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The effects of being spurned and self-esteem on depersonalization and coping preferences in kindergarten teachers: The case of Hong Kong

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study was to examine, based on a model on spurned helpers' reactions (a) the degrees to which kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong, China, experienced recurrent rejections of their offers of help (being spurned) by peer teachers; (b) whether being spurned by peers would induce depersonalization; (c) the ways teachers with higher or lower self-esteem coped with recurrent rejection; and (d) effects of coping in reducing depersonalization. A sample of serving kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong participated in the study. Their levels of self-esteem were first measured. Five months afterwards, the extents to which they were spurned by their peers and the way they coped with such rejection were assessed. Another five months later, the degrees to which they experienced depersonalization were measured. The results showed (a) that the teachers were fairly spurned; (b) that the more spurned the teachers were, the more depersonalized they were towards their peers; and (c) teachers with higher self-esteem and teachers with lower self-esteem coped with being spurned in different ways. The findings suggest that kindergarten teachers should be aware of recurrent rejection of their offers of help by peer workers and also the adverse effect of such rejection, and that administrators should provide training to teachers to assist them to deal with recurrent rejection of help by peers.

Keywords: Kindergarten teachers, rejection stress, self-esteem, depersonalization, burnout, coping

1. Introduction

Classroom teachers in kindergartens, primary and secondary school settings in the city of Hong Kong, China, perform similar tasks in providing guidance and care to children, such as making preparations for class, conducting lessons, marking assignments, and relating to children (Rao et al., 2003). In addition, relationships among teachers are said to be characterized by mutual support and caring (e.g., Goldstein, 2008; Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000). As such, classroom teachers would have ample opportunities for offering help to peer teachers who may appear to have difficulties with their work. However, to what extents are such offers of help repeatedly turned down? If their offers of help are repeatedly turned down, how would the spurned teachers react? How would the spurned teachers perceive and relate to the rejecting peers? Would the spurned teachers feel that the rejecting teachers have not realized how important it is for them to accept the help? Would the spurned teachers feel that the rejecting peers have been too defensive in reacting to the offers of help? How would the spurned teachers subsequently relate to their rejecting peers? Would they intensify their efforts to induce acceptance of their offers of help or would they distance themselves from the rejecting peers?

In addition, how would the rejected teachers view themselves? Would they feel hurt psychologically by the recurrent rejection? Would the rejection lead them to question their own job-related competence? Little research appears to have been done on the topic of peer rejection of offers of help in classroom teachers in terms of extents of such rejection, adverse effects of the recurrent rejection on how the rejected teachers view themselves, and negative effects of such rejection on how the rejected teachers relate to the rejecting peers.

Based on a model on reactions of rejected helpers that we developed earlier (Rosen et al., 1986; Cheuk and Rosen, 1992), the present study examined, through a sample of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong, (a) the extents to which their offers of help have been rejected repeatedly (being spurned) by peers, with increasing degrees of being spurned, according to the model, signifying increasing magnitudes of stress arising from the negative implications of the rejection on self-perceived efficacy and sociability; (b) whether recurrent rejection of offers of help by peer teachers would induce depersonalization in the spurned teachers; (c) the extent of threat to the self held by spurned teachers who have higher or lower self-esteem as a result of the recurrent rejections; and (d) the ways the spurned teachers with higher or lower self-esteem cope with recurrent rejections of their offers of help, and the effectiveness of their coping in reducing depersonalization. We focused on depersonalization as an outcome of being spurned in view of the adverse effects that depersonalization has been shown to exert on interpersonal relationships with work colleagues and/or clients in professional service providers (Gil-Monte, 2008; Tumkaya, 2007). Thus, if being spurned induces depersonalization, then spurned teachers who experience depersonalization would likely perceive and relate to fellow teachers negatively. Such relating will likely not be able to produce positive and cooperative working and personal relationships among the teachers, but will likely engender, through reciprocity and behavioral confirmation, a detached, antagonistic working atmosphere among the teachers.

We also examined the impact of coping in the light of the positive role that coping can play in alleviating stress (e.g., Aldwin, Yancura, & Boeninger, 2007; Ben-Zur, 2009; Pottie & Ingram, 2008). Thus, spurned teachers who are able to cope well with the rejections may be able to overcome fellow teachers' resistance to being helped and

consequently to restore a sense of efficacy in relating to others. More specifically, we were interested in understanding how individuals with higher or lower self-esteem cope with being spurned, and why they do so. We examined self-esteem for two reasons. First, self-esteem can be considered as a form of self-evaluation of competence and that in our model, self-evaluation of efficacy is one of the core elements. Second, research has shown that individuals with higher self-esteem and individuals with lower self-esteem reacted differently to task success and task failure (Corning, 2002; Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Maner, 2007; Wu, Shui, & Sun, 2006), and thus these two groups of individuals will likely react differently to being spurned, which can be viewed as a form of interpersonal failure.

The model on rejected helpers' reactions and related research will first be described, followed by an extension of how the model would be used to capture the reactions to being spurned by peers in kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. The results of this study will expand our understanding of (a) the degrees of recurrent rejection of offers of help (being spurned) that are experienced by kindergarten teachers; (b) the negative effects (depersonalization) of recurrent rejection of offers of help by peers; and (c) the role of self-esteem in moderating the impact of recurrent rejection on self-threat and in influencing how recurrent rejection is dealt with.

1.1 Model and related research

According to the model (Rosen et al., 1986; Cheuk et al., 2003), individuals harbor expectations that their offer of help to a needy recipient would likely be accepted. Subsequent rejection of the offer is stressful to the rejected helper because, in addition to violating prior expectancy of acceptance, the rejection carries unfavorable implications on the helpers' self-perception of being task efficacious and/or caring in helping others, and is thereby threatening to the self. The model further proposes that rejected helpers would cope with the rejection cognitively and behaviorally, with a view to restoring their threatened self-images. The model also proposes that would-be helpers' reactions to rejection are moderated by personal factors, such as individual differences in self-perceived efficacy in task competence and/or efficacy in helping others, and by situational factors, such as the likelihood of further interactions with the recipient in the near or distant future.

To test the model, we first conducted role-play simulation studies (Rosen et al., 1986), followed by laboratory experiments in which an offer of help was actually rejected or accepted by a confederate (Rosen et al., 1986; Cheuk and Rosen, 1992; 1993; 1996). The results revealed that helpers harbored an expectation of acceptance of their offer of help (Rosen et al., 1986), and found this expectation violated when their offer was turned down (Cheuk and Rosen, 1992). The rejection was indeed stressful, as rejected helpers expressed much greater negative affects at the outcome of the offer than did their accepted counterparts (Cheuk and Rosen, 1992; 1993; 1996). Rejected helpers then manifested various coping reactions, all of which appeared to serve to restore their threatened self-images. For instance, rejected helpers claimed that at the time they were considering whether to offer help, they actually had very little control over the decision on whether or not to offer help (Cheuk and Rosen, 1992). Rejected helpers also postdicted that the recipient would refuse the offer (Cheuk and Rosen, 1993). These claims allowed the rejected helpers to detach themselves from the decision which led to the rejection, and thereby enabled them to maintain an illusion that they had not lost decision control. Rejected helpers also regarded the recipient as being too defensive in viewing the offer of help, felt that the recipient had not realized

the importance of accepting help, and devalued the rejecter to a greater extent than they did to the self (Cheuk and Rosen, 1993; 1996). All these reactions reflected that the rejected helpers were trying to detach themselves from the responsibility for the rejection, and therefore could still convince themselves that they were competent and caring individuals.

1.2 Extending the model to capture the experience of classroom teachers: Extent of being spurned by peers

We are interested not just in reactions of would-be helpers in the laboratory, but also in the experience and reactions of professional caregivers such as classroom teachers who may face recurrent refusal of help by their students, peer teachers and/or parents of students. In extending our model to capture the experience and behaviors of classroom teachers, Cheuk et al. (2000) investigated the extent to which secondary school teachers in Hong Kong (China) experienced persistent rejection of offers of help by peers and found the teachers to be fairly spurned (Mean score was 2.78 out on an 11-point scale measuring being spurned). Cheuk et al. (2003) further examined the degree of being spurned by peers in secondary school teachers in another location (Guangzhou, China) and obtained converging results. In those studies, we focused on rejection of help offers by peer teachers because difficulties with peers has been shown to be an acute stressor for teachers (Tang, Au, Schwarzer, & Schmitz, 2001; Zude, Ji, & Junyu, 2004). The present study represented our continuing effort in examining the experiences of being spurned by peers in another category of teachers -- kindergarten teachers.

Teachers in kindergartens in Hong Kong perform very similar tasks in providing guidance and care to young children (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003; Tsai, Fung, & Chow, 2006). Teachers in kindergartens in other societies are likely to behave similarly (e.g., Humphries & Senden, 2000; Rodd, 1999). Kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong therefore would have ample opportunities for offering help to peer teachers who may appear to have difficulties with their work. In addition, relationships among kindergarten teachers are said to be characterized by mutual support and caring (Humphries & Senden, 2000), which would promote the offering of help and support among kindergarten teachers. However, there are many reasons why the offers of help may be turned down or the help is accepted but not follow through. For example, the help offered may not be perceived as useful. Further, the receipt of help may generate a sense of dependence (Fisher & Nadler, 1982), may induce a sense of obligation to reciprocate the help in future (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984), or may be perceived as a gesture to strengthen a deteriorating relationship, which one does not wish to continue (Shinn, Lehman, & Wong, 1984). We hypothesized that kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong would experience a higher degree of being
spurned by their peers than would secondary school teachers in Hong Kong, on the ground that, unlike primary or secondary school teachers who tend to specialize in teaching a particular subject matter, teachers in kindergartens in Hong Kong perform very similar tasks in providing guidance and care to young children (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003), and thus should have relatively more opportunities for offering help to peer teachers who may have difficulties with their work, and consequently may have relatively more opportunities for the offers of help to be rejected.

1.3 Extending the model to capture the experience of classroom teachers: Being spurned by peers producing depersonalization?

Another objective of this study was to examine if being spurned would produce the negative effects of depersonalization, which is a callout, highly negative attitude towards peers. In our studies on secondary school teachers in Hong Kong (Cheuk et al., 2000) and Guangzhou (Cheuk et al., 2003), we examined the degree to which being spurned by peers was associated with depersonalization. In those studies, we reasoned that being spurned would induce depersonalization in light of results of our laboratory studies (Rosen et al., 1987; Cheuk and Rosen, 1992; 1996) which revealed that rejected helpers exhibited (a) decreased evaluation of the rejecter; (b) decreased attraction towards the rejecter; (c) increased tendency to view the rejecter as unduly defensive; and (d) increased tendency to distance themselves from the rejecter. These reactions can be regarded as short-term, less emotionally laden analogs of depersonalization (Maslach & Jackson, 1982). It is understandable why depersonalization would follow from recurrent rejection, as the rejecter is held responsible for bringing about repeated rejection due to certain unfavorable attributes the rejecter is perceived to have, such as being too proud or being too egoistic to accept offers of help from others. With such negative perceptions of the rejecter, it seems logical for the rejected helper to view the rejecter unfavorably and to choose to distance oneself from the rejecter. The results in the two studies on secondary school teachers (Cheuk et al., 2000, 2003) showed a strong association between being spurned and depersonalization. Based on what we found in the secondary school teachers, we hypothesized, in the present study, that being spurned by peers would induce depersonalization in kindergarten teachers. Our proposition of being spurned by peers inducing depersonalization echoes with recent attention paid to interpersonal difficulties as a source of stress in various job settings (Duffy, Shaw, Scott, & Tepper, 2006), and that our proposition has pinpointed one aspect of interpersonal relationships that is stress inducing – being spurned by peers. The adverse effects that depersonalization may in turn produce should be emphasized. Depersonalization, in our view, would lead the spurned teachers to relate to their peers in a negative manner, thus creating, through behavioral confirmation (Synder & Haugen, 1995) a vicious cycle of unfavorable perceptions, negative interactions, and conflict-laden relationships among the teachers.

Reactions to being spurned in teachers with higher or lower self-esteem: Threat to the self

Another objective was to examine how kindergarten teachers with higher or lower self-esteem react to being spurned by their peer teachers. Specifically, we examined the extent of self-threat that is experienced by kindergarten teachers with higher or lower self-esteem in the face of recurrent peer rejection, and the way teachers with higher or lower self-esteem cope with such peer rejection. We chose to examine self-esteem because self-esteem has been viewed as a core aspect of the self (Sommer & Baumister, 2002) and because self-esteem has been shown to influence reactions to task outcome (e.g., Benetti & Kambouropoulos, 2006). Following task failure and given a choice on whether to work on the same task again, individuals with higher self-esteem prefer to approach the same task whereas individuals with lower self-esteem tend not to do so (Baumeister & Tice, 1985). Further, individuals with higher self-esteem are more able to think positively of themselves after task failure than do individuals with lower self-esteem (Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Heimpel, Elliot, & Wood, 2006). In addition, compared with their counterparts with lower self-esteem, individuals with higher self-esteem are more likely to harbor expectancy of task success again (Brockner, Derr, & Laing, 1987), are still more motivated to perform well (Brown & Gallagher, 1992),

and are still more persistent in task performance (Benetti & Kambouropoulos, 2006). These reactions suggest that individuals with higher self-esteem are not threatened by isolated incidents of task failure because they have relatively more positive global self-perceptions probably arising from a long history of task successes.

However, we found in our laboratory experiments that spurned helpers with chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring, compared with those who were less efficacious and caring, harbored greater threat to the self following rejection, as revealed by having greater negative affects and exhibiting a stronger tendency to externalize their failure (rejection). Such results are not consistent with the view that individuals with positive self-perceptions can tolerate isolated failures and are not threatened. We interpreted our laboratory results as suggestive of such individuals having greater investment in their selves and thus having a greater need to defend against failure, relative to those with less positive chronic self-perceptions. In the present study, we proposed that the effects of self-esteem are similar to those of chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring, and so kindergarten teachers with higher self-esteem would feel more threatened when they encounter persistent rejection of offers of help by peers, compared with teachers with lower self-esteem. Based on the results of our laboratory studies, self-threat could be manifested in the magnitudes of negative affects that one experiences. We thus hypothesized that spurned teachers with higher self-esteem would experience greater negative affects than would spurned teachers with lower self-esteem.

1.4 Reactions to being spurned in teachers with higher or lower self-esteem: Ways of coping with being spurned

With regard to how kindergarten teachers with higher or lower self-esteem cope with being spurned, we adopted Folkman and Lazarus' (1985) much researched distinction of coping into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping refers to efforts employed to deal directly with the stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping refers to efforts directed at managing the emotional distress caused by the threat or efforts aiming at reinterpreting the stressor as being less threatening. In the context of kindergarten teachers coping with recurrent rejection of help by their peers, problem-focused coping would involve, for instance, the spurned teachers actively changing the way they offer help to make their offers more receptive. Emotion-focused coping would refer, for example, to consuming alcohol to forget about the negative experience of being spurned or subjectively minimizing the importance of rejection.

In relation to how spurned teachers with higher or lower self-esteem cope with recurrent peer rejection, we propose that effects of self-esteem are similar to those of chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring that we have documented in our laboratory studies earlier. We found in our laboratory studies that individuals who had chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring were more likely to employ confrontative strategies in dealing with the rejection such as opting to interact further with the rejecter and learning more about persuasion techniques. These individuals were also found to be less likely to adopt techniques that would allow them to deal with the emotional distress they were having, such as subjectively minimizing the importance of the rejection and opting for information that was more emotionally uplifting (Cheuk and Rosen, 1993; 1996). On the other hand, it was shown that individuals with less positive chronic self-perceptions were less likely to employ confrontative strategies in dealing with the rejection, but were more likely to employ

techniques that would allow them to deal with the emotional distress they were experiencing (Cheuk and Rosen, 1993; 1996). Using confrontative techniques can be considered as a form of problem-focused coping while employing techniques to deal with emotional distress constitutes emotion-focused coping. Thus, individuals with chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring adopted a high magnitude of problem-focused coping but a low magnitude of emotion-focused coping, whereas those who were less efficacious and caring employed a low magnitude of problem-focused coping but a high magnitude of emotion-focused coping. Accordingly, we hypothesized that spurned kindergarten teachers with higher self-esteem would use problem-focused coping much more than emotion-focused coping, whereas spurned teachers with lower self-esteem would adopt emotion-focused coping much more than problem-focused coping.

In our view, as problem-focused coping deals more directly with the stressor than does emotion-focused coping, the use of it should provide the stressed individuals with a greater sense of control over negative events and with a better chance of overcoming the problem one is facing. Research has indeed shown the positive, long-term effects of problem-focused coping over emotion-focused coping (Jansson, Lundh, & Oldenburg, 2005; Salsman, Pavlik, Boerner, & Andrykowski, 2004). As such, we also hypothesized that the use of a coping style high on problem-focused coping and low on emotion-focused coping (adopted by people with higher self-esteem) would be more effective in reducing depersonalization than would a coping style low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping (adopted by people with lower self-esteem).

In sum, our hypotheses were: (a) the extents of being spurned harbored by kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong would be higher than that experienced by secondary school teachers in Hong Kong; (b) being spurned would induce depersonalization; (c) spurned kindergarten teachers with higher self-esteem would be more threatened than would spurned kindergarten teachers with lower self-esteem, expressed in terms of negative affects experienced; and (d) in dealing with being spurned, spurned kindergarten teachers with higher self-esteem would employ a coping style high on problem-focused coping and low on emotion-focused coping whereas spurned teachers with lower self-esteem would adopt a coping style low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping; and that the use of the former style would be more effective in reducing depersonalization than would the use of the latter style.

2 Method

2.1 Participants and procedure

Two hundred forty serving kindergarten teachers attending a qualification enhancement program of study at a teacher training institute in Hong Kong were approached and solicited to participate in the study. The study was described as a study on teachers' relationships with their colleagues. They were told that, if they participated, they would need to respond to three questionnaires sent to them at three points in time. Two hundred thirty-one teachers agreed to participate. The sample was all female (100%), the average age being 26.54 (SD = 22.31), with a mean of 5.14 years of working experience (SD = 27.43).

A questionnaire, written in Chinese, containing a measure of self-esteem and also

measures of key demographic elements such as age, gender, religion was administered when the kindergartens started their school terms. Each participant was asked to come up with an identification code comprising three alphabets and three numbers arranged in any order, to indicate the code on the questionnaire, and to use the same code when responding to the other two questionnaires to be administered subsequently.

Another questionnaire, assessing being spurned, negative affects and coping style were administered five months afterward. To respond to the questions, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with their fellow teachers in the past five months. Two hundred and twenty-nine students returned the questionnaire.

Another five months later, the participants were requested to respond to a third questionnaire which contained a measure of depersonalization, along with some general questions about their perceptions of their work. To respond to the questions, participants were asked to reflect on their views, feelings, and experiences relating to their fellow teachers that they had in the previous month. Two hundred and seven responded. Only the data of the participants who responded to measures that were administered at all the three points in time were used.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Self-esteem

This variable was measured by the well-researched Rosenberg's 10-item measure (examples of the items: "Overall, I feel I am a competent person", "I am able to influence others", "I feel I am better than others"). The alpha of the items was .74, which was regarded as of acceptable level. Respondents were differentiated into those who were higher in self-esteem and those who were lower in self-esteem through a median split of the scores obtained, in preparation for analyses involving self-esteem conceptualized as an individual differences measure, reflective of what we have found in our laboratory studies on chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring in rejected helpers. One hundred and forty-one teachers fell into the higher self-esteem group and ninety teachers fell into the lower self-esteem group. A median split was adopted over other ways of categorizing the scores such as using the highest quarter and lowest quarter of scores, for two reasons. First, our aim was to examine differences between individuals with higher self-esteem and those with lower self-esteem instead of investigating individuals with very high self-esteem and individuals with very low self-esteem. Second, in our previous study examining chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring, we adopted a median split of the scores obtained. To allow for meaningful comparison between the results we obtained on chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring in our previous study with the scores to be obtained in the present study, we opted for using, in the present study, a median split of the scores obtained on self-esteem.

2.2.2 Being spurned

A 12-item measure of being spurned that was developed in a previous study (Cheuk and Rosen, 1992) was adopted. Respondents rated the extent to which colleagues resisted their offers of help, on scales each of which ranged from (1) *applies very little to me* to (11) *applies very much to me*. Examples of the items are: "My colleagues feel more reluctant to approach me for help than to approach my fellow colleagues", "Colleagues

who need help avoid seeking help from me", and "When I offered help to my colleagues, they think that I did it out of some ulterior motives". A composite was constructed through simple averaging of the items. Internal consistency among the 12 items (alpha = .86) was considered adequate. The sample showed an adequate distribution of scores (M = 3.61, SD = 32.37, with a range from 1.01 to 7.72).

Respondents were differentiated into those who were more spurned and those who were less spurned through a median split of the scores obtained, in preparation for analyses examining the relationship between being spurned and self-esteem, which was conceptualized as an individual differences measure.

2.2.3 Negative affects

Negative affects including anger, worry, unhappiness, strain, disappointment, and helplessness were each assessed by an 11-point scale (1 = absolutely without this feeling; 11 = feel very much so), adapted from the Organizational Stress Questionnaire (Van Dijkhuizen, & Reiche, 1980), which measures the tendency to experience negative emotions. A composite was constructed by simple averaging of these items. The internal consistency of the scale was considered as adequate (Alpha = .86).

2.2.4 Coping style

We adapted a coping scale based on the Ways of Coping Scale (Vitaliano, Russo, Carr, Maiuro, & Becker, 1983) to assess the degree to which the kindergarten teachers employed problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Five items, all on a 7-point scale, were used to reflect each of these two types of coping.

An example of problem-focused coping was "When I encountered difficulties in my work, I spent a great deal of time thinking how it could be overcome." An example of emotion-focused coping was "When I encountered difficulties in my work, I talked with other colleagues to release my frustration". For each of these two types of coping strategy, a composite score was formed by averaging the items. Internal consistency of the composites was of sufficient magnitude (alpha for problem-focused coping = .83; alpha for emotion-focused coping = .61).

2.2.5 Depersonalization

We employed a 5-item depersonalization measure developed by Cheuk and Rosen (1992), on scales ranging from (1) *applies very little to me* to (11) *applies very much to me* (e.g., "don't care much what happens to my colleagues". "I found the behavior and personality of some of my colleagues disgusting." "What my colleagues did irritated me".). A composite was constructed by averaging the items. The alpha of the items was .74, which was considered as proper. The sample showed an adequate distribution (M = 3.24, SD = 33.54, with a range from 1.05 to 8.13).

3 Results

3.1 Extents of being spurned

A t-test was conducted to assess the extents of being spurned that was experienced by

the kindergarten teachers (M = 3.61) and by the secondary school teachers in Hong Kong (using the data on the latter group we gathered from a previous study, Cheuk et al. (2000), M = 2.48). The results revealed a significant difference, t= 5.21, p<.05, showing that the former group was more spurned.

3.2 Impact of being spurned on depersonalization

To examine the hypothesized effects of being spurned on depersonalization, a regression analysis was conducted with the spurning scores as the predictor and depersonalization scores as the criterion. The results revealed that, as predicted, being spurned was positively related to depersonalization, B = .298, F (1, 199) = 9.21, p<.05, such that the more spurned the teachers were, the more depersonalized they felt towards their peers five months later.

3.3 Impact of being spurned and self-esteem on negative affects

Self-esteem was employed as an individual differences measure, and to assess the hypothesis that spurned teachers with higher self-esteem would harbor greater negative affects than would spurned teachers with lower self-esteem, a two-way analysis of variance (more spurned Vs less spurned; higher self-esteem Vs lower self-esteem) was conducted on the negative affects composite. The interaction effects were significant, F(1, 197) = 6.33, p<.05, showing that, as predicted, more spurned, higher self-esteem teachers experienced greater negative affects (M = 4.19) than did more spurned, lower self-esteem teachers (M = 2.81). On the other hand, less spurned higher self-esteem teachers admitted experiencing a magnitude of negative affects (M = 2.45) similar to that admitted by less spurned lower self-esteem teachers (M = 2.29).

3.4 Impact of self-esteem on coping

To assess the hypothesized use of the two types of coping by teachers with higher and lower self-esteem, a t-test was conducted on the problem-focused coping scores for teachers who were spurned. The results indicated that the former group employed this type of coping to a greater extent (M = 4.47) than did the latter (M = 3.21), t = 4.79, p<.05. Likewise, a t-test was performed on the emotion-focused coping scores. The results revealed, contrary to what were predicted, both groups of teachers employed emotion-focused coping to a similar extent (t = 1.11, ns, M = 4.39 for high self esteem teachers, and M = 4.02 for lower self-esteem teachers).

3.5 Impact of being spurned and coping style on depersonalization

A two-way analysis of variance with being spurned (more spurned versus less spurned) and self-esteem (higher self-esteem versus lower self-esteem) as the independent variables and depersonalization as the dependent variable was conducted. As indicated in the previous section, teachers with higher self-esteem adopted a coping style high on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping, while the group of teachers who had lower self-esteem used a coping style low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping. The interaction effects were significant, F(1, 201) = 13.46, p< .01, showing that for kindergarten teachers who were less spurned, those who had higher self-esteem experienced similar level of depersonalization (M = 2.35) as did teachers who had lower self-esteem, M = 2.68, F(1, 198) = 1.09, ns. On the other

hand, for teachers who were more spurned, those who had higher self-esteem experienced less depersonalization (M = 2.56) than did their counterparts who had lower self-esteem (M = 4.62), $F(1, 192) = 6.31$, $p < .05$. The results thus showed that the coping style employed by teachers with higher self-esteem (high on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping) was more effective in reducing depersonalization than did the coping style adopted by teachers with lower self-esteem (low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping).

4. Discussion

4.1 Extent of being spurned

Rejection of offers of help by peer teachers in the school setting and how the rejected teachers subsequently react in terms of self-perception and perceptions of the rejecting peers have so far received little attention. The present study, which is part of our continuing effort to examine this topic, focused on kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. The obtained mean score of being spurned (3.62 on an 11-point scale) shows that being spurned by peers was, indeed, experienced by the kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong who participated in this study. Together with the results showing being spurned in secondary school teachers in Hong Kong (Cheuk et al., 2000) and secondary school teachers in Guangzhou (Cheuk et al., 2003), we now have evidences that being spurned by peer teachers is a phenomenon that needs to be recognized.

Compared with the magnitudes of being spurned experienced by secondary school teachers (Cheuk et al., 2000), kindergarten teachers were spurned by their peers to a greater extent. We think that three factors might have contributed to the higher level of being spurned in kindergarten teachers. First, unlike teachers in primary or secondary school settings who tend to specialize in teaching a particular subject matter, teachers in kindergartens carry out very similar tasks in providing guidance and care for young children and interact with one another frequently and closely (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003). As such, teachers in kindergartens would have relatively more opportunities for offering help to peer teachers, and consequently more opportunities for rejection to occur. Second, the norm of caring and support which is more prevalent among kindergarten teachers than among secondary school teachers (Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000; Humphries & Senden, 2000; Rodd, 1999), while promoting exchanges of support, also at the same time increases the opportunities for rejection to take place. Third, the professionalization of kindergarten teaching in Hong Kong, marked by increasing public recognition of the work of kindergarten teaching, mandatory requirement of professional qualification for entry to kindergarten teaching and increases in salary of kindergarten teachers, has induced greater importance that is attached to task competence. This in turn may have made acceptance of help more reflective of one's task incompetence (Nadler, 2004), which in turn leads to rejection of the offers of help from peers. Future research would need to explore if these are the key reasons that have led kindergarten teachers to reject offers of help from peers. As much as kindergarten teachers in other places perform similar work in providing guidance and care to young children, interact frequently with peers and face similar challenges towards professionalization, they may likely be spurned by peers to an extent similar to that experienced by kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong.

4.2 Impact of being spurned on depersonalization

The obtained association between being spurned by peers and depersonalization showed the adverse effects that being spurned by peers can produce. Depersonalization, referring to a callous, negative attitude towards those with whom one works, has been shown, in the setting of therapy, to be associated with holding a negative attitude towards clients (Raedeke, Lunney, & Venables, 2002), and giving decreased attention to clients (Goldstein, MacLaren, Smith, Mengert, Maestas, Foy, Wenrich, & Ramsey, 2005). As such and extending to the case of kindergarten teachers, spurned kindergarten teachers would likely exert little effort in trying to understand their peers, derive little satisfaction from interacting with peers, distance themselves from their rejecting peers, and to relate to them in a negative manner, thus creating, through behavioral confirmation, a vicious cycle of negative interpersonal perceptions and relationships. However, the spurned teachers would benefit greatly through interacting with peers in knowing more about their work, such as attributes and needs of children, needs and perceptions of the parents of the children, and the work culture of the kindergarten where they are in. In light of the negative effects that being spurned can instigate, research on teacher stress should include being spurned by peers as a potential stressor. In addition, the negative effects that being spurned by peers can produce suggest that training should be furnished to kindergarten teachers during initial or in-service refresher training regarding prevalence of the occurrence of being spurned by peers and the negative consequences of depersonalization arising from being spurned.

Our claim of the causal linkage between being spurned and depersonalization has been strengthened by the prospective design that was employed in the present study wherein being spurned was measured five months prior to the assessment of depersonalization. A stronger claim of causal relationship between being spurned and depersonalization can be made through the use in future research of a cross-lag panel design, in which being spurned and depersonalization will both be measured five months after the kindergarten teachers have started their professional duties and be measured again at the end of the first year.

4.3 Impact of being spurned and self-esteem on threat to the self

We believe that teachers with higher self-esteem, compared with those with lower self-esteem, are more threatened by rejection, with the threat being expressed by the negative affects that were experienced by the spurned teachers. The Being Spurned X Self-esteem interaction effects on negative affects revealed that, as predicted, spurned teachers with higher self-esteem harbored greater negative affects than did spurned teachers with lower self-esteem, while self-esteem did not make any difference when the teachers were less spurned. Such results are in line with the results of our laboratory studies wherein would-be helpers with more positive chronic self-perception tended to experience greater negative affects following rejection than did helpers with less positive chronic self-perception, mainly because the former group experienced greater self-threat than did the latter group (Cheuk and Rosen, 1992; 1993). Such results are also consistent with research which showed that following task failure, individuals with higher self-esteem tended to make more external causal attributions than did individuals with lower self-esteem, as a means of diffusing their own responsibility for

the failure (e.g., Heatherton & Vohs, 2000).

Our view and the obtained results of greater self-threat experienced by teachers with higher self-esteem is not consistent with the view that individuals with high self-esteem are less threatened by task failure due to a relatively more positive global self-evaluation they have of themselves (e.g., Benetti & Kambouropoulos, 2006; Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Kernis, Brockner, & Frankel, 1989). Perhaps such inconsistency can be explained by the relevance of the outcome of task performance for one's self-definition. In the study by Kernis et al. (1989), the outcome of the task performance might not be viewed by the participants as relevant to their self-definition. Thus, when one's core self-image is not threatened, individuals with higher self-esteem can still ignore the isolated event of task failure. But when the failure is relevant to one's self-definition, and thus threatening to one's core self-image, higher self-esteem individuals would probably be more stressed. According to this interpretation, the results we have obtained imply that the help offered to peers, such as ways to relate effectively to children, was relevant to the self-definition of the spurned teachers. To examine the tenability of this interpretation, future research should examine rejection of offers of help that is relevant to self-definition and rejection of offers of help that is not relevant to self-definition.

4.4 Impact of being spurned and self-esteem on coping

The results on problem-focused coping showed, as hypothesized, that spurned kindergarten teachers with higher self-esteem tended to use this type of coping to a greater extent than did spurned kindergarten teachers with lower self-esteem. Such results are consistent with research revealing that, compared with individuals with lower self-esteem, individuals with higher self-esteem were more task persistent and achieved more positive outcomes, such as being more able to develop a supportive social network (Axelsson, & Ejlertsson, 2002; Way & Greene, 2006). The results on emotion-focused coping indicated that spurned teachers with higher self-esteem tended to use emotion-focused coping to the same, moderate extent as did spurned helpers with lower self-esteem. This was contrary to our hypothesis that the former would tend to use this type of coping to a lesser extent than would the latter. Perhaps, spurned kindergarten teachers with higher self-esteem, like spurned teachers with lower self-esteem, found it important or necessary to deal with the negative affects for their well-being. Thus, teachers with higher self-esteem coped with recurrent rejection through both dealing directly with the recurrent rejection and handling their negative emotions, whereas teachers with lower self-esteem coped by mainly addressing the emotional distress they experienced. The greater effectiveness of the style of coping adopted by higher self-esteem teachers over the style adopted by lower self-esteem teachers in reducing depersonalization is evidenced by the obtained Being Spurned X Self-esteem interaction effects. That the style adopted by higher self-esteem teachers was more effective is understandable in that these teachers attempted actively to overcome peers' resistance to being help and also actively dealt with the negative emotional distress coming from recurrent rejections of their help. In light of the positive effects of problem-focused coping in enabling the stressed individuals to deal with the problem on hand, and the beneficial impact of emotion-focused coping as a short-term therapeutic measure to address the distress experienced and to maintain self-confidence (e.g., Hampel & Petermann, 2006), the use of both forms of coping allowed such individuals to deal with being spurned successfully in the long run, such as evoking acceptance of offers of help by peer teachers and releasing the distress and frustration

that they experience.

Spurned kindergarten teachers with lower self-esteem, on the other hand, tended to use mainly emotion-focused coping to handle their emotional distress arising from recurrent rejections of help. Such form of coping, while allowing the spurned teachers to temporarily deal with the emotional distress they were experiencing, may not enable such individuals to overcome recurrent rejections by peers and the stress arising from such interpersonal failures, and thus would continue to experience recurrent rejection if they persist in offering help. This being the case, it is not just how individuals of lower self-esteem view themselves that serves to maintain a negative self-view (Baumeister, 1993), it is also the way they cope with stress that results in a vicious cycle of interpersonal failures and negative self-perceptions.

In sum, this study has provided evidence for the experience of being spurned by peers in classroom teachers in the kindergarten setting, along with the negative effects being spurned could induce. Training regarding the phenomenon of being spurned and its adverse consequences should be provided to teachers to enable them to be sufficiently prepared to face being spurned and to deal effectively with it. Self-esteem has also been shown to moderate the impacts of being spurned and way of coping with being spurned by peers, suggesting the usefulness of examining individual differences variables in understanding and studying the experience of being spurned.

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