2000

An Exploration Of Social Withdrawal In Adolescence

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AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL
IN ADOLESCENCE

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Specialist in Education

Ryan Lee Channel
University of Northern Iowa
May 2000
ABSTRACT

Social withdrawal is most frequently described in the literature as a form of social maladjustment characterized by a lack of prosocial and cooperative behaviors combined with shyness, anxiety, and oversensitivity leading to withdrawal from social interactions and avoidance of the peer group. Social withdrawal can lead to rejection by the peer group, with the assumption being that peers would not necessarily reject the socially withdrawn student if the child interacted appropriately in social situations. The opposite, however, may also be true. The rejection by peers may be the cause of the social withdrawal. This study focuses on an adolescent who should be able to function well in social settings, yet has withdrawn from his peer group. In this situation, actions of the peer group, more than anxieties of the socially withdrawn student may have created the withdrawal. This student desires interactions with peers, but reports that he is hindered by past peer rejection and reluctance to initiate interactions and face further social failure.

The focus student is observed in his classes and interviewed regarding the relationships he has with peers. Four of the student’s teachers are interviewed regarding their perceptions of the student’s experience and peers are also interviewed to investigate their views of peer relationships at the school. The purpose of this research is to better understand the ramifications of social withdrawal for the student, how this student is perceived and perceives himself in the school environment, and the possible environmental factors that impacted his situation.

From an examination of the interview and observational data two themes emerged: First, the focus student’s perspective and perceived causes for his situation
were markedly discrepant from those expressed by his peers and teachers. Whereas he felt that his social withdrawal was a reaction to negative treatment by his peers, peers and teachers considered his withdrawal to be caused by the focus student. Second, peers and teachers located the cause for the withdrawal in the focus student’s lack of effort to join in activities of his peer group. In particular peers and teachers made mention of the paucity of common interests shared by the focus student and his peers, specifically athletic endeavors.

This study illustrates how a number of individuals, all involved in the same situation of social withdrawal, may have very different perspectives on the causes of the withdrawal. The study points to a need to further explore the multiple viewpoints of individuals in regard to beliefs about causes of and effective solutions to social withdrawal.
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Ryan Lee Channel
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May 2000
This Study by: Ryan Lee Channel

Entitled: An Exploration of Social Withdrawal in Adolescence

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the degree of

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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>RESULTS</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>DISCUSSION</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APPENDIX A</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APPENDIX B</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A child's first school experiences and the many years of schooling thereafter are considered critical in developing peer relations and providing the social learning that comes from interacting with peers (Parker & Asher, 1987; Piaget, 1926; Rubin, 1993; Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, 1990). Children who are helpful, considerate, and tend to recognize the feelings of others as they interact will have more and more successful relations with peers (Rubin, 1993). Not all children, however, are successful in their relationships with peers and may withdraw from such social interactions. This study is an investigation of the dynamics of social withdrawal through exploration of the characteristics of an adolescent male who is socially withdrawn. The study also investigates the interactions he has with teachers and peers and the environmental factors related to social withdrawal in his situation.

Relevant Terminology

Social Maladjustment

The term "social maladjustment," used frequently in the peer relations literature, suggests a lack of prosocial and cooperative behavior in combination with anxious, withdrawn, or hostile behavior contributing to difficulties in peer relations (Beirman, Smoot, & Aumiller, 1993). Social maladjustment in childhood may lead to later problems in adolescence and adulthood, such as delinquency, dropping out of school, and criminal activity (Parker & Asher, 1987).
Social Withdrawal

"Social withdrawal," a related term used in the peer relations literature, has been described as a form of social maladjustment characterized by a lack of prosocial and cooperative behaviors combined with shyness, anxiety, and oversensitivity leading to withdrawal from social interactions and avoidance of the peer group (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992; Rubin, Hymel, & Mills, 1989; Rubin et al., 1990). Social withdrawal can lead to rejection by the peer group (Rubin & Mills, 1988). Peers would not necessarily reject the socially withdrawn student if the child interacted appropriately in social situations. Socially withdrawn students, as defined for this study, desire interactions with peers, but may be hindered by the fear of social failure or the negative response of peers.

Assumptions Underlying Terminology

Some of the terms used in the peer relations literature to describe social withdrawal and related concepts carry negative connotations. A normative standard of peer relations is assumed, and social withdrawal is viewed as a deficit. Although this no doubt represents the views of many scholars, it is a value judgement that may serve to obscure potentially healthy characteristics of some youth who are socially withdrawn. In cases where youth are labeled maladjusted, it may be that society has defined adjustment and success in a manner not applicable to youth who do not involve themselves in social situations. These same children may or may not be successful or well adjusted in areas outside that of the narrowly defined social arena.
Purpose

The focus of this study is on social withdrawal believed to be caused by external reinforcers of social failure (such as teasing/peer rejection) that are problematic for some children and adolescents. Deprivation of social interactions during adolescence, when peer interactions and support are central to how individuals define themselves (Parker & Asher, 1987; Rubin et al., 1990), is detrimental because it may lead to depression, anger, loneliness, resentment, or a host of other negative emotions. We hardly have to look beyond our school doors to see instances ranging from dissatisfaction and apathy to incidents of frustration and deadly school violence. The extreme cases of retaliation draw attention to the need for understanding the impact of rejection in a democratic society that defines success through the cooperative interactions of individuals within groups. Anytime that children and adolescents repeatedly experience the devastation of failed interactions, or rejection by peers, it is cause for concern. Though rejection and withdrawal are not clear predictors of difficulties in adulthood, that does not negate a potentially painful situation created for the child or adolescent. These children are subject to fears of social failure and must choose between withdrawing from the group or risking further peer rejection.

Because of the personal level at which I entered this study, as observer, interviewer, and researcher, my knowledge of predetermined characteristics and roles for the withdrawn student could easily have influenced the investigation. Though cognizant of these potential biases, every attempt was made not to assume that all definitions and findings of the prior research should be applicable to all situations or persons. I assumed
social withdrawal could be one of many things; a disorder created by school/society; a problem for people who tend to internalize anxieties; or a choice made without pressure from anyone.

The purpose of using a case study methodology in the present study was to gain a better understanding of what happens when social withdrawal occurs and why it does so through intensive investigation of one student’s situation. To this end, I asked for the perspectives of a focus student and his teachers, sought the perceptions of his peers on the topic of peer relationships, and made personal observations. Specific observations were directed toward an adolescent selected by two staff members familiar with students at the chosen school. The student interviews, including one with the focus student, addressed the issue of peer relationships and social dynamics at the school.

Research on Social Withdrawal

The literature reviewed for this study presents a clinical, well-defined description of social withdrawal. The most salient characteristics of social withdrawal have been identified and researchers have attempted to correlate social withdrawal with later problems. The purpose of the review is to show the depth of investigation previously undertaken and the gaps in understanding that are still present despite extensive research.

Research on social withdrawal has identified many possible characteristics of the withdrawn and many reasons for the withdrawal. Although the hypothesized reasons for withdrawal are numerous and include fear of social failure, peer rejection, and disinterest in the peer group, peer group influence was the factor evaluated in this study with a focus on the desire for social interaction. If there is a desire to interact, the withdrawal would
be considerably more detrimental than if the individual was content to have few or no interactions with others. This study concerns a case of withdrawal that seemed to be related to peer rejection (defined by descriptors such as “harassment,” “teasing,” and “peer neglect”) in combination with characteristics of the withdrawn student (differing interests, lack of athletic ability, etc.) that had further isolated him in the school setting.

Much of the research literature on social withdrawal presents a picture of individuals with adjustment difficulties. The literature posits that the individual has some responsibility for his or her withdrawn behavior. While there is some validity to this viewpoint, the term “social” indicates the interactive nature of behavior. Solely focusing on the individual’s “internal” states may be inadequate. The present study examines the impact of group processes on the behavior and interactions of an individual creating a context in which environmental factors and as well as the behaviors of an individual are explored.

In light of the tragic events in schools across the country, where one could make the argument that withdrawn or isolated students have taken drastic measures to make themselves known, an exploration of how social dynamics influence the occurrence of withdrawal seems needed and timely. In line with this recommendation, observations of an identified student in combination with interviews of the student, peers, and teachers were undertaken in hopes of gathering multiple perspectives on the possible causes of and perceived solutions for social isolation and subsequent withdrawal. It is important to note that isolation imposed by the peer group does not always precede withdrawal; it may be that withdrawal is sometimes the cause of isolation by the peer group. In this study, a
focus student was selected who appeared to be withdrawn as a reaction to prior peer rejection.

Although this study is exploratory in nature a definition of social withdrawal was provided to experienced teachers in the chosen school for the purpose of identifying the focus student. This approach was adopted because it was considered most efficient in identifying potential students for the study. Observer discretion was used to choose one student for the final study. A detailed explanation of the identifying characteristics desired in the focus student is provided in the methodology section.

Rationale for the Study

The literature review for this study revealed gaps in the research on social withdrawal. I could locate no comprehensive theories of social withdrawal in the review of literature on peer relationships and social behavior. Further, much of the research sought to define withdrawal without direct input from those who were seen as withdrawn. Coie, Dodge, and Kupersmidt (1990) identified over 30 studies of younger children, but only six studies of seventh grade or higher examining the characteristic behavior of the socially withdrawn and rejected group. The literature on peer relationships and risk of social difficulties has also neglected the child’s understanding of his or her problems (Hymel, Woody, & Bowker, 1993; Parker & Asher, 1987).

Birch and Ladd (1998), in a review of teacher-child relationships, found the least studied dynamic that of children’s interpersonal behaviors and the effects these have on relationships formed with teachers. Further, teachers’ perceptions of student behavior are
associated with the attitudes teachers have toward certain children (Brophy & Evertson, 1981). Teachers are more responsive to students demonstrating cooperative, cautious, and responsible behaviors whereas problem behaviors including internalizing (social withdrawal) are negatively associated with the quality of early teacher-child relationships (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Wentzel, 1991).

Considering the needs for further research, I justified my study using the following reason. First, the nature of previous studies of social withdrawal have been quantitative. The current research investigated closely the situation of one student who is socially withdrawn and the dynamics of relationships and interactions involving him using a qualitative methodology. This case study method had the potential to portray a richer picture of the student and his relationships than previously available. Second, few studies have been conducted that examine the ramifications of social withdrawal in adolescents and the possible implications of rejection and withdrawal when acceptance is desired by most individuals in this age group. Third, I wanted to explore the models of research on social withdrawal in greater detail and attempt to apply one to this case. The causal model of social withdrawal suggests that poor peer relations are the point of origin for withdrawal and that exclusion from peers deprives the individual of needed interpersonal support. The causal model suggests that anxiety and avoidance of social situations are outcomes of peer rejection. The incidental model of social withdrawal implies that the internal thoughts and visibly anxious or unusual behaviors of the child cause peers to avoid the child. Finally, this case of social withdrawal is briefly considered in light of factors for change as I explore how the causes attributed to
withdrawal will affect the methods of change that would be most likely to benefit the withdrawn student.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the characteristics of a student with social withdrawal as described by the focus student, teachers, and observer?

2. How do environmental factors and school culture contribute to the phenomenon of social withdrawal?

3. How does the student respond to the school environment?

4. What are the causes attributed to social withdrawal as described by participants in this study; is it self-driven, affected by the behaviors of teachers or peers, or a mixture of both factors?
The purpose of this review is to describe information on peer relations with an emphasis on the behaviors associated with social withdrawal. Social withdrawal has yet to be well-defined and is connected inconsistently in the literature to concurrent childhood problems and future maladjustment. Part of this inconsistency is due to debates over the significance of social withdrawal. Researchers are not in agreement as to the nature or detrimental effects of social withdrawal. In a review of studies, Rubin (1993) found some researchers viewed social withdrawal as a transient phenomenon unrelated to adolescent or adult maladjustment. Earlier research by Kohlberg, LaCrosse, and Ricks (1972) found that withdrawal from the peer group was not a significant source of concern. A review of longitudinal studies of children’s peer relationships (Parker & Asher, 1987) uncovered little evidence linking withdrawal to later negative outcomes.

Rubin et al. (1990) found little data to support claims for or against the predictive significance of social withdrawal. Reviewing the literature, they uncovered neither correlates nor consequences that were well established with respect to childhood social withdrawal. Several researchers have alluded to the emotional and behavioral “overcontrol” or extreme reservations in social settings connected to social withdrawal and subsequent isolation from peers as warranting further observation and intervention (Rubin, 1993; Rubin et al., 1990; Strain & Kerr, 1981). Rubin and Asendorpf (1993) note that “In source after source, social withdrawal is contrasted with aggression as one of the two most consistently identified major dimensions of disturbed behavior in
childhood” (p. 8). Other researchers have also found clinicians and parents place much importance on withdrawn behaviors as indicators of peer relation difficulties (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Evans & Wilson, 1982). Rabin (1993) found the withdrawn child is subject to negative social and emotional life experiences and because of this finding, disagreed with arguments equating social withdrawal with nonrisk status.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Social Withdrawal**

**Developmental Theory**

Inconclusive evidence regarding the risks associated with social withdrawal has meant that much of the present discussion is theory-based and awaits conclusive evidence from sound research. The discussion of social withdrawal by developmental psychologists is supported by their belief in peer relations as an influential factor in child development, with adequate and positive relations with peers forming the social context for children to acquire social skills. Rejection, which social withdrawal may precede or follow, represents the lack of opportunity for socially competent interactions (Coie & Cillessen, 1993). Johnson (1980) stated that peer relations are “an absolute necessity for healthy cognitive and social development and socialization” (p. 125). This statement reflects the position of developmental theorists and basis for a resurgence in recent years in an interest in peer relations and the behaviors which may hinder those relations. Peer relations have taken a central role in the assessment and classification of problems of childhood development and social adjustment (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978; Quay, 1979; Ross, 1980). This relatively recent research can be traced back to the work of Piaget (1926) and Sullivan (1953), who emphasized peer relations in development.
Piaget's (1926) work on child development presented knowledge construction as developing from subject-object interactions and in the case of human-human interactions, social cognitions were the outcome. These social cognitions represented the thoughts, beliefs, and ideas of the child about the social world. Interactions with peers allowed children to develop communication skills and make moral decisions through peer relationships. The togetherness and mutuality of peer interaction broadens the child’s cognitive perspective and brings about the realization that the world is a social, not individual place. Social interactions will involve conflict, forcing the child to an awareness of other children’s perspectives and forming the concept of self versus others’ thinking. With conflict will come negotiation if children are more aware of other’s viewpoints, feelings, and needs and realize others’ perspectives are different than their own in significant ways. Beneficial and responsive relationships then develop through cooperation and sensitivity to peers (Piaget, 1926).

Sullivan’s (1953) interpersonal theory of psychiatry defines personality as formed by social relationships. A child’s peers are change and growth agents, serving as catalysts for further social development. Peers build the framework for cooperative interactions and engagement in competition. In the elementary years and before, roles are formed regarding those with authority and those who will follow. Sullivan’s ideas closely align with Piaget’s as friendships demonstrate equality, mutuality, and reciprocity for children. Social learning theorists hold that peers serve as control agents, pointing out or ignoring abnormal behavior such as aggression, and reinforcing acceptable, culturally appropriate behaviors, often those related to gender or having prosocial characteristics.
Concern regarding social withdrawal and its impact on peer relations as understood by Piaget, Sullivan, and other social learning theorists has caused an increase in reference to the works of these authors.

Continuation of early developmental and social learning theory centers on the interplay between peer relations and maladaptive behavior. Considering peer interactions and peer relations critical for normal social cognitive and social-behavioral competence, Rubin (1993) found this reasoning “suggests that children who preclude themselves from interacting with others may place themselves at risk of not developing, at a normal rate, those social and social-cognitive skills that are derived from peer interaction, and the opportunities it affords to develop skill in negotiation, persuasion, and conflict resolution” (p. 299). The withdrawn, noninteractive child has fewer opportunities for social relations and instead of developing socially, the child recognizes his or her social difficulties, withdrawing further and increasing the negative experience.

**Socioecological**

Another view of peer relations involves the environment of the child in combination with the child’s internal characteristics. Within the social environment are characteristics which may act as stressors or supports for children, such as size, complexity, density, and provisions of their social world, and thus facilitating or limiting adequate functioning (Franzoi, Davis, & Vasquez-Suson, 1994). Setting conditions in conjunction with the child’s behavior will influence parental sensitivity, the feelings directed toward the child, knowledge of child rearing, and opinions on discipline (Rubin et al., 1990). Financial or living conditions are examples of negative setting conditions
that impact family relations; subsequently stress may be displayed in interactions of
mother, father, and children (Rubin et al., 1990).

Three factors are at work in the above discussion of environment and child: the
internal characteristics or temperament of the child, socialization, and setting conditions.
The child may have an external temperament displaying overactive behaviors and being
difficult to soothe or an internal temperament having a low arousal threshold, therefore
easily agitated and difficult to soothe. In both cases the temperament of the child is
detrimental to interactions. From these temperaments, Rubin et al. (1990) hypothesized
two pathways to social withdrawal. The child in pathway one is more hostile and
aggressive because of temperament and the environment, where living conditions are
poor and the relationship with parents is more focused on issues of discipline rather than
nurturing. These early influences lead to aggressive and inappropriate peer interactions,
subsequent exclusion from the peer group, and further antisocial and solitary activities.
Thus, in pathway one, social withdrawal and isolation from the peer group are a forced
consequence of the aggressive child and his or her negative environment. Pathway two
involves children who, because of their internal temperament and low arousal threshold,
have withdrawn early in life. Social withdrawal has been brought about by the
child’s wariness, anxiety, and insecurity in new environments. Initial social withdrawal
by the child, then, will lead to peer perceptions of abnormal behavior and subsequent
rejection by the peer group. Again, children in pathway one, where aggression creates
rejection leading to social withdrawal and pathway two, in which social withdrawal is
initially present, all have limited chances for social and social-cognitive skill development (Rubin et al., 1990).

**Cognitive-Social Abilities**

Children must have the ability to define the situation they find themselves in, not only by their perspective, but with the realization of the needs of their peers and setting (Bierman et al., 1993; Merten, 1996). These social perceptions, necessary for adequate peer relations, are guided by schemas of social information (Younger, Gentile, & Burgess, 1993). Schemas are cognitive structures which allow categorization of social experiences by: (a) directing attention to relevant social information; (b) influencing the categorization and encoding of experiences to memory in a particular configuration; (c) facilitating recall of schema-related information; and (d) assisting the prediction of future behavior based on categorized experiences (Younger et al., 1993). For all children, initiating and maintaining peer relations will involve monitoring and responding to interpersonal cues and adjusting behavior accordingly. Socially awkward, incompetent, or strange behavior may indicate an inability to read cues, a general insensitivity to peer expectations and feedback which can be used to modify social behavior (Bierman et al., 1993). Cognitive-social theory posits that socially withdrawn children are not using social comparison processes, which worsens their peer relations, and thereby they have less chance for social experiences that create well-developed schemas to guide interpersonal interactions. Schemas also contribute to peer status as the socially withdrawn children will be categorized by their behaviors that constitute the schema for social withdrawal.
Social Perspective

Difficulties in peer relations are the result of inappropriate interpretations and responses to social situations. These deficits are thought to arise from fewer opportunities to observe and experience normal social behavior which would lead to the development of adequate social cognitions (Coie et al., 1990; Merten, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1987). Fewer opportunities to interact are thought to be due, in turn, to the negative setting created by inappropriate responses, initially.

Withdrawn, low-accepted children do not have the ability to understand thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others, often misinterpreting the intentions of peers, and typically viewing them as negative (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Davis (1980) described “perspective taking” as an individual’s tendency to entertain the psychological point of view of another person, using empathetic reasoning to consider the consequences of their own social behavior for peers. In contrast to the maladaptive social behavior common to poor peer relations, adaptive social behavior is marked by mature, sociocentered thinking and evaluation of actions against peer group standards. Well-adjusted children are able to think socially and to appraise themselves relative to their peers (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993).

Models of Risk Research

Theorists have provided two models of risk research with peer interactions serving different roles for each. The basis of the causal model is that peer interactions are multidimensional and essential in the socialization of the social, cognitive, and moral development of children. Supporters of this model believe that to be excluded from
typical peer interactions is to be systematically removed from typical socialization, and that deprivation of interpersonal support will ensue. Abnormal thought and behavior, such as the anxiety and removal from social situations common to social withdrawal, are outcomes and these children are vulnerable to stress and mental breakdown. In this model, it is the lack of peer relations which drives subsequent disorders (Parker & Asher, 1987).

The incidental model suggests peer problems are effected by internal problems of the child. The causes of poor peer relations are the internal behavioral problems of the child, and peer avoidance and low acceptance are consequences. The disorders will peak in adulthood, but negative impact will be seen on peer interactions in childhood (Parker & Asher, 1987). The incidental model supposes behaviors such as social withdrawal determine the quality of peer interactions. Peer interactions are not seen as contributors or cause of maladjustment; hence peer relations are considered to be incidental to the socially withdrawn behavior and possible later disorders.

Whether social withdrawal causes poor peer relations or negative peer interactions create social withdrawal, the theories guiding research on social withdrawal are based on children and their interactions in the social environment. Through social interactions, the child develops an understanding of others’ actions and appropriate responses in social situations. The framework for social functioning is established in the environment, not in isolation. How the environment is set-up to meet the needs of the child and compatibility between the child’s internal characteristics and those of the environment will play a
critical role in social adjustment, and may lead to social maladjustment in the form of social withdrawal.

Studies of Social Withdrawal

Current research is based on the theoretical viewpoint that social interactions are necessary for normal growth and development. Using this idea, both social isolation (due to aggression or withdrawal) and social withdrawal are viewed as detrimental to development and exploration of their actual impact has thus been studied with this developmental theory as a foundation for much research. The following review has been organized with an attempt to highlight the main points that converge in studies of social withdrawal. Review of the literature revealed numerous methods of studying peer relations and the implications of maladaptive behavior in such relations. Peer status, student and teacher perspectives, concurrent and future problems related to social withdrawal, the reason for rejection (both by aggression and social withdrawal), and other variables were found to take on various levels of significance in the literature. Also, some researchers alluded to the necessity of environmental considerations as discussed in the theoretical section.

Social Withdrawal Characteristics and Consequences

Characteristics. Social withdrawal was earlier defined as anxious, insecure behavior causing the child to withdraw from interactions with others. Studies support that definition and additional characteristics of social withdrawal in children and adolescents. As discussed above, social withdrawal is initially determined by one or more of the following, peer nominations, peer and teacher assessment, or observations.
Rubin (1993) analyzed data from the 10-year Waterloo Longitudinal Project (WLP), the most extensive study of social withdrawal reviewed in the literature, and found social withdrawal to be a stable behavior, not transient as previously thought by some researchers (e.g., Ensminger, Kellam, & Rubin, 1983). Concurrent behaviors found to be associated with social withdrawal were insecurity, negative self-perceptions, dependency on adult intervention during peer conflicts, and socially deferent actions (Rubin, 1993). Following the students, beginning with two cohorts of kindergarten children, Rubin also found social withdrawal to be related to other internalizing difficulties such as anxiety and depression (1993). Using data from pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, Rubin et al. (1990) found socially withdrawn children to be immature and socially deferent, as well. The young children were also socially anxious and their anxious, hesitant actions led frequently to social failure. In older age groups, fifth and sixth grades, Rubin (1993) reported that early adolescents were disliked by their peers and expressed more loneliness and depression than average agemates.

**Consequences.** Social withdrawal can be the cause of negative self-esteem, loneliness, and depression, as well as the indicator of poor perspective taking skills (Rubin et al., 1990). Socially withdrawn children, by definition, stay remote from peers leading to impaired self-confidence, sadness, loneliness, and depression (Engfer, 1993). Research has found the socially withdrawn child to be more depressed (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992; Rubin et al., 1989). This depression is brought on by a lack of positive reinforcement or feedback in social relations. In connection, socially withdrawn children have less success in achieving their social goals and the social failure creates or worsens
negative self-perceptions of social competence and feelings of loneliness. These negative self-perceptions increase the likelihood of depression in adolescents.

Perceptions of Social Withdrawal

**Self-perceptions.** Socially withdrawn children, both submissive and rejected by peers, reported greater loneliness than their aggressive-rejected peers (Hymel et al., 1993). These socially withdrawn and rejected children felt greater social dissatisfaction when compared to average status peers. The socially withdrawn children saw themselves as less well accepted by peers, and less competent academically and behaviorally. The children mentioned negative self-esteem and dissatisfaction with peer relations, indicative of a lack of social support, intimacy, and group belonging (Hymel et al., 1993).

Social withdrawal was associated with negative self-perceptions in the study by Hymel et al. (1993), both concurrently and predictively, as children saw themselves as less competent and felt no change would occur in their future. Most important was that withdrawn and nonaggressive unpopular children painted a particularly negative, but accurate self-portrait, both in social and nonsocial domains. The accuracy of self-reports describing perceived negative and undesirable attributes was established using teacher and peer ratings, as well as observation. These accurate and negative self-perceptions, as discussed earlier, lead to internalizing disorders, most commonly depression (Boivin, Thomassin, Alain, 1989; Hymel, Rubin, Rowden, & LeMare, 1990; Rubin, Hymel, LeMare, & Rowden, 1989; Williams & Asher, 1987).

Aggression is the other behavior most associated with maladjustment and rejection by peers and it is helpful to discuss the differences between social withdrawal
and aggression, as they vary considerably even though the outcome of peer rejection is the same. Self-perceptions are significant in demonstrating the different concerns between aggression and social withdrawal. Aggressive-rejected children reported feeling less competency in regard only to their behavioral conduct (Hymel et al., 1993) whereas socially withdrawn children expressed feeling less competent in their social skills, as well as behavioral conduct. In the same study, aggression did not correlate with negative self-perceptions in either grades two or five (Hymel et al., 1993). However, Hymel et al. (1990) found significant concurrent relations in second and fifth-grade children between negative social self-perceptions and indicators of social withdrawal. This suggests that social withdrawal is a feeling-oriented problem, rather than being located in actions to be perceived. Withdrawn children report accurate and negative conceptions of themselves and aggressive children seem to fail to acknowledge their observed social difficulties on self-report measures (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1994). Though the risk associated with social withdrawal is questionable because socially withdrawn children were found to be cooperative and did not cause class disturbances, the data supporting negative self-perceptions in socially withdrawn children and subsequent internalizing disorders is the basis for conclusions of risk (Boivin et al., 1989; Hymel et al., 1994; Hymel et al., 1990; Hymel et al., 1993; Rubin et al., 1989; Williams & Asher, 1987).

Peer perceptions and the maintenance of social withdrawal. Researchers believe that peer rejection, whether caused by socially withdrawn behaviors or initiating socially withdrawn behaviors, may be a factor in the maintenance of rejected status. Children are thought to attribute stable characteristics to the negative behavior of their rejected peers.
This means the children, having formed negative expectations of their rejected peer, will act negatively toward the peer; the target child then returns the negative behavior in defense, fulfilling the expectations of the perceiver (Coie & Cillessen, 1993). This self-fulfilling prophecy applies to rejected children also, as the rejected child believes they will fail in social interactions, acts inappropriately guided by their beliefs, and does ultimately fail, feeling less socially competent as a consequence (Coie & Cillessen, 1993).

In ethnographic studies of middle school, the situations of isolated, rejected students with reputations as outside the peer norms were nearly impossible to change unless a change of setting, such as moving schools, was to occur (Evans & Eder, 1993; Kinney, 1993). Other researchers (Hymel et al., 1990; Coie & Cillessen, 1993) also found that reputation maintains status as peer perceptions guide responses toward the rejected child and the child keeps the reputation that fits peer perceptions regardless of changes made by the rejected child. Early research has made mention of negative treatment of the maladjusted child by the peer group serving to continue the behavior of the child. Peers effectively reinforce the social withdrawal through their treatment of the rejected child (Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973).

Friendships. Discussion of withdrawal and rejection often focuses on group dynamics, although peer relations also involve close friendships. Friendship can be distinguished from group acceptance in terms of the distinct benefits of each. Friendship creates a close and accepting context where children are more able to explore behaviors and express opinions not necessarily accepted by the peer group. Because friendships are
voluntary, those involved must understand commitment, responsibility to the relationship, and exhibit loyalty to the friend in order to have a successful friendship. Friendship, then, provides intimacy, a source of social support for both partners, and creates allies in group conflicts. Group or peer acceptance on the other hand provides opportunities for leadership and developing assertiveness. The acceptance of peers fulfills needs of community and group belonging (Furman & Robbins, 1985). As with group relations, the socially withdrawn child may have problems establishing and maintaining relations at the individual level, as well.

Loneliness surfaces in the literature on friendship, also, as Sullivan (1953) thought preadolescent friendships were significant in impeding loneliness and thoughts of isolation. More recently, Parker and Asher (1993) found friendship quality and acceptance by the peer group contributed separately but equally to the prediction of loneliness. The combination of low quality friendships and low peer acceptance common to social withdrawal will be more detrimental to self-perceptions and increase feelings of loneliness. Children who have a close relationship with a peer, a best friend, will be less lonely than children without a best friend, regardless of the level of peer acceptance (Parker & Asher, 1993).

In close friendship, a certain degree of conflict and disagreement is common (Berndt & Perry, 1986). What will decide the strength of a friendship is the ability of both partners to resolve their conflicts quickly and amicably, not how successfully conflict is avoided entirely (Vespo & Caplan, 1988). Parker and Asher (1993) presented four general factors from a review of friendship studies which determine the quality of
the relationship: (a) the extent to which the relationship encourages opportunities for play, companionship, and recreation; (b) the degree of intimate disclosure and exchange between partners; (c) the extent to which friends share, help, and guide one another; and (d) the perception of the children seeing the relationship as real and beneficial to their needs for self-worth.

Using the four determinants of friendship quality, Parker and Asher (1993) studied the dynamics of friendships with respect to six qualitative aspects: (a) validation and caring; (b) conflict and betrayal; (c) companionship and recreation; (d) help and guidance; (e) intimate exchange; and (f) conflict resolution. Children were assessed using sociometric measures, a loneliness measure, a questionnaire on important aspects of friendships, and a measure of friendship satisfaction. After determining which students were in the low-accepted category, quality of friendship was determined. The low-accepted category had the largest variability within-group on five of the six qualities listed. This indicates that some behavioral categories within the low-accepted group, such as aggressive students, may still have high quality friendships. The loneliness associated with social withdrawal could be indicative of aspects regarding friendship quality (Parker & Asher, 1993). The lack of social interactions brought about by social withdrawal may limit the withdrawn child’s effectiveness at conflict resolution. The findings suggest not all low-accepted children are without friends if they have relationship skills, which socially withdrawn children do not.
Schema and Peer Perceptions

Social withdrawal does not seem to represent a well-defined, coherent concept or social schema underlying children's perceptions of the social behavior of their peers (Younger & Boyko, 1987; Younger & Piccinin, 1989). An early onset of the aggressive schema and later development of the schema for processing socially withdrawn behaviors enables young children to recall aggression in their peers much better than social withdrawal (Younger et al., 1993). With age, the recall of social withdrawal was found to increase substantially, so much as to be better recognized and recalled than aggressive behaviors (Younger et al., 1993). To explain the later onset of recognition of social withdrawal, researchers have suggested the presence of an undifferentiated, social-evaluative perspective in young children (Coie & Pennington, 1976; Yarrow & Campbell, 1963; Younger, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 1985), whereas older children use a second, active-passive dimension to process peer behaviors (Younger et al., 1985). The social-evaluative dimension allows young children to separate behaviors into categories of good and bad or to make competent and incompetent distinctions. The active-passive dimension allows further qualitative distinctions as forms of "bad" behavior are separated, such as aggression and social withdrawal (Younger, Schwartzman, & Ledingham, 1986). Because young children work on a very positive/negative dichotomy, their focus is on concrete and observable behaviors (Younger et al., 1993). As aggression is a behavior done to others, it fits well into the social-evaluative dimension. Younger et al. (1993) found abundant evidence that children view aggression negatively across ages and it is the most reliable correlate of
peer rejection to be identified (Parker & Asher, 1987). Social withdrawal is more neutral in the view of young children and less noticeable as a consequence (Younger et al., 1993). Older children, using the active-passive dimension are cued into the underlying dispositions, traits, and motives of their peers, making social withdrawal less ambiguous (Younger et al., 1993).

In studies of the schemas used to process behavioral information, the Pupil Evaluation Inventory (PEI) has been used to determine evaluator cognitions. Examining the perceptions of child assessors, Younger et al. (1993) found children in lower grades used the single dimension of good-bad, assessing children by prosocial or maladjusted characteristics. The characteristics of social withdrawal defined by the PEI, such as playing alone, are not seen as bad in first grade, nor are these behaviors inappropriate many times. However, at higher grade levels, the active-passive dimension was used, distinguishing aggression from social withdrawal as forms of maladjusted behavior and social withdrawal items formed a cohesive category, distinct from items loading for aggressive behavior (Younger et al., 1993).

Age and Social Withdrawal

Differentiation with age. Studies of elementary age children and early adolescents, seventh grade, showed maladjustment was described by aggressive acts (Younger et al., 1993; Younger et al., 1986). First-grade and fourth-grade children were found to nominate peers concurrently for aggression and social withdrawal demonstrating no distinction between the two behaviors in their peers (Ledingham, 1981; Younger et al., 1993). Not only was socially withdrawn behavior confused by young children, Younger
et al. (1993) found it was not even present in descriptions of maladjustment until seventh grade, aggression being the sole focus. An age-related shift was noticeable in the seventh-grade group as peers were rated either aggressive or socially withdrawn, not high on both behavioral styles (Ledingham, 1981; Younger et al., 1993; Younger et al., 1986). The studies point to a decrease in concurrent nominations, for example, a child clearly suffering from social withdrawal as assessed by adult observation, may be placed in the aggressive group or not noticed at all by children in grades one and four. It appears from these studies that younger children have not clearly defined for themselves what socially withdrawn behavior may mean (Younger et al., 1986). Younger et al. (1986) reasoned that social withdrawal is not noticed until later in childhood or even adolescence because peer groups and social activities are not as important for young children. Also, while aggression is reinforced by society as inappropriate early in life and physically noticeable, therefore hard to ignore, social withdrawal is not directed at peers or clearly defined by adults for children's benefit. The difficulty of assessing social withdrawal in young children may create problems establishing stability and predictive validity of later maladjustment (Younger et al., 1986).

**Adolescence.** Younger et al. (1993) concluded that children may not be perceived by their peers as socially withdrawn nor will they be rejected because of the withdrawn behavior. In adolescence, the passivity and chosen isolation of withdrawn children becomes more salient, is considered deviant from peer norms, and is disliked by peers (Younger et al., 1986). Because of this change in perception and subsequent reactions by the peer group, social withdrawal may be more important as an indicator of problems and
as a predictor of future maladjustment (Younger et al., 1993). Rubin and Mills (1988) agreed that social withdrawal is a more clearly defined and disliked behavior with increasing age and more likely to result in peer rejection.

The changing view of peers is partly explained by Hatzichristou and Hopf's (1996) findings that older children and adolescents differentiate more distinctly and qualitatively between peers. In other words, as young children place their peers' behavior into categories of good and bad, older children consider a greater variety of behaviors and reasons for each in the context of the environment. Anxiety in the peer group during a speech class will not be viewed the same as anxiety and withdrawal when opportunities arise for conversations during free-time or study halls. To further illustrate the age-related shift, studies have investigated adult perspectives on the two behaviors of aggression and social withdrawal, and find that both behaviors are distinct categories with well-defined limits in determining maladjustment (Achenbach, 1980a; Achenbach, 1980b; Ross, 1980). Younger et al. (1986) studied the ratings of first-, fourth-, and seventh-grade teachers to determine whether behavior change of children with age actually created the category of social withdrawal or if the cognitions of the rater developed with age becoming more conceptually distinct. No grade related shifts in the organization of behavioral categories was found among the teacher ratings indicating that social withdrawal was perceived by the adult in all three grades and was not an age-related phenomenon. This suggests the changing dynamics among rejected children and rejected adolescents is due to cognitions of the rater, not behavior changes with age. In other words, social withdrawal does not suddenly appear in adolescence and not before.
Children in the rejected group are described as aggressive and disruptive by their peers (Parker & Asher, 1987), while adolescents in the rejected group are perceived as being shy and sensitive to criticism and possible humiliation in the group setting (Hatzichristou & Hopf, 1996). Adolescents see the behaviors descriptive of social withdrawal as negative and a cause for rejection. Children see only aggression as a behavior to reject, although signs of social withdrawal may be displayed by their peers.

**Appropriateness as developmental stage.** Solitude is acceptable and commonplace for young children and is not viewed negatively by peers. Withdrawal from peers may be normal for young age groups and not representative of any maladjustment. Rubin (1982) found quiet, constructive, exploratory, and solitary play was acceptable in the preschool years. Solitary activities may be suggestive of maladjustment in the elementary years when children are provided opportunities for play at certain times such as recess and still a child persists on withdrawing from social contacts. Rubin and Mills (1988) indicated this type of behavior is reflective of social anxiety and negative self-perceptions of social competence.

Socially withdrawn behaviors are not directed at peers or adults. In the case of young children, the withdrawn child may exhibit behaviors which concern adults, but these behaviors may not fit the peer group's social-evaluative distinction (Younger et al., 1993). As mentioned above, with increasing age, increased interactions are the norm, making socially withdrawn behaviors atypical and dysfunctional in the view of peers (Younger et al., 1993).
The available research on adolescent views of social withdrawal have important distinctions from preadolescent studies. First, overt aggression decreases in occurrence from kindergarten to the adolescence, thereby lessening the influence of aggression as a cause of rejection and low-acceptance (Coie et al., 1990). Withdrawal, instead of aggression, leads to rejection by peers (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). The lack of aggression as a defining characteristic of rejected children causes a merging of the rejected and neglected peer groups. In younger age groups, rejection was defined in large part by aggressive actions, however, without aggression as a common characteristic, the rejected children more resemble neglected, both having low levels of social interaction (Franzoi et al., 1994). An investigation of high school students by Franzoi et al. (1994) found little differentiation between neglected and rejected students in high school. The reason for this is that neglect (ignored by peers) and rejection (due to aggression) were easily separated in elementary school, but as aggression declines with age, there must be another defining characteristic of the rejected group, such as social incompetence and group avoidance. The neglected status child is thought be ignored in childhood as are socially withdrawn children. Neglected, ignored children and socially withdrawn children, therefore, have similar behavioral characteristics, neither causing peer rejection in childhood. The relationship between observed and peer-assessed social withdrawal, meaning the child chooses to withdraw for various reasons, and peer rejection increase in magnitude with increases in age (Rubin & Mills, 1988).
Methodological Considerations in the Study of Social Withdrawal

Assessment

The following methods are used to assess peer relations and identify socially withdrawn children for further study: (a) peer nominations; (b) peer assessment of social behavior; (c) teacher assessment of social behavior; and (d) behavioral observations of the rate and quality of peer interactions (Rubin et al., 1990). Peer nominations are best described as assessing which children are liked and disliked, thereby establishing status categories in the classroom. Peer and teacher assessment of social behavior differs in that perceptions of behavioral style related to status, not status directly, is measured. Another measure of peer relations and behavioral style is self-report. Though used infrequently because of possible bias and inaccuracy in reporting, statements by the participant are considered by many researchers to be valuable when connected with observations and other evaluations (Hymel et al., 1993).

Peer nominations are used extensively because peers have an intimate knowledge of behaviors and characteristics important to the peer group. The peer as judge of other children can incorporate that knowledge as well as information across settings, experiences that many adults may not see. The use of many peers increases the number of raters and also provides perspective variance (Rubin et al., 1990). Peer evaluations have shown high predictive validity for later psychopathology, adolescent maladjustment, and other problems in adolescence, and identifying “at-risk” students better than ratings by adults (Younger et al., 1993; Younger et al., 1986).
Peer nominations. Peer nominations are commonly referred to as a sociometric measure of status. By this measure, children choose two or three classmates, depending on class size, they “Like Most” and two or three they “Like Least.” On the basis of these peer nominations children are categorized into one of four or five status groups, popular, rejected, controversial, neglected, and average is sometimes included as a fifth category (Rubin et al., 1990). Neglected and rejected categories are used in studies of maladjustment and peer relations. Peer nominations establish positive or negative reputation, but do not indicate the reasons for that reputation. Behavioral correlates may be assigned to these status categories, an area of contention for some researchers studying social withdrawal (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993).

Sociometry measures peer reputation, indicating the status of a child among peers. Social withdrawal is defined by behaviors and is not a status description. Therefore sociometric status descriptors and social withdrawal should be clearly delineated, yet sociometric neglect has become synonymous with the behavior of social withdrawal (Rubin et al., 1990). Though behavioral style may suggest the status level among peers, there are problems with lumping studies together which seem to support a correlation between status and behavior (Parker & Asher, 1987). Studies in the 1980s connected the terms “neglect” and “social withdrawal,” and then suggested that neglected status did not vary significantly from average status in regard to maladaptive behavior. With this said, long-term risk of social withdrawal seemed unwarranted (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Numerous researchers have used withdrawal in conjunction with their discussion of neglect, effectively making them one and the same (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli,
Rubin found no one-to-one correspondence between sociometric categories and behavioral indicators of social withdrawal (Rubin et al., 1990). The distinction that needs to be made is: peer nominations measure a quantity or degree of acceptance by peers, whereas social withdrawal represents a specific individual action. Social withdrawal is thought to be relevant to status and affecting peer nominations, but behavior and status are not synonymous. As Parker and Asher (1987) described the differentiation, peer acceptance asks the question “Is the child liked?” (p. 359) and assessing behavior answers the question “What is the child like?” (p. 359).

Peer assessment. The Pupil Evaluation Inventory (PEI; Pekarik, Prinz, Liebert, Weintraub, & Neale, 1976) and the Revised Class Play (RCP; Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985) measure require children to nominate their peers for specific behavioral roles or based on character descriptions. The PEI factors measure Likability, Aggression, and Withdrawal, while the RCP measures Sociability/Leadership, Aggressive/Disruptive, and Sensitive/Isolated factors. Younger and Daniels (1992) found the RCP to be “the most recently developed peer assessment measure of social withdrawal and has been widely used to identify children perceived by their peers to be aggressive or withdrawn” (p. 955). Peer assessment can be used in conjunction with sociometric nominations to correlate perceived behavioral styles and status within the peer group.

A criticism of peer assessment of behavior comes from the work of cognitive-social psychologists who use recall and recognition memory tasks to assess social schemas. After giving a description of an individual, the child is asked to describe the
behavior of the individual from memory. A well-developed social schema facilitates recognition and recall of salient descriptions. Peer assessment of behavior asks the child rater to report on behaviors seen in classmates prior to the assessment, which is then a memory task requiring a well-developed social schema to recall these behaviors. The assessment of behavior by peer nominations may assess how well the rater has processed and can recall the behavior of his or her peers, thus a measurement of the rater's social schemas is incorporated into peer assessment, possibly effecting the validity of the findings if the rater's social schemas are not well-developed (Younger et al., 1993).

Teacher assessment. Rating scales for teachers are used in research studies to identify withdrawn children. A variety of scales are available for different age groups, as an example, the Child Behavior Profile (Edelbrock & Achenback, 1984) is used for older children. The teacher rating scales produce factors similar to those for the peer assessment of behavior and differentiate between behaviors associated with withdrawal, aggression, and prosocial actions (Rubin et al., 1990).

Although teachers are present for many of the interactions in the classroom, the adult perspective is much different than that of the child's and qualitatively more distinct. Teacher ratings provide only one perspective on the situation. Very little research exists on the correlation of teacher assessment, peer nominations, and observations.

Behavioral observation. Behavioral observation is considered the most valid method of assessing social withdrawal in children if well-defined methods are used (Rubin et al., 1990). Observational records consist of behaviors categorized to define peer interactions. Most studies do not use this method of peer relation assessment as
many settings must be incorporated to establish withdrawn behavior, requiring numerous hours of research.

Sample Characteristics

Studies of peer relations, specifically the implications of social withdrawal, are carried out in an attempt to generalize findings to a larger population, thus better understanding the significance of social withdrawal for many children and adolescents. To apply findings to a larger population, researchers must use samples which are representative of the target population. To this end, much of the research on social withdrawal and peer relations has fallen short of any useful generalization due to nonrepresentative samples. Below is a discussion of the types of samples used, reasons for their use, benefits, and possible problems.

School. School samples are most adequate for generalization to a larger, typical population of school-age children as school samples are representative of the majority. The heterogeneity of school samples assure the researcher that a wide range of variance in accepted and non-accepted behaviors will be present. Schools, however, are normally not equipped to handle cases of severe behavioral disorders, therefore the likelihood of severe cases being included in the sample is low. To then create a study using school samples which would adequately resemble the larger population, the sample size must be quite large and the recommended longitudinal studies to establish the predictive validity of social withdrawal are difficult (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Clinic. Clinic samples enable the researcher to have the severe cases readily at hand for study and smaller sample sizes can be used with assuredness that socially
withdrawn children are included. Clinic samples are problematic in that many times children are overlooked or do not have the means to seek clinical help. Therefore external variables limit the number of cases which make it to the clinic. Also, clinic populations are homogeneous and have no well-adjusted subjects to use as comparisons (Parker & Asher, 1987).

**High-risk.** Children considered high-risk have parents with psychology disorders. The children of adults with psychological disorders have a higher incidence of psychological problems themselves and are considered a high-risk category. These children are less representative of the majority and again, generalization to a larger population outside of other high-risk children, is not possible. High-risk children potentially have many other problems in their environment limiting any real application to more typical populations and their risks associated with social withdrawal (Parker & Asher, 1987).

**Research Designs**

**Follow-back studies.** Follow-back studies use samples of adults selected for some deviant adjustment and adults without the deviant characteristic. The use of follow-back studies leaves no possibility for predictive findings. By examining the cases of diagnosed adults and their school and clinical records, researchers are able to establish childhood functioning. Exploration the adults' childhood facilitates knowledge of childhood problems, but as follow-back studies cannot control other variables, no interpretation of predictive risk can be made (Parker & Asher, 1987).
Follow-up studies. The sample groups for follow-up studies differ on a chosen characteristic, such as social withdrawal, and each group’s adjustment over time is documented. Because follow-up studies have target and comparison groups, predictive validity can be established. However, follow-up studies are hard to implement and it is difficult to keep the original cohorts intact long enough to obtain relevant and reliable data (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Summary of Methodological Problems Regarding Current Research on Social Withdrawal

Much past research investigating the problems associated with social withdrawal has consisted of samples of clinic and high-risk children, nonschool samples offering a narrow range of behaviors and not generalizable to larger populations (Rubin & Mills, 1988). Parker and Asher (1987) found only one study, by Ensminger et al. (1983), using a school sample and follow-up design, the research methods considered most appropriate to the investigation of social withdrawal. Without appropriate research, the evidence of concurrent problems and future disorders related to social withdrawal is inconclusive, yet the at-risk status of socially withdrawn children is often stated as an accepted fact and certain studies are typically referenced as proof of risk in the literature. Parker and Asher (1987) found socially withdrawn children were categorized as “at-risk” by many researchers, although the research they reviewed was not conclusive upon critical analysis. As example, Duck (1983) said “the socially withdrawn, socially incompetent and aggressive child soon becomes the socially inept adult social casualty” (p. 115). Putallaz and Gottman (1983) also commented on the constant reference to well-known
studies as proof of risk without consideration of study quality (e.g., Cowen et al., 1973; Roff, 1963; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972; Ullmann, 1957). Research has suggested that social withdrawal is predictive of later disorders in adolescents, yet as Rubin (1993) pointed out neither the concurrent problems nor future concerns related to social withdrawal can be discussed with any certainty after reading the existing literature on social withdrawal.

One reason for the uncertainty surrounding social withdrawal and the potential negative impact on a child's development, is the failure of past research to differentiate subtypes of social isolation leading to assessment of outcomes not suggestive of social withdrawal (Rubin, 1993). Rubin and Mills (1988) questioned the realism of suggesting socially withdrawn children will become participants in delinquent activities, while other studies have assumed psychosis or criminality relevant outcomes of childhood social withdrawal (Ensminger et al., 1983; Robbins, 1966). Research, in some cases, is not differentiating between behavioral styles of aggression versus social withdrawal, subsequently the outcomes studied are not specific to one or the other. Externalizing outcomes such as delinquency, a more appropriate consideration in aggressive children, have been measured in studies of social withdrawal (Hymel et al., 1993).

Uncertainty surrounding the phenomenon of social withdrawal was a driving factor in the current study. Social withdrawal involves a multitude of characteristics and consequences making it a confusing problem difficult to identify and hard to solve. This study considers one student and his life without putting the situation into preconceived categories.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study of perspectives on social withdrawal was conducted using interviews of teachers and students and observation of the focus student. Given the complexity of social withdrawal, it was necessary to obtain multiple perspectives from numerous participants in order to create a portrait of the personal life and social relationships of the focus student. In doing so, a combination of the following sources of data were used: observer record, students' descriptions of relationships, and teachers' perceptions of the student's relationships, peer dynamics, and behaviors in their classroom. I observed the student during three class periods and in another large group, town meeting-type setting. The focus student and two of his peers were interviewed to better understand relationship issues from multiple same-age perspectives. Interviews of teachers focused on their insights and perceptions of the selected student.

Site

The site for this study was a small, midwestern school serving nursery through twelfth grades. The average size of the graduating class is approximately 40 students. The site was chosen because of my familiarity with staff due to my current presence in the building fulfilling other academic obligations. The support, helpfulness, and openness of students and staff was also a determining factor in site selection. Entry into the site for the research was gained by administrator permission.
Participants

Students. Potential participants, that is students who exhibited characteristics representative of the literature on social withdrawal, and their respective teachers were identified by the report of two experienced teachers. Both students considered for the study were in eighth grade, one male and one female, and were identified by the two facilitating teachers when they were provided with the following definition of social withdrawal:

Social withdrawal is a form of social maladjustment characterized by a lack of prosocial and cooperative behaviors combined with shyness, anxiety, and oversensitivity leading to withdrawal from social interactions and avoidance of the peer group. Social withdrawal can lead to rejection by the peer group. Peers would not necessarily reject the socially withdrawn student if the child interacted appropriately in social situations.

This study will focus on the child who would be able to function well in social settings, if not for the anxiety and fear of social failure, which drives him/her to withdraw. Socially withdrawn students, as defined for this study, desire interactions with peers, but are hindered by the fear of social ineptitude (Hymel et al., 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987; Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993).

Though the parameters of what I wanted to explore were not as well-defined as the definition above would suggest, it was necessary to identify a focus student in a definitive manner, with the intention of carrying out a more open-ended exploration of the student’s situation as the study progressed. One student was to be selected from the two based on observations using the definition above and my best judgment as the researcher. I selected the focus student based on informal observations of both students
and comparison of their behaviors and interactions with teachers and peers. After first 
observations, the student chosen appeared uninvolved, had few interactions, and did not 
approach other students or his teachers. The other student demonstrated characteristics of 
withdrawal, but was verbally aggressive and rude when interacting with peers. Also, she 
spent much of the day in the resource room, creating a situation with additional variables, 
such as aggression and special education services, which were not ideal for this study.

Teachers. Three of the teachers chosen for interviews currently worked with the 
focus student. One teacher had taught the student in science the previous year. The 
teachers were selected based on their openness to the research, willingness to participate 
in the study, and their knowledge of the student. All teachers chosen felt they knew the 
student well and were willing to share their insights with me in a taped interview. The 
teachers assisting in identifying potential students also provided information regarding 
potential teachers for interviews. The participating seventh-grade teacher was 
recommended by current teachers interviewed as a person who had established a close 
relationship with the focus student and who would be willing to share her understanding 
of his situation.

All teachers interviewed had taught at the secondary level for at least 10 years. 
All teachers were in their forties; two were male and two were female. Two teachers had 
only been at the school for one year, the other two for over five years. Teachers who had 
seen the focus student for many years at the school were important in establishing the 
student’s history and identifying possible origins for the problems he encountered. The
eighth-grade teachers taught English and language arts, social studies, and math to the focus student. The seventh-grade teacher had taught life science to the focus student.

**Peers.** The focus student and his peers were approached by one of the eighth-grade teachers interviewed. The teacher had suggested (and I concurred) that if she were to initiate contact with the students and ask them whether they would agree to be involved in a study of student relationships at the school, they would be less intimidated and hesitant than if I were to approach them. In this way, the chance of the focus student feeling he was somehow singled out or the target of the study would also be lessened. The teacher discretely requested the participation of two peers and the focus student when they were in a busy study hall; thus little or no attention was drawn to the students. After this initial request, I was introduced to the students as the interviewer/researcher and I explained to them that I was studying the relationships students have with friends and peers as part of my graduate studies. I then interviewed each student at their convenience during the study hall period. The teacher was asked to select two students who were representative or typical with respect to their peer relationships and who could articulate their thoughts well.

**Procedures**

**Observation**

My observation of the focus student in the classroom and during an eighth grade large group meeting permitted an understanding of the context of his interactions and his established routines. Observations also provided convergent data to better understand the perspectives of the interviewees. Observations were 40 minutes in duration each day for
three days near the end of the school year. Observation guidelines were constructed based on the research criteria and suggestions from Merriam (1998) on the subject of observation in qualitative research (see Appendix A).

Management of observation data. Observation data was documented with time, date, purpose, setting, and number of observation in the sequence. Every attempt was made to provide information indicating people present, environmental aspects; and situational factors, as well as interactional observations to create a thick, rich literal description of the situations observed (Merriam, 1998).

Interviews

A semi-structured interview format was employed. Teachers and students interpreted events and situations in unique ways, therefore some flexibility in the interview questions was allowed. The semi-structured interviews consisted of a set of predetermined questions with specific wording and open-ended questions to allow flexibility and exploration of alternate perceptions. Topics of interests arising in the interviews were often explored in subsequent interviews, as well (see Appendix A).

Teachers. The four teachers were interviewed for an average of 40 minutes regarding the selected student and his/her interactions with classmates. Interviews focused on past and present teachers’ perceptions of the target student’s behavior, interactions with peers, and success or failure in social and academic situations. The overriding purpose of the interview was to paint a picture of the student’s social situation and compare this with information provided by the student himself. Positive or negative
description of behaviors and perceived skills in social interactions were of particular interest.

Students. The three students were interviewed for 25 to 30 minutes each. The focus of the student interviews, along with the interview with the focus student, was school in general and interpersonal relationships with peers. Though the focus student was not asked directly about problems with peer relationships, the questions were phrased in such a way that the outcome was the same. Once the student or his peers began to talk about peer relationship difficulties, it was much easier to inquire further without the interview becoming an interrogation. The students appeared comfortable and willing to participate throughout the interviews.

Analysis of Field Notes and Interviews

Data from my observations and interviews was analyzed using the constant comparative method. This entailed considering data as it was collected, searching for common issues, key comments, and similar ideas across participants. Constantly comparing what was seen in observations and heard in interviews allowed me to create categories descriptive of the data. Many pieces of data were then placed within the categories created by constant comparative analysis. This process continued throughout data collection and after all data was collected, until no new information was uncovered or findings began to lead in a direction far removed from the current research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser, 1978; Merriam, 1998).

Interviews were transcribed for later analysis and student, teacher, and peer comments were examined for patterns in responses. The notes from observation were
categorized based on themes arising from each observation period in the same manner as
the interview analysis. Each category was defined and coded for all observations.
Emphasis was given to the categories of person to person interactions, environment, and
indicators of the school culture in both observation and interview data.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The findings of this study are summarized according to four sequential themes. First, a portrayal of the focus student is presented. This includes a self-description by the focus student, perceptions of the focus student by the teachers who participated in the study, and my own observations regarding some aspects of the focus student’s personality. Second, a description of the school environment in which the focus student attended is included. This is reported from the point of view of the focus student, the participating teachers, and two peers of the focus student. Third, the focus student’s response to the school environment is discussed from the point of view of the focus student, the participating teachers, and myself. Fourth, the possible avenues of change for the student in light of the reasons study participants attributed to the withdrawal are examined.

Description of Student

The following are perceptions of the student as reported by the student himself, his teachers, and the observer. How the student views himself and how others view him is important in creating a framework for understanding the interactions the student has with others, of teacher interactions with, and approach to the student, and the perceived impact of peers in the student’s life. The descriptors chosen were thought to be critical to the student’s school experience and indicators of the origins of his problems. To protect his identity, the focus student is referred to as Peter. Other participants are not named in the study.
Student Description of Self

Peter reported that he had few friends at school. He made mention of only one good friend who shared his interests. Within the first five minutes of the interview Peter explained his "outcast" role at the school this way, "Yeah, well it's just because most of my friends here, well, I don't really have, do well with the students here, that basically I am the outcast of our school." Peter seemed to accept this label and I could almost detect a sense of pride in the title that only he had at the school. In support of this claim, Peter said he was teased constantly in sixth and seventh grade, so much so that a friend of his who was also involved left the school. Peter told me, "He left and I was stuck here." Peter appeared unhappy about this, that he had not been able to "escape" by changing schools.

Peter's interests involve intellectual pursuits such as role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons. These interests, he admitted, were dissimilar to those of his peers at the school. In my estimation, it is possible that other students may have seen these pursuits as weird or not "cool" in eighth grade. Not only was Peter not interested in the same things as his peers, such as skateboarding and athletics, he was limited by his abilities in those areas, as well, "some people are into skateboarding, I considered trying that, I was terrible at that. . . so I never tried it again." He also described the school culture and his situation by saying, "Uh, this school's too sports related, it's like obsessed with sports. Another thing why people hate me, well used to hate me, I don't like sports."
Peter expressed his concern about attending a good college and worried that his school program was not preparing him well for standardized testing. As Peter spoke, I felt he thought about things on a more intellectual level than his peers most likely would have. He explained his situation as an “outcast” in a straightforward, logical manner with the understanding that this was life, that things like that would happen now and then.

Teacher Descriptions of Student

When asked to describe Peter in one sentence, each of the four teachers interviewed mentioned his capabilities noting that he did not live up to the academic expectations they had for him. Two teachers indicated that he was bright, but an underachiever. One stated, “Peter is very bright and um, and he is an underachiever.” Another stated that Peter is “bright, but has difficulty motivating himself to do tasks and work. Uh, and somewhat socially isolated.” This was significant because the teachers had a responsibility to do what they could to get Peter to complete work while simultaneously attempting to establish a caring relationship. The line between concerned adult and enforcer of academic obligations was difficult. One teacher mentioned conflict over assignments, the other three made note of the necessity of “reminding” and “working with the student” to get assignments completed.

Discussing comments made by Peter in an eighth-grade large group meeting on class conflicts, two of the teachers noticed Peter’s involvement and thought it a defining moment for him. One teacher stated, “I was very, very, uhh, pleased at the comments that Peter made at the meeting, at his, he articulated very well, and without an excessive amount of emotion or anger, uh, what it feels like to be isolated and I think people were
touched by that. And saw him and see him in a new light.” When asked if it was a surprise, he said, “We weren’t so much surprised as pleased. . . we know he is capable of it. He is a bright, thoughtful young fellow, but does not, has not heretofore been that kind of insightful.” Other teachers echoed these thoughts about Peter, saying that he had potential and three of the four showed a genuine liking for him. The fourth teacher cared about Peter’s situation, but said he and Peter had never “clicked” or “found common ground,” meaning the relationship was based on classroom encounters mostly.

After mentioning academics, all teachers referred to Peter’s social situation spontaneously and without prompting, mentioning his isolation from the peer group. One teacher described Peter as “somewhat socially isolated” another as “talented, creative, articulate, but a loner.” This teacher went on to say, “and I don’t know by, I mean I would not say by choice, I just think that was where he was at.” Although each teacher saw Peter’s isolation differently, one felt Peter hadn’t made efforts toward participation; the other three believed he was rejected by the group mainly through harassment.

Peter’s interactions with teachers were not similarly described by all four. One teacher, who was female, stated that, “I would characterize Peter as a needy student. He needs a lot of, especially it seems like, adult interaction to affirm.” Another teacher, also female, had established similar relationships with Peter the previous year. However, the other two teachers, both male, felt the student avoided interactions with them entirely. Neither saw him as an initiator of conversation unless it was a necessary academic question. One stated, “Oh, I don’t think he does, at all. I don’t think he does much. He is much more, uh, he is much more interested in reacting to, than he is in initiating.” The
teacher who felt he initiated nearly all conversations with Peter also said they would "chat, you know, about social things." As interviewer and observer, I was able to establish some connections with all four teachers and I felt more comfortable in the presence of the two teachers who happened to be female and who had seemed to feel they had made more successful contacts with Peter. Both teachers were very calm, easy to approach, and had an empathic manner about them.

Consistent with Peter's own remarks, the teachers described him as a nonparticipant, especially with respect to athletic activities. Two of the four teachers mentioned athletics directly, one put it this way, "Well, um, he isn't very athletic so he, he doesn't, uh, have that to help pull himself in." A lack of ability and interests in athletics seemed to further limit his inclusion in the peer group as most students in Peter's class were somehow involved in sports. His lack of participation in other extracurricular activities was also mentioned by all teachers. One teacher described Peter's situation regarding extracurricular activities and athletics in this way:

Well Peter is, I think one of the reasons he might be outside of the normal social circle is because he doesn't participate in any extracurricular activities. If he were to make more of an effort to do that, he might find, um, that he might have more in common with the other kids, but he's just, like socially in terms of the extracurricular activities and the school events, he's not really involved in those. He's not really athletic, so that in the middle school that is the majority of the activities. So, I would encourage him to become more involved in, uh, clubs or activities outside the classroom with other kids to get a little bit more connected. If I were his advisor next year, that's what I would recommend to his parents.

As with their interactions with Peter, all the teachers felt he was involved in few if any self-initiated interactions with peers. He was not chosen for group participation. One teacher had made adjustments to group work knowing that Peter would not be
picked if she allowed students to choose their partners as she had seen it happen previously. The same teacher described peer contact with Peter as “neutral,” meaning there was very little feeling either negative or positive, in the interactions Peter had with other students. She explained it this way, “I would say for the most part it seems like his peers ignore, there might be things going on outside of my classroom, but in terms of what I have seen, I would say it is mostly ignoring.”

All teachers knew Peter had one good friend and mentioned this in the interviews as an important source of support, as an alliance. One teacher said, “So, I think with the exception of the one really close friend he is pretty much an outsider.” The seventh-grade teacher went into detail about the relationship, feeling that it was a support that the student benefited from and needed at the school. She felt that “probably the most positive thing that happened to Peter in 7th grade was [name] coming and starting (at the school) and they developed a really good friendship.”

**Observer Description of Student**

Peter appeared to be a typical eighth-grader. He wore glasses and had medium length blonde hair. He usually had on a t-shirt with some slogan on it, blue jeans, and tennis shoes. His appearance and manner of dress were similar to most of his peers. He did not have any abnormal physical characteristics or unusual mannerisms which would have brought him undue negative attention.

When observing Peter, I saw a student who did not take up space and received little positive or negative feedback from teachers or peers. He seemed to be an unobtrusive figure and hard to notice in the classroom. Peter was quiet for the most part,
spoke softly, and interacted infrequently when the rest of the class was loud and active. He was typically hunched over or slouched down in his chair, making him even less noticeable. (Field notes, April 16, p. 1.)

Peter was not outspoken, nor completely silent during observations. He spoke quickly when it was his turn to answer a question in class. Peter provided the answer, "The Olympic Games were first held in 776 B.C. in Olympia." He had to say this twice. The first time he stuttered his answer quickly and many classmates indicated with puzzled expressions that they did not understand what he had said. (Field notes, April 23, p. 2.) Peter was reserved, never actively participating, but surveying the room several times during my observation. I observed in a chaotic classroom on a Friday afternoon and Peter was talking quietly to one student, but doing even this infrequently.

As I was in the school often, I had the chance to see Peter in the hallways between classes. He was usually with the girl that all teachers had referred to as his one good friend and they were usually not with others. They sometimes sat in a doorway during lunch or walked together to class. Prior to this study, I had a mental picture of the withdrawn individual with head down, shuffling quickly to his or her next destination, avoiding interactions of any kind. Peter did not avoid others necessarily, I never observed him hurrying to class to avoid an interaction. It was more the lack of interactions and a quietness about him. He made eye contact with others and looked around, but was very seldom in the company of others besides the one friend.
Summary

Peter's comments and those of the teachers complimented what I had gathered from observations in the classroom and had sensed in the interviews with Peter and his teachers. Peter was not an "involved" student, but also it was apparent that he was not overlooked because the teachers were able to provide so much information about him. He was liked by his teachers and seemed to have no difficult interactions with them. It was apparent that Peter did well enough in school academically, but had problems with social situations.

The interests that he had compared to those of his peers were a source of controversy as he had none of their interests or wasn't good at what they enjoyed doing. The connection of interests, abilities, and isolation receives more attention in a later section as the literature reviewed had little to say regarding this connection, yet it was a recurrent theme in the data from participants in this study.

Environmental Factors Related to the Focus Student's Situation

Student

Peter described a timeline for the harassment that had occurred and how he had been changed because of it, "things were fine in fifth grade, it was good, actually." He had many friends and things were "pretty normal." With a larger class entering in sixth grade, problems began and Peter was a target of peer harassment, that was, at times, severe.

Peter did not share details of all the harassment, nor was I able to question to intensely as the premise was not an investigation of his life, but peer relationships at the
school. What Peter did share was an episode of name-calling that caused a friend to leave the school explaining, “I was really good friends with John, who doesn’t go here anymore and he left due to something like people were calling us gay. There was this huge thing on sexual harassment, all this. He left and I was stuck here.” Peter told me about this treatment in a matter-of-fact manner. He did not appear frustrated, embarrassed, or angry. He seemed to accept it, but when asked how he felt about being chosen as the object of such ridicule he emphatically stated, “I did not like it.”

Peter had discussed with me his friends outside of the school and noted that none of them went to his current school, “thank goodness.” I asked what he meant as it seemed odd not to want your friends at your school and he explained, “The school class, but um, I’m picked on a lot so, if they were here (his other friends) their basically, lives would slum, go down. They do better at their schools than they do here.” I was curious as to why he thought his friends would be teased also or why he was teased. Peter felt the students had just, “chose me out of the blue” which was an interesting way of explaining the rejection.

Peter explained what being an outcast meant to him, “Um, not having many friends. Most people rejecting you and not being very friendly to you.” Earlier, without directly questioning it, Peter had made the statement, “Another thing why people hate me, well used to hate me.” Hate is a powerful emotion and whether true of the other students or not, it was clear Peter had felt quite rejected by their actions in the past.

Peter did not feel he had always been in such an undesirable social situation. He told me, when asked if things had always been like this, that things were fine “4th year,
then 5th year and the 6th year it all went to heck.” I asked about sixth year and he continued to describe the progression, “and then seventh year, was, just like had no friends, everyone just kind of like teased me. I had one or two friends, but that was it.”

**Teachers**

During the study, the eighth grade class had a series of meetings on problems stemming from the inability of the group to get along. These meetings were initiated by students going to the counselor with concerns of teasing and peer intolerance. The meetings coincided with the tragic events in Colorado. This had an impact on many of the eighth graders and added more sincerity to the discussion. All four participating teachers had alluded to the dynamics of Peter’s eighth grade class as causing social and emotional difficulties for the students for many years. They said such things as, “I know the history of his particular class is tough. I know they do a lot of in-group, out-group stuff, but that is typical of 8th graders.”

The comments of teachers painted a picture similar to Peter’s and suggested an environment of peer rejection that was clearly noticeable to the teachers, especially to the his seventh-grade teacher. She was well-informed of his history and had made many attempts to support him in his conflicts with peers. I told her that Peter had mentioned fifth grade being good and sixth grade was, and she interjected with, “was absolutely horrendous for him.” She described the name-calling incident from sixth grade saying:

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Uh, there were a couple of issues that came up in 6th grade with Peter. And he and another student were targeted as gays (homosexual) by the students and they made just really callous and nasty remarks and the teachers dealt with it. The other student left the school and Peter remained.
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As we talked, it became clear that sixth grade was only the beginning of Peter’s difficulties with peers. The teacher described a critical event for Peter at a seventh grade dance:

Let me give you an example of what happened in 7th grade. Peter was at a dance that I was not chaperoning, was ummm being harassed by another boy. And he told the teacher and the teacher said ‘so and so leave Peter alone.’ And then they (the teacher) left the room and were never there again. Alright? What ended up happening was that they grabbed Peter and Peter said, ‘leave me alone! Let go of me!’ and they basically picked him up and did a, I don’t know, I don’t watch all-star wrestling, but a wrestling move, okay? And with him on his back, really could have hurt him, and I don’t think, I think it hurt him more inside than it did physically, but really could have hurt him physically and it made me mad when I found out about it on Monday. And I dealt with it then, but it should have been dealt with at the dance and there should have been ramifications throughout the next week. Umm, and then when he fell down on the ground, tried to crawl away, his brother grabbed his legs and drug him around and then they “humped” him, all right? Acted like they were humping him, this is the story that Peter told and I believe him. He has no reason to make this up. And um, so and I didn’t know that any of this happened. They were in my class Monday and Peter came in late and I said, ‘Peter, you’ve got to go get a tardy pass’ and he just-literally ran out crying and I’m going ‘wait, this is not a real big deal’ so I went after him and ask what was going on.

The teacher went on to explain that Peter had filed a harassment charge the following week, but nothing came of it. As all four teachers did, she also mentioned Peter’s class as explanation for social conflicts. She felt, “Peter is in a very unusual class, we gave them a social attitudes survey and found, basically it’s composed of people who are going to tell you their opinion whether you asked for it or not and are going to be pushing for, advocating for their position, and the other group are people that are very dominant, they feel good about themselves, but they are expecting people to ask them their opinion.” She said, “I don’t think they are bad, but they are just very domineering.”
This description did not include Peter and it was easy to see how someone quiet and uncertain of peer reactions would not be successful in such an atmosphere.

Another teacher describing Peter's situation said, "he has also been a victim of teasing, probably in the younger grades, um, upper elementary especially." And asked about the whole class in this context, he said, "They all know he is a victim. They know that and if you were to say to any kid in that class, 'Who's the guy that gets picked on in this class?' He'd be one of the ones that got pointed to I'm sure." The teacher felt Peter's treatment and knowledge of it was well known among his peers.

Peers

Peter's peers did not refer to the same type of treatment as Peter or his teachers had described for him. In fact, although they disliked the behaviors of their peers who felt it necessary to select students to tease, they felt it was just that, teasing. One peer did explain how he thought it could get out of hand when the harassers wouldn't let a subject go, similar I suspected, to the problems with name-calling Peter had dealt with in sixth grade. He said sometimes he guessed students would keep "firing at you until you can't handle it."

Peer harassment was caused by conflicts over interests, for example, a few students might like some musical group, while others found the group material for teasing. Things like that would lead to angry disputes over teasing and intolerance. Also, one of Peter's peers felt students would sometimes tease people who acted stupid or said weird things. Again, these things were minor in their eyes. I did not feel they had difficulties at the school or would suggest that the school environment was one that could
hurt them. One of Peter’s peers had even transferred to the school after being unable to “fit in” or be accepted at another middle school in the area. He felt the current school was more of a family and more accepting than the other. I gathered that both of Peter’s peers were content with the school environment and had not seen such rejection as that which Peter and his teachers described.

Summary

The account provided by Peter and his teachers of incidents involving peer rejection suggest that sixth and seventh grades were difficult for Peter. It would seem that fifth grade was not so bad, or at the least Peter has better memories of this time. His withdrawal coincides with the torment he suffered through peer teasing and harassment after fifth grade. Peter’s peers did not indicate they had seen anything that could be called severe harassment, anything that would create the situation in which Peter had found himself. They did feel things could be better, yet all in all, it was just teasing. This raises the question of individual differences: was there something about Peter or the environment he was in that differed from what the peers had described at the school? Had he seen a more consistent harassment than what his peers described? Answers may lie in how Peter responded to his situation and/or the impact of the peer group or select members of that group in regard to the choices they make to include or exclude certain students. Regardless of what other students have experienced, Peter’s situation was real and many of his problems appear to have been created by peer behaviors directed toward him.
Interests and Abilities

Peter's interests and abilities played a critical part in his isolation at the school. Interests define the groups to which you belong and Peter had interests that were unlike those of his peers at the school. It was clear that outside the school his interests had allowed him to become part of a group that met for role playing games. Interests alone would not seem enough to create withdrawal, but if peer rejection were combined with a lack of any connection to peer groups at the school, it would leave no place for a student to be accepted.

Athletics were mentioned by all study participants. It was even used as a descriptor of the school by one peer, “This is an athlete’s school.” It is then easy to see how someone who is not interested or not athletic would have some problems being accepted regardless of other factors such as peer rejection. All indications from Peter and his peers and teachers were that groups equaled interests, therefore you must have the same interests the group has to fit in well or at all.

The comments of teachers reinforce this issue of interests and abilities. “He’s not very tied into the same interests that the mainstream eighth graders seem to fall into.” Peter is “not an athlete, so he doesn’t have that to rely on.” He couldn’t be a part of the athletic groups. All teachers suggested Peter could improve his situation by becoming more involved in extracurricular activities.

When asked to define what a friendship was, Peter said it was “sharing interests” with another person. Peter spoke frequently about the interests he and his friends had in common, “because we have some things in common and all can relate to those things.”
He talked about the interests of his peers that he had tried. Skateboarding was unsuccessful. He tried paintball and said, “I tried that and really enjoyed it.” That activity went much better and he felt more accepted after exploring this new interest with others at the school.

Focus Student’s Response to School Environment

Student

Peter had developed methods of coping with his situation at the school, and one of these was withdrawal from the peer group. As Peter withdrew, he had reasons for the withdrawal and other ways of spending his time. Withdrawal did not resolve all Peter’s problems, but it was part of Peter’s solution. He had also created a fantasy world for himself, a place to escape from peers. Peter told me, “I used to get insulted a lot during the day, so I just started ignoring people completely, shutting them off. And just going off into my own little world, which I love.” He laughed and added emphasis to the word love; clearly he derived pleasure from being somewhere that no one else could come, a place of escape where he created the possibilities. I asked what it was like in his “own world” and he said, “basically, paradise, to sum it up in one word.” Peter said this escape was more typical in seventh grade, but not so much now. When I asked why, he explained, “Now it’s kind of like, I am connected with more people, um, I don’t go back to my own little place more and more often, I go there, but I go there every once and awhile. I don’t go there constantly.”

Peter had also stopped associating with many people. He had stopped “sharing” his life with those who made him uncomfortable, saying, “Like, um, I have become
basically less connected with the people I don’t like, which is kind of nice because they don’t know more about me to insult me about.” I felt Peter didn’t want this to have happened, to have to stay away from people because they used things they heard him say or saw him do to tease him about. My feelings were supported by remarks he made. When asked more about withdrawing from other students, Peter said, “basically if people don’t like me, I really don’t care anymore, care enough to like, let it hurt me.” I asked how he had gotten over that and he told me, “Ummmm, I don’t know, when I first came here, I just like wanted everyone’s opinion on everything, I enjoyed everyone’s opinion. Now, it’s just kind of not as important to me.” I sensed that it would have been important still, if the situation would have gone differently in sixth and seventh grade. This appeared to be a somewhat forced lack of concern about the opinions of others. Listening to Peter, I felt it would be hard for an eighth grader to have to let go of so many things that are important at this stage of development, such as the opinions of peers and the social interactions that define students at this age (Coie & Cillessen, 1993; Parker & Asher, 1987).

Peter had tried more conventional methods of response, ones mentioned by both teachers and peers as typical of teasing situations, ignoring and fighting back. When I asked how he handled most problems with peers, he said, “Um, ignore them, um, well most of the time, sometimes I just kind of hit them.” I asked how ignoring worked for him and he said, “It, it stopped for awhile, but then they’d like, just do things that like drove me crazy.” By this he meant continued teasing, getting in his face with names and pushing him around. I told Peter that I had often heard others mention ignoring the
teasing as a solution and wanted his opinion on the effectiveness of that method. He said, “It doesn’t work that well. It’s good advice, but after awhile it starts to, you lose hope in that.” I felt that simple statement was descriptive of Peter’s situation in general, of all his different responses to negative treatment by peers; that after awhile he had lost hope in most any solution.

I asked Peter if his “lashing out” had done anything to stopped peers from harassing him. He explained, “Um, that works sometimes, but that’s just like, I haven’t done that in a really long time, but for example my friend (from outside the school), um he’s teased a lot because they tell him he is overweight, he just gave up ignoring entirely, he just lashes out at anyone.” I asked if that approach had been effective for his friend. Peter answered, “No. He gets teased more.”

When asked what did work, Peter felt threatening students with legal action had been the only successful measure. He said, “I think the fact that I went to like, I was, I was threatening to like take them to court. I think that got them to stop.”

Teacher

The teachers described Peter’s response to the negative environment as choosing to withdraw, but when I questioned this further, they seemed to feel it was a choice made to escape, not because he really wanted to be withdrawn from his classmates. The teachers answered that “yes, Peter seemed to choose to be alone most of the time.” Further exploration suggested that it was not a voluntary choice, that because other students ignored or harassed Peter, being alone was a better alternative. One teacher said, “Oh sure, that was his way of avoiding the unpleasantness that was sometimes visited on
him. But that isolation was, you know it was like a vicious cycle. Him pulling away made it easier for kids to torment him because they don't care, you know, he's not part of the group. It makes him look more different.” This comment on Peter’s response and its effectiveness summarizes the situation quite well. Peter made himself less a part of the group, the only method he had found that would work, and created a situation where peers were even less considerate of his needs and more likely to direct negative behaviors toward him.

Two teachers saw Peter’s association with one good friend as a way of avoiding further risk of social failure. He relied on the friend to be his partner in class and as a companion, reducing the need to talk to others. One teacher was pleased when Peter’s friend changed to another class period for math as the teacher felt it would “force” Peter to interact instead of continuously relying on his friend. The teachers indicated they had seen the barriers that Peter had mentioned, his escape to a fantasy world and his attempts to disregard the peer group.

Peers

The behaviors Peter’s peers mentioned as common responses to a negative environment were ignoring the remarks or fighting back. Both peers had seen a lot of yelling and remarks made back and forth. One said, “People just get into shouting matches. . . . they disagree about something they like that someone else doesn’t” to describe the problems he saw most often. One of Peter’s peers had experienced some of the same problems with acceptance as Peter, but only for a short time. He described the situation, “Well, I was new and just wanted people to know me. I would walk up and
say, ‘Hi, my name is [name] and I’m new here’ and they would just like turn their back, not even try.” I asked what that was like and he explained, “I had to go and cool down. I kind of gave up trying after a couple of days.” When I asked how he felt he said, “Rejected, you know, like people don’t even know who you are, but aren’t willing to even try for some reason.” This student felt it would be easier to just let go if that type of thing kept happening, to just walk away.

Summary

Walking away, in a sense, is what Peter had done; he walked away from the group. He was unsuccessful in ignoring their actions, did not like activities that might have helped involve him with his peers, and found no one else in his situation. Thus, it appears from Peter’s reports that he began to ignore his peers and the whole situation as a reaction to the negative actions of the peer group.
Researchers studying social withdrawal have developed two models to explain this phenomenon. As described in the literature review in Chapter 2, each model proposes a different origin for social withdrawal. The causal model suggests that social withdrawal is environmentally-driven, that is, rooted in the ecology of the school system and peer group. Conversely, the incidental model is suggestive of internal disorders as the causal agent in social withdrawal and predicts it will occur regardless of peer or environmental factors.

Peter presents a case of withdrawal that appears to situate causal factors in the environment (i.e., peer rejection) as the main reason for this withdrawal. According to Peter's own statements and those of his teachers, he would not have been so isolated at the school without external influence. In his own words and the words of teachers who knew him, the reluctant withdrawal from his peers is evident. Although he appears to have grown content since he has become significantly isolated from the group, having only one friend in the class, he did not do so of his own accord. Peter had described his past, before peer rejection, as normal with having "lots of friends" in fifth grade. His socially withdrawn behavior and acceptance of the outcast role stemmed from the peer rejection that, by his and teacher accounts, began in 5th and 6th grades. The student did not define himself as an outcast when describing earlier grades at the school.
The notion that some peer rejection might be caused by behaviors of a student who is socially withdrawn should not be disregarded. An either/or situation where only peer rejection or characteristics of a student who is socially withdrawn are responsible for the withdrawal is difficult to imagine. Peter admitted to having different interests that have served to isolated him from his peers. He may have some unusual behaviors that peers latch onto and tease him about, although neither I, nor the teachers noted such behaviors. It is not the case, however, that the student has exhibited so many obvious behaviors and anxieties that he has been isolated only because of them. Peter may have exhibited earlier behaviors that peers focused on which caused them to reject him initially. Later the severity of the situation grew as the harassment worsened.

The incidental model of social withdrawal suggests the severity of internal problems alone drives withdrawal. Social withdrawal originating before peer rejection involves intense anxiety and fear of social failure, so much so that the student would be withdrawn regardless of positive or negative interactions and peer rejection serves only to aggravate the situation. Peter’s seems to be a case of a few behaviors (i.e., lack of participation in athletics/extracurricular activities) that peers took notice of and did not accept or possibly arbitrary decisions by the peer group to isolate and harass Peter making withdrawal necessary when rejection became overwhelming. Peter exhibited no outward signs of anxiety when others interacted with him, nor did I gather from observations or interviews any inclination that he wanted to be withdrawn. Teachers and peers seemed to feel social isolation was caused by the withdrawn student’s behavior and
thus blamed him for the situation. Both groups felt a voluntary change of behavior would alleviate the student’s problems.

Factors Related to Change

Too often social withdrawal is seen to reside in the individual and considered to be up to the individual to “fix” the problem. This “blame the victim” attitude precludes a recognition that the problem can only be resolved at the group level. It is important to understand why Peter feels things happened the way they did and what changes he thinks might be reasonable to improve his situation. Also, Peter’s peers and teachers hold notions that guide the changes they would see as most effective for success in social interactions. The explanations for social withdrawal provided by Peter, his teachers, and peers will guide any attempts they would make to changes their behaviors in the future.

Student

Peter felt his peers were mostly responsible for his situation claiming they had just “chosen” him to tease and harass. He thought boredom had played a part as they had nothing better to do than single him out. He didn’t see any reasons for such treatment, but it had become an accepted part of his life. Peter felt he had tried new things, but that they had not always gone well. Peter felt his efforts had done little to improve his situation and attributed the rejection to the whims of his peer group. To explain improvements in his situation this year, he remarked that “people have forgotten about the past a little.”

Peter had waited to see if his situation would change and he had done what he could by getting used to “having no friends” and accepting the role of “outcast.” “I have
accepted it,” he had said when I asked how he felt about his situation and about associating with very few people at the school. Peter indicated that there was very little hope for change until others changed. He felt all of this had happened through no fault of his own, and because he had done nothing wrong, he could not escape by changing himself. When I asked about how the rejection had occurred, if he had done anything to instigate such treatment, Peter explained the rejection happened from the “get-go,” with his peers never needing any reason. He went on to say, “Well, I think they did it because they just had nothing better to do because it’s really boring here. And so they had to do something to entertain themselves. So they chose me because they thought of something out of the blue and there it went.”

I was able to compare Peter’s situation to that of his friend who left the school under similar circumstances of harassment to find out how the friend’s situation had changed, if indeed it had. Peter said his friend “fit in pretty good” at his new school. He had started to play some sports and “had a chance to make a fresh start.” That was why he had done better, because he had “stayed in the circle and did what others wanted.” I asked if Peter thought his own situation would have been different had he been able to stay a part of the “circle.” He said, “I think it would have happened eventually that they got, that they would have just found a way to do it [meaning harass him].” He didn’t think there would have been an escape for him, a way that would have allowed him not to withdraw from his peers.
Teacher

Two of the teachers did not know why Peter’s peers had chosen him to harass and reject. One teacher said, “I don’t see, I don’t see anything about him that would be really offensive to kids. But I would say that most kids would probably say that he wasn’t cool. He’s not into skateboarding, into like music, you know, things like that.” Another, his seventh-grade teacher said “and I don’t know why this started because I don’t see any unusual characteristics about Peter except that he is, he hasn’t physically matured, I mean deepened voice, widened shoulders.” Because the harassment had begun early in sixth grade, the teacher realized even this reason wouldn’t explain Peter’s situation. Neither teacher could arrive at origins for the difficulties Peter had with peers in his class.

Another teacher did feel part of the reason was that Peter projected himself as a “victim” or an “easy target” for peer harassment. All four teachers had in some way attributed the combination of different interests, possible traits of the focus student such as lack of assuredness, that is, the “victim” role, and lack of athletic involvement to the harassment Peter was subject to by students in his peer group.

After inquiring as to why this had happened, I wanted to know if the teachers could suggest ways Peter or others could change his situation. Though the teachers’ ideas regarding Peter’s rejection were varied, their ideas about change were quite similar. He needed to be more involved and to try extracurricular activities. As described in the first section, one teacher thought, “one of the reasons he might be outside of the normal social circle is because he doesn’t participate in any extracurricular activities. If he were to make more of an effort to do that, he might find, um, that he might have more in
common with the other kid, but he's just, like socially in terms of the extracurricular activities and the school events, he's not really involved in those.” As a suggestion for change he said, “So, I would encourage him to become more involved in, uh, clubs or activities outside the classroom with other kids to get a little bit more connected.” He should not spend all of his time with only one friend, “I worry that he is more isolated with only [name] as his constant companion and I hope that doesn’t continue.” He could make an effort to be interested in things other students were interested in, “he doesn’t have to love it, but maybe try it.”

The issue of change was described in detail by Peter’s seventh-grade teacher when we discussed the harassment in seventh grade:

It’s a systemic problem, it’s not something that you can have a one shot thing to deal with. When I said they dealt with it, they dealt with it in terms of a one shot thing, and they, I think they understood that it was a systemic problem, but they, they didn’t. . . . you have to come at it from a lot of different angles because it’s systemic. You know they, they turn off. You need to hit it with developing community really, and acceptance and you hit that from a lot of different areas. I don’t think that happens in 6th grade. I think it happens, I think we work real hard to make it happen in 7th grade and at different times we have various successes.

Peers

I found in the interview of peers that students who are not involved in extracurricular activities or sports seem to be the ones who are rejected. Peers placed most responsibility on the student for behavior or choice of activities and not on the peer group’s lack of acceptance. One peer said it was that “they sometimes do weird things that people tease them about” when referring to students who were harassed or rejected at the school. Also, both of Peter’s peers felt it was normal for some people not to fit in or
be accepted. One said, “It’s like human nature that not everyone will get along. You can’t expect everyone to like everyone.” She said she knew there were some people who didn’t like her, but she “ignored” it. I asked if it was easy to do this and she said it didn’t always work, but she didn’t have “too much trouble with anyone at the school, anyway.” The other peer suggested he had few, if any problems at the school because he tried to be involved. He said, “you just like, try new things and get involved. I like most anything with action (sports) and it’s easy to get along with people because we do fun things together.”

**Summary**

In Peter’s description of his situation there is the sense of inevitability; he has surrendered and can do nothing about the harassment and rejection. Peter feels that his peers selected him for no reason and rejection ensued. His peers echo this to some extent with the idea of “human nature,” that some people will be excluded and not everyone can get along. In this sense Peter has no hope for better social interactions until the external factors change in his favor. He has done nothing wrong and cannot escape by modifying his behavior. Peter’s statements were suggestive of the condition of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Peter claimed that he had made efforts to involve himself in peer activities but was unsuccessful, and also that he was subjected to rejection without provocation. These factors may have led to Peter’s view that he was helpless to effect positive change. This cycle of rejection and failed attempts at interactions may have escalated to the point that Peter “learned” that he is helpless to do anything about his situation.
I felt teachers and peers were telling me that teasing and harassment, which influenced Peter's withdrawal, could be lessened by his actions. He could become part of the group through activities. Peter needed to find common interests and blend with his peers, not pull away, which would give peers "fuel" for further harassment. In a sense, these comments suggested that for Peter to avoid harassment, he must act in a manner more similar to that of his peer group. Although all teachers indicated that the behavior of Peter's peers toward him was not acceptable, none went so far as to suggest that the peers and not Peter must change their behaviors first and foremost. I felt the teachers and peers were saying that in order for Peter to avoid harassment, he needed to become more involved. This outlook, even though guided by concern for Peter's welfare, may be detrimental to positive change in the school environment because it focuses only on the victim. Looking directly to those students, such as Peter, who find themselves isolated from the peer group and encouraging them to change their behaviors to avoid rejection and harassment (which should not occur in the first place) neglects the responsibility all must take to ensure a positive social environment exists at the school.

I found this discrepancy between the views of peers and teachers and Peter's view of his situation disconcerting. Teachers and peers see withdrawal as a problem of nonparticipation, not trying hard enough to be a part of groups, and doing things that other students will not see as acceptable or desirable. Peter did not see that he could control his destiny by acting differently or doing more. In fact, what he had done was to stop caring what others thought and he had pulled himself away from others at the school except for one other student with whom he shared common interests. Otherwise his
friends were outside of the school. His words and attitude toward the situation suggested that he felt he could do nothing except meet his fate because it was controlled by others around him.

All teachers felt the student had some responsibility in changing the situation, that through involvement in extracurricular activities, the student could improve his situation. Peers echoed this in their statements about belonging and doing things with their friends and discussing why it seemed some students were not part of the group, that they do stupid things and do not try to be involved. The responsibility for change is located within the student. The peer group or Peter’s teachers attributing the isolation to Peter’s actions may see nothing that they could do differently. They might wait and see if Peter comes around and if Peter “chooses” to behave in such a manner and cause his own exclusion, they cannot force him to be involved.

Those in the peer group and Peter’s teachers were able to suggest ways Peter could change his situation, while Peter sees nothing he ever did or could now do differently to improve his social situation. According to Peter, he had tried to be involved and he had not done “stupid” things that would draw any unnecessary negative attention to him. He was singled out for reasons outside of his control and he therefore could do very little or nothing to change his situation.

Attributing the isolation to external forces not only leaves Peter with few ideas for change, it also can provide an “excuse” of sorts, that is he represents the situation as though it was not anything he did or did not do, he was just chosen by the group to be the excluded one. This is may be a defense mechanism to lessen the pain, frustration, and
helplessness of being rejected, but it also makes Peter more helpless to change his situation.
A Summary of Peter's Situation

Peer Rejection

Peter was a "victim" at his school. He clearly had been teased to the point of harassment and others at the school knew this. Teachers were aware of Peter's situation and if their statements about the students are as accurate as their statements about Peter appeared to be, most all students were aware of Peter's situation, as well. Peer rejection can be a subtle phenomenon, a neglect of sorts, but in Peter's case some of his peers blatantly let it be known they did not like him or at least did not care about his feelings. Indications from some teachers suggest that peers who did not directly tease Peter also did not interact positively with him, but in a neutral manner, such as cooperative behaviors in groups, with little outside of this. In fairness to the group, this study did not investigate the peer side of this issue and the dynamics of the situation as seen by students who had harassed or ignored Peter. The causes of rejection from the perspective of the peer group is an area for further study.

Withdrawal

Peter withdrew from his peer group. He had consciously limited his contact with students who might want to tease him and reported that he enjoyed the escape that came from being in his "own world." This study was not extensive enough to completely explain how withdrawn Peter was, nor how drastic the changes from fifth to sixth grade truly were. Peter most likely had always been a quiet student, but his friendships outside
the school suggest that for Peter to have only one friend in his school was caused by something other than his choice. Peter’s withdrawal was a product of a negative environment and the only solution that seemed to work in his eyes.

**Perspective**

**How Peter Perceives the Situation**

Peter felt that he was controlled by his environment. Numerous times during the interview, Peter made mention of being “chosen” for teasing and harassment. Peter may have done things that peers perceived as unusual and used to tease him, for example, something they saw in Peter may have driven the homosexual remarks in sixth grade, however, nothing specific emerged consistently in the interviews with his teachers and peers. What is important, though, is that Peter was not aware of any characteristics he possessed that were a direct cause of the harassment. His situation was created by peers for reasons only they knew and he was having little success in changing his withdrawn status because peers controlled it. Peter knew that trying things that interested his peers would help his situation. Most recently paintball games had provided Peter with some success, as he was able to participate with peers in this. However, in the past Peter had tried such avenues of inclusion and was still not accepted, supporting his conclusion that the exclusion was based on arbitrary reasons of his peers.

**How Peter’s Teachers and Peers Perceive the Situation**

Peer perceptions of exclusion and avoiding exclusion revolved around interests and participating in activities. Also, Peter’s peers indicated that students who were teased and excluded usually did things that were “stupid” or unusual. It can be assumed
then, to change students could act differently and participate more. Teachers were not certain about the reason for peer rejection in Peter’s case; they speculated that he may not appear “cool” or comes across as an “easy target,” but they were able to share ideas they felt would help Peter to be included. Teachers felt Peter needed to take “risks” and get involved in peer group activities. Three of the teachers indicated that athletics might be out of the question for Peter as he didn’t seem particularly gifted in this area, but that other extracurricular activities would help him be a part of the group and less rejected by his peers.

**Possible Directions for Peter**

**Heightened Awareness**

Teacher awareness of Peter’s situation is potentially very beneficial. I felt that people were looking out for Peter even if they did not know exactly how to stop the rejection or help Peter feel included. Teachers who listened and were familiar with Peter’s difficulties could provide support for Peter and ideas to those trying to change the situation.

**Change**

Change cannot occur at only the individual level only if Peter is to have success. This study describes a system of interactions and points where the system needs modification. Encouraging Peter to join groups and try new activities will lead to more failure if his peers still refuse to accept him. Likewise, effort on the part of his peers to include him will be useless if Peter continues to isolate himself and spend time with only one other person at the school. The teachers, as part of the system, can talk about
problems with students and try to understand the situation clearly so that suggestions they make to Peter or his peers are based on the needs of those involved, instead of more generic advice such as more involvement in peer activities.

Friends and Success Outside the School

Peter indicated in the interview that he had friends outside the school and they met often for role playing games. This was interesting given the absence of all but one close relationship at the school. If Peter could be successful in establishing and maintaining friendships outside, but not inside the school, this discrepancy could be explained by the environment at the school and characteristics of his peer group therein. Peter’s situation may have been more tolerable because he had people to turn to even though few were found inside the school. Peter’s friends outside the school could continue to be a critical element of support by providing a more positive environment outside the school to alleviate some of the negative emotions for Peter within the school.

Limitations of the Study

Researcher Bias

I investigated the phenomenon of social withdrawal extensively in preparation for the current study. The ideas I explored served as a foundation for this research and provided me an understanding of the dynamics of social withdrawal as described in earlier research on the subject. Although this information helped tremendously in my exploration of Peter’s situation, it may also have created potential bias as I entered observations and interviews with preconceived notions of social withdrawal.
Small Sample

The present study focused on one student and as such the findings may not be representative of others who are socially withdrawn. Peter’s situation may or may not replicate itself for students in other schools, because the environment will always vary to some degree, as will the characteristics of the persons involved. Further, as indicated in the literature review, there may be multiple types of social withdrawal with numerous causes, and a single case study could address only one situation. Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest some promising directions for further research.

Limited Viewpoints Examined

The students who harassed Peter do not have a voice in this study. Their motives and just as importantly, their perceptions of how the events unfolded, might shed new light on Peter’s case. The belief system that drove the behaviors of Peter’s peers, those who blatantly rejected him and those in more neutral positions, as well as the behaviors of his teachers was not explored. The peers who verbally and physically harassed Peter may have felt their actions completely justified. The teachers may have been opposed to the treatment, but may have also felt that Peter had put himself in the situation by his choice to be a nonparticipant. Their belief systems and the outcomes for their behaviors was not investigated.

Future Research

As suggested above, research is needed which delves further into the belief systems of those who are part of a constellation of individuals contributing to a case of social withdrawal. Perspectives of the “bullies” as well as the peers, teachers, and target
individuals may provide some important insights into how bullying patterns are initiated and maintained, and how this in turn, plays into subsequent social withdrawal. Involving multiple socially withdrawn individuals would likely yield more representative results. Finally, this study clearly suggests the need for a “systems” approach to the problem of social withdrawal where each contributing member reflects on and articulates their role in a situation of social withdrawal.

Literature on social withdrawal and situations involving peer rejection have shown that escape from those situations while remaining in the same setting (i.e., the school) is difficult and sometimes not possible (Evans & Eder, 1993; Merten, 1996). In Peter’s case, I felt his escape would be affected by the causes he attributed to peer rejection and these attributions would influence any attempts to change. Also, the peer definitions he had come to accept as part of his identity, such as “outcast”, would make his escape even more difficult.

**Attribution Theory and the Approach to Change**

Conflicting ideas of situational control, as seen with Peter and his teachers and peers, where Peter felt external factors controlled him and his peers and teachers felt his withdrawal was an internal issue, may impede the progress of change. If the peer group and teachers see the responsibility as Peter’s whereas he feels controlled by the group, any attempts to resolve the issue of withdrawal may be unsuccessful.

**Attributions.** Attribution theory suggests that the beliefs a person has about a situation and the causes they attribute to success or failure in that situation can affect motivation to involve oneself in such situations in the future (Weiner, 1990, 1992). The
causes an individual attributes to success or failure can enhance or further impede his or her progress. Peter could attribute his social failure to a lack of effort on his part, something he could easily change by putting forth effort and enhance his involvement in the peer group. However, he chose to attribute his failure to the peer group and their whims, allowing him no method of correcting the situation. Also, Peter attributed social failure to his interests and abilities, things he could not easily change, and therefore believed he was incapable of group participation because of these factors.

Peter may not have more successful peer interactions if he assumes that the events that create these successes or failures are outside his control. However, it may also be more beneficial for him to attribute the social failure to the external forces, than to feel something is "wrong" with him. I assumed this would be a discovery, that the student would feel isolated because he did things that others did not like, however, it would seem he feels that others just need someone to push around. Also, Peter feels they will not accept his interests, rather than believing that his interests may be different from his peers and need to be changed.

Because of past situations, Peter sets himself up to expect future failure and creates an unstable, uncontrollable environment where his successes are due to the peer group, not to any effort of his own. This causes him to perceive no relationship between his actions, such as making an effort to try group activities, and the outcome of being accepted by the group. However, it may also be that the group truly does control Peter’s belonging; the group decides “out of the blue” whether or not to allow certain students to participate or reject them for arbitrary reasons. The reasons in Peter’s case were the way
he acted "gay or queer" (according to his peers) and his lack of athletic ability; "he's not an athlete." I suggest there are two possible considerations arising from the data: (a) that Peter sees no escape because the group makes all decisions or (b) that there is no escape because the group does have such control. Future research could investigate whether it is the group dynamics or the student's perception or a combination of both.

**Control by Peer Definition**

There should be further investigation into the labels that peers have created for Peter. "Outcast" was used by Peter as a self-descriptor, but was not entirely self-created. The fact that Peter identified himself in such a seemingly negative manner without hesitation suggests that changing his thoughts about that label would be very difficult for him. The teacher who suggested Peter's peers know he is a "victim" supports this notion that the peer group has given Peter certain negative labels that they are aware of and most likely they view him in light of these. In a sense the peer group has boxed Peter into a category defined by words like "outcast" and "victim." The ramifications for Peter and other students in his situation who define themselves through the eyes and words of their peers needs more attention.

The question remains as to whether Peter truly wanted to be accepted. If he did not, then he probably also did not do all he could to escape his isolation. If Peter was not determined to change his "outcast" status, it is quite possible that his attempts to achieve a more accepted role in the peer group may have been half-hearted. I have assumed that Peter did want to belong and had tried several times to do so with minimal success. This, I feel led to his social withdrawal. Pursuing questions regarding Peter's desire for change
might paint a very different picture of the situation and Peter's possibility to escape from
his isolation.

This case study provided a personal glimpse into the life of a student who had
withdrawn from peer interactions. Peter's situation may serve as an example of one way
in which social withdrawal occurs where a student was apparently driven to withdrawal
by the actions of the peer group. Though Peter's situation is not necessarily
representative of the problems faced by other persons with social withdrawal, by
examining his situation, a better understanding of the perspectives that influence
interactions was gained as were ideas about the various attributions made regarding the
causes and solutions for social withdrawal. I was able to examine Peter's life by talking
with him and others who knew him. This examination sheds light on the social dynamics
that may be present in other cases of social withdrawal and that warrant further
exploration.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Observations:

Patterns of behavior associated with social withdrawal and peer interactions tend to cycle and become "normal" for the student who is withdrawn and his or her peers. I looked for meaning in what might be only routine situations to students and teachers. The observations provided me the context that interviews did not and served as reference points for the interviews with teachers, that is, "I saw this behavior in class, what does it mean?"

Observations concentrated on the focus student's behavior, peer interactions, and the level of class or activity participation. A more general observation of the environment is also important to understand the interpersonal dynamics of the situation. Merriam (1998) suggests the following elements will be present and observable in any situation: (a) the physical setting; (b) the participants; (c) activities and interactions; (d) conversation; (e) subtle factors (p. 97-98). These five elements were used as the guideline for making observations in this study.
APPENDIX B

Interview questions:

Probes were used throughout the interviews to elicit more information thought pertinent to the study. Probes included the following:

1. Tell me more about it.

2. Explain what you mean.

3. Is there anything else?

Students

Due to the nature of the study, student interviews focused on peer relationships and not specifically on social withdrawal. The target student did not realize he was the focus of the research as this would only have added to the potential concerns he had regarding his situation at the school. Ethically, it would have put undue stress on the student and further differentiated him from peers; an outcome outweighing the benefits of any research findings. Questions were as follows:

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Do you like school?
   a. If yes, what makes school enjoyable for you?
   b. If no, what would make school better?

3. Tell me about your friends. Who are they? (Have students provide a list and differentiate between school and home friends.)
   a. What makes this person a friend? Why do you think of X as a friend?
4. I want to better understand relationships that students your age have.
   a. Tell me what has happened in the last couple of days with friends or peers.
      (Positive or negative interactions)
   b. Why do you think it (the event) happened that way?
   c. What would you have liked to have happened differently?

5. Have you had uncomfortable interactions with your friends or classmates in the past?
   a. Tell me about this.
   b. Was this at school or at home? (If at home, repeat question for school.)
   Point: Trying to understand perceptions of events that were unsuccessful or uncomfortable regarding social interactions and treatment students have received.

6. Who do you think sees you as their friend?
   a. Why?
   b. (If nobody) Why do you think that is?
   c. How does that make you feel? (Or, Are you okay with that?)
   d. Has it always been this way for you?
   e. (If no) When did things change? Why do you think things changed?

Teacher

The goal of the initial part of the interview is to better understand student behavior and peer relationships through the eyes of the teacher. [The teacher was informed of the study’s purpose, to better understand peer relationships, but the word “social withdrawal” was not used because it might have influenced teacher responses.]

1. You have (name) as a student. Can you describe (name) for me in one sentence?

2. Can you tell me everything you know about (name)?
   If not forthcoming ask the teacher:
   a. Does (name) have many friends in your class?
   b. Can you describe the nature of the interactions (name) has with these friends?
   c. Does (name) spend a lot of time alone? (If yes) When he does interact with other students how would you describe that interaction?
   d. (If answer is yes to c) Do you think this “alone” is by choice?
   e. What kinds of things do you think might help (name) become more socially involved with other students?
f. Do you know why it is that (name) spends a lot of time alone if s/he does not choose to do so?

3. Thinking back over the past week, can you describe an example of how (name) interacts with his/her fellow classmates?

4. Have you seen any changes in (name) over the year he has been in your class as to how he interacts with other students? (If yes) What do you think caused those changes?