



Our teacher likes you, so I like you: A social network approach to social referencing



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ABSTRACT

A teacher is a social referent for peer liking and disliking when students adjust their evaluations of a peer based on their perceptions of teacher liking and disliking for this peer. The present study investigated social referencing as an intra-individual process that occurs over time, using stochastic actor-oriented modeling with RSiena. The co-evolution of peer-perceived teacher liking and disliking networks with peer liking and disliking networks was analyzed in 52 fifth-grade classes in the Netherlands, with 1370 students ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.60$). Results showed that when a student viewed the teacher to like a peer, this student would also like this peer. Regarding disliking, there was a stronger effect in the opposite direction, indicating that students' disliking a peer increased the likelihood that they would view the peer as disliked by the teacher as well. In sum, partial evidence for social referencing as an intra-individual process was found. For teachers this implies that the cues they provide regarding their liking of a student, and not necessarily their disliking, may affect individual peers' liking of this student.

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1. Introduction

The classroom is a primary context for peer interactions and for the development of peer relationships (McAuliffe, Hubbard, & Romano, 2009; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). In addition to students' interactions with their teachers, peer interactions and relationships are considered important determinants of social and academic adjustment (Ladd, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Visconti, & Ettekal, 2012; Rubin et al., 2006; Wentzel, 2005). Connecting these two influential agents of child development, a growing body of research has focused on how teachers influence children's development indirectly via peer relationships (e.g., Chang et al., 2007; Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001; McAuliffe et al., 2009). More specifically, one branch of research has viewed the teacher as a *social referent* for affective peer evaluations – that is, students are hypothesized to use social cues from how the teacher interacts with a peer as information about the likeability of the peer (Hughes et al., 2001; McAuliffe et al., 2009). Because the teacher is the main focal point in the classroom, students have ample opportunity to witness teacher behavior and to develop ideas about whether the teacher likes or dislikes each of their peers. Students can use this information in their own affective evaluations of their classmates (Hughes et al., 2001; Hughes, Im, & Wehrly, 2014). When teachers indeed are social referents for peer liking

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and disliking, teachers can put this mechanism to use and strategically interact with a student in such a positive manner that will improve peers' views of the student (McAuliffe et al., 2009). In this way, teachers can exert their "invisible hand" (Farmer, McAuliffe, & Hamm, 2011), and affect not only students' academic adjustment but also their social development.

Since social referencing relies on individual students to develop an idea about teacher liking for a peer, and then to adapt their own view of the peer accordingly, social referencing implies an intra-individual process. Research thus far (e.g., Hughes et al., 2001) has only inferred this intra-individual process based on analyses of classroom-level reputation or status. The present study extended the existing research in three ways. First, to directly test social referencing as an intra-individual process, individual students' tendencies to adjust their liking and disliking of a peer, based on their individual perceptions of the teacher's like or dislike of this particular peer, were investigated. Second, to conduct a further test of social referencing as the mechanism that drives the associations between teacher and peer (dis)liking, possible effects in the opposite direction were studied, specifically whether peer (dis)like also affects students' perceptions of teacher (dis)like. Finally, we examined whether students' likeliness to follow their teacher's affective evaluations of their peers depended on the students' perceptions of the teacher's warmth. Together, these additions to the existing knowledge base will provide more insight into how social referencing actually works within individual students' minds and will make room for directions for teachers that are even better grounded in empirical findings.

1.1. The teacher as a social referent for peer liking and disliking

According to social referencing theory, children look to their caregivers for social cues regarding how to respond to novel or startling situations (Feinman, 1982; Walden & Ogan, 1988). Hughes et al. (2001) extended this theory to the classroom and hypothesized that students refer to their teachers' interactions with their peers for cues regarding how to evaluate these classroom peers. Most researchers interested in the impact of teachers on peer liking and disliking relationships in primary schools (first to sixth grade) have focused on how observable teacher behavior (e.g., McAuliffe et al., 2009), teacher-rated preference or affect for students (e.g., Chang et al., 2007; Kiuru et al., 2015), or teacher-rated support and conflict in the teacher-student relationship (e.g., De Laet et al., 2014; Hughes & Im, 2016) are related to peer liking and disliking status. In agreement with social referencing theory, these studies have generally found that children who have positive rather than negative relationships with their teachers are liked more by their classmates. However, based on the nature of these studies, the active role of students who developed an image of how the teacher liked or disliked a peer and accordingly liked or disliked the peer themselves could only be assumed because student perceptions of teacher liking for their peers were not considered.

Hughes and colleagues (Hughes et al., 2001, 2014; Hughes, Zhang, & Hill, 2006) extended the existing research by focusing on how students' perceptions of the teacher-student relationship in primary schools are related to students' peer liking and disliking status. They found, in accordance with social referencing theory, that students who were viewed by their classmates as having a supportive relationship with the teacher were liked by more of their peers, whereas students who were perceived to be in frequent conflict with the teacher were disliked by more of their peers. To the contrary, research in Belgian secondary schools (Engels et al., 2016; Mage = 13.79 years) found no significant correlation between peer-perceived teacher-student relationships and peer liking. Thus, it might seem that teachers function as a social referent for students' peer liking and disliking particularly in primary schools.

1.1.1. Social referencing as an intra-individual process

Engels et al. (2016) and Hughes et al. (2001, 2006, 2014) investigated peer perceptions as the classroom-averaged reputation or status. Thus, all nominations a student received from any of his or her peers were aggregated into the student's reputation score. Reputations are valuable representations of the valence of a group's sentiment toward a peer (Hughes et al., 2014), and it is not unlikely that a positive association between teacher and peer liking reputation indicates social referencing. However, this is not conclusive evidence for an intra-individual process, so conclusions and implications based on existing research must still be formulated with a certain degree of caution. In the present study, we explicitly focused on the intra-individual processes and studied whether for individual students, thinking that the teacher likes or dislikes a peer would make it more likely that this particular student would come to like or dislike this particular peer as well. For instance, if Ann thinks the teacher likes her classmate Beth, Ann would come to like Beth as well. On the other hand, if Ann thinks the teacher dislikes Beth, Ann will take this as a cue to come to dislike Beth as well. In other words, we investigated whether teacher (dis)liking ties lead to peer (dis)liking ties, where a tie refers to a relationship of any kind between two actors in a social network (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013), the social network in this case being a class of students. Note that we refer to a student viewing that the teacher likes a peer as a teacher liking tie, although it is not a tie in terms of an emotional relationship between two people, such as a friendship or a liking tie. Rather, it is a social cognition tie (Babad, 2009; Cillessen, 2009) in the sense that a student identifies those peers whom they believe are liked by the teacher.

1.2. Effects of prior peer evaluations on perceived teacher liking and disliking

Up to this point, associations between peer-perceived teacher (dis)liking and peer (dis)liking have been mainly explained as students following their teacher's affective evaluations of their peers. This explanation corresponds to the dominant conceptualization of the teacher as a socializing agent who affects peer relations (Farmer et al., 2011). However, students' perception formation might not be such a straightforward process, and effects of peer liking and disliking ties on peer-perceived teacher liking and disliking could also underlie the previously found correlations. When a student likes a peer, the student could be more likely to

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