perceived rejection was measured using a single item from the Social Interactions Survey (Guerra, Asher, & DeRosier, 2004). Students read a description of a child that was disliked by their peers and rated the degree to which they are like that kind of child, ranging from 0 = 'Not at all' to 10 = 'Exactly'. The specific scenario read as follows: 'Some kids are very disliked or rejected by lots of other kids in their grade. Often, other kids don't like to play with them or even be on the same team with them. Other kids may try to avoid them or leave them out of their group. How much are you the kind of child that most other kids really *don't* like?'

Narcissism

A 10-item measure of childhood narcissism (Thomaes et al., 2008) was used to assess grandiose, inflated self-views of adolescents. Items were rated on a scale of 1-5 ($\alpha = .75$; 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree; e.g. 'kids like me deserve something extra'). The narcissism items were averaged across, such that higher scores represented higher degrees of narcissism.

Results

Mean-level differences by gender

Means and standard deviations of the study variables can be found in Table 1. We examined mean-level differences in the study variables using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Girls ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.86$) scored higher than boys ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 1.82$) in communal goals, $F(1, 263) = 4.74$, $p = .03$. Note: scores in agentic and communal goals are comprised of vector scores, so are not interpreted as ranging from 1-5; rather, the range of scores was, for agentic goals, -4.44-5.72, and for communal goals, -4.13-7.12. No other mean level differences by gender were found.

Direct and interactive associations among the variables

Bivariate correlations can be found in Table 1. We used multiple regression to examine direct and interactive associations among social goals, rejection, narcissism, and gender. Gender was included as a dummy-coded variable (girls were coded as 0 and boys were coded as 1). All other predictors were mean-centered. We first examined the main effects of rejection, narcissism, and gender on social goals by regressing each goal upon these variables (see Table 2 for results). Rejection was negatively related to communal goals and unrelated to agentic goals, whereas narcissism was positively related to agentic goals and unrelated to communal goals. We then examined interactive effects by including two interaction terms, comprised of the product of the mean-centered rejection and narcissism variables and the product of the mean-centered rejection variable and dummy-coded gender variable, as predictors of social goals (see Table 2 for results). Narcissism and rejection significantly interacted in association with agentic goals. Follow-up simple slopes tests (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that rejection was negatively associated with agentic goals for youth who were low in narcissism, $\beta = -.31$, $t(38) = 4.09$, $p = .05$; but unrelated for youth average, $\beta = .04$, $t(157) = .54$, $p = .59$; or high, $\beta = .19$, $t(35) = 1.17$, $p = .25$, in narcissism. Gender and rejection did not significantly interact in association with agentic or communal goals.

Table 2. Cross-Sectional Regression Analysis (Studies 1 and 2).

Main Effect Model: Predictors	Communal Goals				Agentic Goals			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Rejection	-.12/-.09	.06/.04	-.20/-.13	.00/.02	.00/-.07	.05/.04	.00/-.09	.99/.19
Narcissism	-.12/.09	.16/.04	-.05/.03	.45/.56	.50/.59	.15/.17	.21/.20	.00/.00
Gender	-.55/-.32	.25/.19	-.14/-.10	.03/.09	-.13/.27	.24/.21	-.04/.07	.58/.19
<i>F</i>		4.75/3.33				3.77/6.51		
<i>R</i> ²		.06/.03				.05/.06		
Interaction Effects: Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Rejection	-.17/-.08	.06/.06	-.23/-.12	.01/.15	.01/-.08	.06/.06	.01/-.10	.92/.19
Narcissism	-.21/-.17	.20/.21	-.08/.06	.30/.42	.54/.79	.19/.23	.23/.26	.00/.00
Gender	-.54/-.37	.26/.19	-.14/-.11	.04/.06	-.21/.28	.24/.21	-.06/.07	.38/.19
Narcissism X Rejection	.06/.08	.08/.07	.06/.09	.44/.27	.18/-.06	.08/.08	.19/-.06	.02/.45
Gender X Rejection	.08/-.02	.10/.08	.07/-.02	.41/.83	.02/.02	.09/.09	.02/.02	.84/.84
Gender X Narcissism	.16/-.19	.35/.32	.04/-.04	.65/.57	-.18/-.37	.33/.35	-.04/-.08	.59/.30
Gender X Nar X Rej	.13/-.14	.13/.11	.08/-.10	.33/.21	-.14/-.03	.12/.12	-.10/-.02	.26/.81
<i>F</i>		2.73/1.75				2.44/4.32		
<i>R</i> ²	.08/.04				.07/.07			

Note: Coefficients are reported as Study 1/Study 2 (identical models were conducted between the Study 1 sample and the Time 1 of Study 2 sample).

Summary of results

We found that rejection was negatively related to communal goals and did not interact with narcissism or gender in relation to communal goals. Narcissism was unrelated to communal goals, positively related to agentic goals, and moderated the association between rejection and agentic goals. Rejection was negatively related to agentic goals only for those low in narcissism, as expected. However, contrary to predictions, rejection was unrelated to agentic goals for youth high in narcissism. Unexpectedly, interactions with gender were non-significant.

Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate cross-sectional associations from Study 1, and examined short-term longitudinal associations (across six months) between perceived rejection and adolescent social goals during middle school. Overall, our hypotheses were in line with Study 1, now also extending to longitudinal data. That is, in addition to similar hypotheses for cross-sectional associations (see Study 1), we also expected rejection to predict decreases in communal goals, and to interact with narcissism to predict changes in agentic goals. We also explored the moderating role of gender in these associations.

Method

Participants and procedure

For the first time point of the study, data were collected from 321 adolescents (56% girls) in a diverse middle school in the Southeast U.S. (Mage = 12.6, SDage = 1.02; grades 6-8; 33.6% Black/African American, 27.4% Hispanic, 18.7% Caucasian, non-Hispanic, 12.1% Multi-ethnic, and 1.5% other). Thirteen participants either did not know or did not want to provide their ethnicity. Both parental and adolescent consent was obtained. Surveys were completed during school hours, and participants were compensated with candy and school supplies as incentives for participation. Six months after the first data collection, participants were asked to participate in a follow-up survey, with adolescents and parents again providing consent for this time point. This resulted in a follow-up N of 110. The lower than ideal retention may have been due to

the nature of the population of adolescents, which was primarily lower SES. In many instances, students could not be contacted by the research team for a follow-up survey as they had switched schools and school board policy did not allow for sustained contact. While we recognize this as a primary limitation, we believe that longitudinal data, particularly in a diverse sample, is still valuable for research on rejection. Participants who persisted to T2 did not differ from those who did not in any of the T1 continuous variables, or in gender, grade, or ethnicity. The data for this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Measures

We used the same measures as in Study 1. The Interpersonal Goals Inventory (Ojanen et al., 2005) was also used in Study 2 to assess social goals for peer interaction. Subscales were internally consistent in the full-sample cross-sectional data and the follow-up sample ($\alpha = .68-.72$). We also used the same measure for perceived rejection as in Study 1 (Guerra et al., 2004), as well as the same measure for narcissism (Thomaes et al., 2008). However, unexpectedly, the narcissism scale did not evidence sufficient internal consistency ($\alpha = .59$). Removal of one item ('it often happens that other kids get the compliments that I actually deserve') increased the alpha coefficient to .62. Results (correlations, main effects models, and interaction effect models in both cross-sectional and longitudinal portions) did not differ in significance and only slightly in magnitude between the variable formed using this item or not. Thus, given the importance of this scale to the current study, we proceeded with analyses using the scale with one item removed.

Results

Mean-level differences by gender and over time

See Table 3 for overall means, and standard deviations of the variables. ANOVA indicated that in time 1, $F(1, 318) = 4.15, p = .04$, and time 2, $F(1, 108) = 5.60, p = .02$, girls scored higher than boys in communal goals (T1 girls: $M = 1.48, SD = 1.71$; boys: $M = 1.10, SD = 1.58$; T2 girls: $M = 1.85, SD = 1.58$; boys: $M = 1.12, SD = 1.58$). No other mean level gender differences were found. Paired samples t -tests indicated that neither agentic goals, $t(108) = -1.58, p = .12$, nor communal goals $t(108) = -1.08, p = .28$ changed in average levels from T1 to T2.

Cross-sectional associations

Bivariate correlations among the study variables at T1 and T2 may be found in Table 3. As in Study 1, we used multiple regression to examine direct and interactive associations among social goals, rejection, narcissism, and gender. Gender was included as a dummy-coded variable (girls were coded as 0 and boys were coded as 1). All predictors were mean-centered. Using all participants who participated in Time 1, we first examined the cross-sectional main effects of

Table 3. Study 2 (longitudinal): correlations, means, and standard deviations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean	SD
<i>Time 1</i>								
1. Agentic Goals	1						-.39	1.87
2. Communal Goals	.16**/.20*	1					1.31	1.66
3. Rejection	-.13*/-.10	-.15**/-.12	1				3.88	2.41
4. Narcissism	.24**/.13	.09/-.01	-.23**/-.20	1			3.33	.63
<i>Time 2</i>								
5. Agentic Goals	.34**	.11	-.20*	.28**	1		-.12	1.99
6. Communal Goals	-.012	.47**	-.29**	.06	.24**	1	1.56	1.61

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Note: Time 1 correlations are presented as the full sample/the selection of the sample that participated in both time points. Time 1 means and standard deviations include the full sample, and Time 2 social goal means and standard deviations include only those who participated in both time points.

Table 4. Study 2: short-term longitudinal prediction of social goals.

Main effect models: Predictors	T2Communal goals				T2Agentic goals			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
T1Com.Goals	.44	.08	.46	.00	.08	.11	.07	.45
T1 Ag.Goals	-.13	.08	-.14	.12	.31	.11	.27	.00
Rejection	-.15	.06	-.23	.01	-.10	.08	-.12	.21
Narcissism	.01	.20	.00	.97	.72	.28	.24	.01
Gender	-.34	.28	-.11	.22	.27	.37	.07	.47
<i>F</i>		8.93				4.93		
<i>R</i> ²		.31				.20		
Interaction Effect Models: Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
T1Com.Goals	.45	.08	.47	.00	.04	.10	.03	.70
T1 Ag.Goals	-.12	.08	-.13	.15	.34	.10	.30	.00
Rejection	-.13	.08	-.21	.08	-.25	.10	-.31	.01
Narcissism	-.21	.26	-.09	.42	.77	.32	.26	.02
Gender	-.38	.29	-.12	.19	-.04	.36	-.01	.90
Narcissism X Rejection	.13	.11	.13	.26	.32	.14	.26	.02
Gender X Rejection	-.03	.12	-.03	.81	.46	.15	.36	.00
Gender X Narcissism	.57	.42	.14	.19	-.45	.53	-.09	.39
Gender X Rej X Nar	-.15	.17	-.10	.37	-.24	.21	-.13	.26
<i>F</i>	5.26					5.45		
<i>R</i> ²	.33					.34		

rejection, narcissism, and gender on social goals by regressing each goal upon these variables (see Table 2 for results). Rejection was negatively related to communal goals and unrelated to agentic goals, whereas narcissism was positively related to agentic goals and unrelated to communal goals. We then examined interactive effects by including two interaction terms, comprised of the product of the mean-centered rejection and narcissism variables and the product of the mean-centered rejection variable and dummy-coded gender variable, as predictors of social goals in addition to the main effects (see Table 2 for results). Neither narcissism nor gender interacted with rejection in the cross-sectional models.

Longitudinal associations

We examined whether rejection and narcissism were related to later agentic and communal goals while controlling for initial levels of goals. For these analyses, only people who participated in both time points were included. In these models, we regressed each Time 2 social goal upon Time 1 social goals, rejection, narcissism, and gender. See Table 4 for results. Agentic and communal goals were stable (i.e. Time 1 values predicted Time 2 values) and unrelated to one another over time. While controlling for the initial levels of both goals, rejection predicted decreases in communal goals and was unrelated to agentic goals over time. Narcissism, in turn, was unrelated to communal goals and predicted increases in agentic goals over time.

We tested longitudinal moderation by narcissism and gender by including two continuous interaction terms comprised as in the cross-sectional models (i.e. interaction terms between Time 1 narcissism and rejection, and between Time 1 rejection and gender), in addition to the predictors used in the main effects models. Interactive effects to predict communal goals were non-significant, but both interaction terms significantly predicted agentic goals (see Table 4). Follow-up simple slope analyses indicated that rejection predicted decreases in agentic goals only for those low in narcissism ($\beta = -.43$, $t(21) = -2.36$; $p = .03$), but not for those average ($\beta = .05$, $t(59) = .44$; $p = .66$) or high ($\beta = -.10$, $t(15) p = .67$) in narcissism while controlling for T1 agentic goals. Further, perceived rejection predicted decreases in agentic goals for girls ($\beta = -.41$, $t(61) = -3.65$, $p = .001$), and increases in agentic goals ($\beta = .31$, $t(36) = 2.20$, $p = .03$) for boys while controlling for T1 agentic goals.

Summary of results

In this study, we examined cross-sectional as well as short-term longitudinal associations between rejection and social goals, and narcissism and gender as moderators in these. Cross-sectional replication of Study 1 results emerged partially as expected. In line with Study 1, rejection was negatively related to communal goals and predicted decreases in communal goals over time, and these associations were not moderated by narcissism or gender. Also, narcissism was positively related to agentic goals and predicted increases in agentic goals over time, but contrary to Study 1, narcissism did not interact with rejection in relation to agentic goals in cross-sectional data. However, in line with Study 1 results, narcissism moderated the longitudinal rejection-agentic goal association: rejection predicted decreases in agentic goals for those low in narcissism. Gender moderated the longitudinal rejection-agentic goals association: rejection predicted decreases in agentic goals for girls, but increases in these for boys.

General discussion

We conducted two studies to examine cross-sectional and longitudinal links between rejection and adolescent agentic (status) and communal (closeness) goals among peers, and narcissism and gender as moderators in these associations. Mostly consistent across the studies, the findings suggest perceived rejection is related to and may predict changes adolescent social goals, reflecting globalized interpersonal motivations among peers, and these relations may partially depend on narcissism and gender.

Rejection and communal goals

Rejection was negatively related to communal goals (Studies 1 and 2) and predicted decreases in communal goals across time, while controlling for their initial level (Study 2), as expected. Further, the direct association between rejection and communal goals was not moderated by narcissism or gender, in either study. These findings align with existing correlational research in youth and some experimental research in adults linking peer rejection to low prosocial behaviors and high social withdrawal (e.g. Salmivalli et al., 2005; Twenge et al., 2007), both reflecting low communal goals (e.g. Ojanen et al., 2005). Thus, the present and existing finding suggest that, on average, rejection during adolescence may elicit the need to protect oneself from further rejection, reflected in decreased goals for closeness with peers.

It should be noted that contrary to the present findings, some studies have also found that rejection can *increase* efforts aimed at affiliation (Maner et al., 2007; especially for people with high self-esteem; Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). In theory, rejection violates the need for acceptance from others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) and thus may signal a need to engage in behaviors that may regain acceptance (Leary, 2001). A few possible explanations for the difference between this finding and our research exist. First, the current assessment of social goals requires consideration of what one aims for during interaction with *familiar* peers, rather than around strangers, or online. Secondly, unlike in the present project, motives to reconnect following rejection are sometimes indirectly inferred from other behavioral or psychological measures rather than directly assessed (e.g. Maner et al., 2007), which may provide different information on explicit intentions and motives underlying behaviors. Third, experiences of more longstanding rejection, as presently assessed (vs. acute experiences) may perpetuate more negative interpersonal functioning (e.g. decreased communal goals), as youth may begin to accept, or expect rejection rather than actively trying to improve peer relationships.

We also examined gender as a moderator in the links between rejection and communal goals. Though considerable evidence suggests that boys and girls differ in many peer-relational processes and thus may react to rejection differently (see Rose & Rudolph, 2006), our findings suggest that rejection is related to communal goals among peers similarly for adolescent boys

and girls, concurrently and over time (links of rejection to situation-specific cognitions in youth are also similar across gender; see e.g. Dodge et al., 2003). It is possible peer interaction is so eminent during adolescence that connection to, or closeness with peers is equally important to boys and girls, that is, rejection may be linked to communal goals in this context similarly across genders (see also findings on similar attitudes toward communal peer behaviors across gender; Hibbard & Buhrmester, 1998; for a discussion regarding gender and agentic goals, see below).

Rejection and agentic goals: moderation by narcissism and gender

Rejection was not directly related to agentic goals in the cross-sectional models of Studies 1 or 2, or in the longitudinal model in Study 2 (also as expected, as these associations were partially moderated). Thus, on average, rejection may not drive subsequent strivings for social status (as presently assessed) among peers. However, this association was qualified by narcissism in the cross-sectional model of Study 1 and in the longitudinal model of Study 2, and was also qualified by gender in the latter model of Study 2. Collectively, these findings suggest that accounting for individual differences in this context may advance understanding of rejection regarding social status motivation among peers. We discuss findings for each moderator in turn.

First and as expected, narcissism was positively related to and predicted increases in agentic goals over time. These findings concur with existing research indicating that narcissistic individuals generally aim for social status and power (Findley & Ojanen, 2013; Thomaes et al., 2008) and extend these findings to longitudinal data during adolescence, in a diverse U.S. sample (to our knowledge, the only other longitudinal study linking adolescent narcissism to increased status goals occurred in a Finnish sample; see Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2020). Narcissism also moderated links between rejection and agentic goals concurrently (Study 1) and over time (Study 2) and thus as expected, most of our findings suggest it is meaningful to consider individual difference variables like narcissism to further understand rejection.

Specifically, rejection was negatively related to (Study 1) and predicted decreases in (Study 2) agentic goals for youth *low* in narcissism, but was unrelated to agentic goals for youth high in narcissism. This finding was not entirely as expected, as we didn't observe rejection to be linked to higher agentic goals for those high in narcissism. Agentic goals are linked to aggression in youth (Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014; Salmivalli et al., 2005) and in adults, acute rejection combined with narcissism predicts heightened aggression (Twenge et al., 2001). Collectively, while the specific way in which narcissism moderated rejection-agentic goal associations was unexpected, our findings suggest that though narcissistic youth generally increasingly strive for status over time, this striving may not be related to experiences of rejection. Youth low in narcissism, in turn, may be more affected by rejection and less motivated to pursue status when feeling rejected or disliked, as rejection may thwart one's confidence in achieving high status, though perhaps not for those high in narcissism who perceive themselves superior to others. In summary, our findings from two independent studies suggest that goals for (potentially restoring) social status among peers in the context of rejection vary somewhat as a function of narcissism.

We can speculate on at least two plausible reasons for why we didn't observe elevated agentic goals following rejection for those high in narcissism. First, it may be that the already heightened status motivation (and aggression) among peers during adolescence (Pellegrini & Long, 2002) creates a developmental distinction in this context, such that narcissism may differentially moderate links between rejection and agentic goals in adolescents versus adults. Secondly, methodological differences between the present study and adult research used to develop this hypothesis (Twenge et al., 2001) may explain this, as we assessed rejection specifically among familiar peers, and we directly measured motivational orientations, rather than immediate behavioral reactions. We also assessed rejection as a more chronic, rather than acute experience. As people high in narcissism are likely to prioritize agentic outcomes following an acute rejection reminder

(Lamarche & Seery, 2019), it may be that narcissism drives immediately elicited goals, but less so in chronic interpersonal difficulties. Clearly, longitudinal replication studies are needed to further examine these associations, as the present studies are among the first to assess rejection in relation to social goals and narcissism during adolescence.

We also explored the role of gender in this project, with somewhat inconsistent results: no gender differences were observed in cross-sectional associations between rejection and social goals in either study, but in Study 2, rejection predicted decreases in agentic goals for girls, but increases for boys over time. This finding aligns with existing evidence suggesting girls are more relationally oriented than boys, who endorse more agentic and like goals instead (e.g. Cross & Madson, 1997; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Thus, boys may be especially motivated to increase their social standing when rejected, whereas girls require a level of closeness with others to achieve status (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). When rejected, girls may feel less efficacy for status strivings, at least until lost acceptance is regained, whereas boys may be especially motivated to actively regain status. Yet, gender moderation was only observed in longitudinal data in this project. Thus, further research on gender in the context of rejection and adolescent social goals is needed.

Implications, limitations, and future directions

Our findings contribute to research on interpersonal rejection and social goals, and have theoretical and practical implications. Conceptually, they advance research on rejection as well as adolescent social goals, suggesting that rejection is associated with changes in adolescent social goals among peers. Thus, in addition to altering situation-specific cognitions (Dodge et al., 2003) and in line with accounts on the potentially long-lasting effects of rejection on social cognitions, or beliefs and cognitive representations of the self in relation to others (see Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016), our findings suggest that rejection explains individual variation in globalized social goals among peers, also longitudinally (across six months; without causal inferences). This extends existing research on outcomes of rejection to include social goals reflecting interpersonal motivations among peers, and suggests that rejection may alter individuals' orientation toward others, potentially creating changes in personal and social adjustment (e.g. lower communal goals may result in less social connectedness inducing loneliness, depression, and like outcomes, whereas agentic goals are linked to aggression), which may further contribute to the stability of rejection. Also, these associations may vary by gender and personality variables like narcissism.

Practically, the findings have potential implications for efforts to improve socialization for rejected youth. Communal goals are especially important for adaptive social functioning, as diminished motivation to connect with peers may result in missing out on the social-emotional benefits of peer interactions, especially important in adolescence (Hartup, 1996). Social goals can be altered in school-based interventions, with changes linked to respective changes in behavior (Frey, Nolen, Van Schoiack Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2005). Promoting communal goals, perhaps together with social skills, may foster re-connection with peers for rejected youth. Also, though our results suggest narcissism promotes greater agentic (status) goals, this may not be exacerbated by rejection; rather, those *low* in narcissism likely decreasingly strive for status when rejected. Gender should be considered here as long-term, especially rejected girls may be at risk for reduced closeness goals with peers (further increasing other adjustment difficulties), whereas rejected boys may be especially motivated to regain status and thus be at risk for aggression.

This research had limitations. First, though perceptions of rejection affect psychological and behavioral functioning regardless of, or more proximally than peer-reported rejection, youth may under or over-report rejection relative to a peer group's consensus, and some may be high in rejection sensitivity (increasing the likelihood of over-reporting rejection; Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998). Thus, our findings should be replicated using sociometric assessments of rejection; both methods of assessment are likely valuable and can provide complimentary information on associated outcomes. Second, our longitudinal findings should be interpreted

with caution given the relatively low participant retention and a short assessment interval of six months. Longitudinal attrition is problematic and should be noted, though attrition analyses suggested this was not systematic and diverse adolescent samples are clearly underrepresented in the social goal and rejection literatures. Third, it would be beneficial to understand psychosocial mechanisms linking rejection to globalized (trait-like) social goals, such as changes in situation-specific social information processing (e.g. perceptions of social situations; Crick & Dodge, 1994), or in perceptions of the self in relation to others (see Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). Finally, interpersonal goals following rejection may show cultural variation. This study focused on U.S. adolescents, but in cultures with a collectivist orientation, youth may primarily strive to restore communal goals with less consideration of status following rejection, regardless of personality or gender.

Despite the limitations, the present findings contribute to understanding of interpersonal rejection and research on adolescent social goals among peers. They suggest rejection predicts decreases in communal goals, and its role regarding agentic goals partially depends on narcissism and to a degree, gender. The findings have conceptual and practical implications for understanding rejection in youth and call for further research on outcomes of rejection, specific mechanisms involved, and variables that may explain individual variation in this context.

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