

## Effects of Being Spurned and Coping Style on Depersonalization in Beginning Kindergarten Teachers in Guangzhou, China

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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 Guangzhou, China, experience recurrent rejections of their offers of help (being spurned) by peer teachers; (b) whether being spurned by peers would induce depersonalization; (c) the way more efficacious and caring teachers cope with the rejection in comparison with their less efficacious and caring counterparts; and (d) effects of coping in reducing depersonalization. A sample of new kindergarten teachers in Guangzhou participated in the study. When the participants started their teaching work, their self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring were measured. Five months afterwards, they extents to which they were spurned by their peers and the way they coped with such rejection were assessed. Five months later, the degrees to which they experienced depersonalization were measured. The results showed (a) that the teachers were fairly moderately spurned; (b) that the more spurned the teachers were, the more depersonalized regarding their peers; (c) efficacious and caring teachers coped in ways different from teachers who were less efficacious and caring, and was relatively more effective in reducing depersonalization.*

**Keywords:** *teachers rejection stress.*

Classroom teachers in kindergartens, primary and secondary school settings in the city of Guangzhou, China, perform very similar tasks in providing guidance and care to children, such as making preparations for class, conducting lessons, marking assignments, and relating to children (Rao & Koong, 2000). It is likely that classroom teachers in other societies behave similarly (e.g., Humphries & Senden, 2000; Rodd, 1998). In addition, relationships among teachers are said to be characterized by mutual support and caring (e.g., 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 [7][16], the

present study examines, through a sample of beginning kindergarten teachers in the city of Guangzhou, (a) the extents to which their offers of help have been rejected repeatedly by peers; (b) whether recurrent rejection of offers of help (being spurned) by peer teachers would induce the adverse effects of depersonalization in the spurned teachers; and (c) the way spurned teachers who hold chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring cope with being spurned in comparison with teachers who are less efficacious and caring; and effectiveness of coping in reducing depersonalization. The model 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. The results will expand our understanding of (a) the extents of recurrent rejection of offers of help among kindergarten teachers; (b) the negative effects (depersonalization) of such rejection; and (c) whether or not spurned teachers who perceive themselves as efficacious and caring deal with recurrent rejection differently from their counterparts who are less efficacious and caring.

### The model and related research

According to the model [3][16], individuals harbor expectations that their offer of help to a seemingly 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 to the helpers' self-perception of being efficacious and 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-image. 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 in helping others, and by situational factors, such as the likelihood of further interactions with the recipient in the near or distant future. So far, no other models or theories appear to have addressed the reactions of rejected helpers.

To test the propositions of the model, we first conducted role-play simulation studies [16], followed by laboratory experiments in which an offer of help was actually rejected or accepted by a confederate [3][4][5]. The results revealed that helpers harbored an expectation of acceptance of their offer of help [16], and found this expectation violated when their offer was turned down [3]. The rejection was indeed stressful, as rejected helpers expressed much greater negative affects at the outcome of the offer than did their accepted counterparts [3][4]. Rejected helpers then manifested various coping reactions, all of which appeared to serve to maintain or 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 to offer help [3]. Rejected helpers also postdicted that the recipient would refuse the offer [4]. 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 [4][5], doing all these seemingly to detach themselves from the interpersonal failure of the rejection.

### 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. To extend our model to capture the experience of classroom teachers, [6] investigated the extent to which secondary school teachers in Hong Kong (China) experienced persistent rejection of offers of help by peers and found that the teachers were fairly spurned (Mean score was 2.78 out of 11). Further

examined the degree of being spurned by peers in secondary school teachers in another location (Guangzhou, China) and obtained converging results.[7] 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][20]. The present study represents our continuing effort in examining the experiences of being spurned by peers in another category of teachers -- kindergarten teachers.

Unlike teachers in primary or secondary school settings who tend to specialize in teaching a particular subject matter, teachers in kindergartens in the city of Guangzhou, China, perform very similar tasks in providing guidance and care to young children [Rao & Koong, 2000]. It is likely that teachers in kindergartens in other societies behave similarly (e.g., Humphries & Senden, 2000; Rodd, 1998). Kindergarten teachers 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 facilitate the offering of help and support among kindergarten teachers. On the other hand, 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 [8], may induce a sense of obligation to reciprocate the help in future [17], or may be perceived as a gesture to initiate a relationship or to strengthen a deteriorating relationship, which one does not wish to continue [Shinn, Lehman, & Wong, 1984]. We hypothesized that kindergarten teachers in Guangzhou would experience a higher degree of being spurned by their peers than would secondary school teachers in Guangzhou, the reason being that, unlike primary or secondary school teachers who tend to specialize in teaching a particular subject matter, teachers in kindergartens in Guangzhou (probably so in most other societies) perform very similar tasks in providing guidance and care to young children (Rao & Koong, 2000), and thus should have relatively many 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.

#### 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. In our studies on secondary school teachers in Hong Kong [6] and Guangzhou [7], we examined the linkage between being spurned by peers and depersonalization. In those studies, we reasoned that being spurned would induce depersonalization in light of results of our laboratory studies [15][3][5] which revealed that rejected helpers showed (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 oneself from the rejecter. These reactions can be regarded as short-term, less emotionally laden analogs of depersonalization (Maslach & Jackson, 1985). It is understandable why depersonalization, which is a highly negative, callous attitude towards the rejecter, would follow from the recurrent rejection, as the rejecter is held responsible for bringing about the interpersonal failure of repeated rejections due to certain unfavorable attributes the rejecter is perceived to have, such as being too proud or being too egoistic to appreciate the offers of help from others. The results in the two studies on secondary school teachers [6][7] 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 (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), and that our proposition has pinpointed one aspect of interpersonal relationships that is stress inducing – being spurned by peers. The adverse effects that depersonalization can in turn induce should be mentioned. Depersonalization, in our view, would

lead the spurned teachers to relate to their peers in a negative manner, thus creating, through behavioral confirmation (Swann, 1983) a vicious cycle of mutually unfavorable perceptions, negative interactions, and conflict-laden relationships.

Coping style employed by teachers with chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring versus coping style employed by teachers with who are less efficacious and caring

We were also interested in the ways spurned kindergarten teachers with chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring cope with recurrent rejection of their offers of help by peers. The importance of coping in reducing the adverse effects of stress is well established [Goldenberg & Matheson, 2005][20], and as such, it is important to examine how spurned kindergarten teachers cope with being spurned, as effective coping could reduce or minimize the experience of depersonalization. We followed Folkman and Lazarus's [9] distinction of coping into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping refers to efforts deployed 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. For kindergarten teachers coping with persistent rejection of offers of help by their peers, problem-focused coping would involve, for instance, the spurned teachers actively persuading the rejecting peers to accept help and actively changing the way they offer help to make their offers more receptive. Emotion-focused coping would refer, for example, to spurned teachers interpreting the rejection in ways to minimize its negative implications to the self and diverting their thoughts from the experience of having been persistently spurned, or dealing with the negative emotions one is having.

Our focus, in the present study, on individual differences in coping is grounded on the results of our laboratory studies regarding how individuals who held chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring reacted to rejection [3][5]. One of the key propositions of our model on spurned helpers' reactions is that rejection of help is stressful because of its unfavorable implications on the helper's self-perception of being efficacious and caring in helping others. This led us to examine, in laboratory studies involving actual rejection or acceptance of help, how individuals who held chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring confronted and reacted to rejection of their offers of help, compared with individuals who harbored chronic self-perceptions of being less efficacious and caring [3][5]. The results revealed significant differences between individuals who held chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring and those who were less efficacious and caring. Compared with those who were less efficacious and caring, those who held chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring voiced greater willingness to associate further with the rejecting recipient, attributed lesser defensiveness to the rejecter in reacting to the offer of help, and exhibited a weaker tendency in hindsight bias in postdicting rejection of the offer of help by the rejecting recipient. Recall that problem-focused coping is defined as dealing directly with the problem one is facing, while emotion-focused coping is defined as dealing with the negative emotion one is experiencing or interpreting the problem in ways to minimize its importance. Being willing to associate further with the rejecter can be viewed as an instance of problem-focused coping in that the spurned helpers seemingly wanted to overcome the recipient's resistance to being helped by interacting further with the rejecter, while attributing undue defensiveness to the rejecter and postdicting rejection can be viewed as instances of emotion-focused coping in that these were attempts by the spurned helpers to create an illusion that the blame for the rejection should rest with the rejecter rather than with the self, and thus the rejection is not indicative at all of one's attributes such as being competent and/or caring. Thus, individuals who held chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring tended to employ problem-focused coping much more than emotion-focused coping, while individuals who were less efficacious and caring tended to react in the opposite way, using emotion-focused coping much more than problem-focused coping. It is understandable why spurned teachers who viewed themselves as efficacious and caring would confront and deal directly with the rejection

(problem-focused coping) rather than minimizing its importance (emotion-focused coping), as such individuals hold a belief, buttressed by a long history of task and interpersonal successes, that they are able to overcome the rejection. On the other hand, spurned teachers who are less efficacious and caring tend to avoid confronting the rejection as they may feel that they are not able, even if they try, to overcome the rejection.

In the present study, we therefore contrast spurned teachers who hold chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring with spurned teachers who were less efficacious and caring in relation to how they cope with recurrent rejections of offers of help by peers. We hypothesized, based on what we found in our laboratory studies, that in coping with rejection of help by peers, spurned teachers with chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring would adopt a coping style which is high in problem-focused coping and low in emotion-focused coping (a predominantly problem-focused coping style) while spurned teachers who are less efficacious and caring would tend to employ a coping style which is low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping (a predominantly emotion-focused coping style).

Problem-focused coping has been shown to be more effective in dealing with a stressor than is emotion-focused coping [9][11], mainly because the former confronts and addresses the stressor more directly [Stoneman & Gavidia-Payne, 2006]. The use of emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, while enabling the stressed individuals to temporarily ignore the problem on hand through subjectively minimizing the importance of the problem, would make individuals ill-prepared when they subsequently confront the same problem again. Based on the relative effectiveness of problem-focused coping over emotion-focused coping, it follows therefore that a coping style high on problem-focused coping and low on emotion-focused coping (a predominantly problem-focused coping style) would be more effective in overcoming peers' resistance to being helped than would a coping style low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping (a predominantly emotion-focused coping style). As such, we predicted that a predominantly problem-focused coping style would be more effective than a predominantly emotion-focused coping style in reducing the magnitude of depersonalization in kindergarten teachers who are spurned. At the same time, coping style would not have any effect on depersonalization for kindergarten teachers who experience little recurrent rejection of their offers of help.

It has, however, been suggested that the effectiveness of problem-focused coping over emotion-focused coping is contingent on the extent to which the stressor can be changed [18] such that if the stressor can be changed or removed, then problem-focused coping, which deals directly with the problem, would be effective. On the other hand, if the stressor is not likely to be changed, emotion-focused coping will be more appropriate than problem-focused coping for protecting psychological emotional well-being, the reason being that working to remove a problem which cannot be removed would be fruitless and would bring about frustration, anger and a sense of incompetence, whereas accepting the problem and learning to live with it would induce less frustration and anger. We are of the view that perception of changeability of the stressor is likely to be mediated by self-perception of efficacy. Insofar as perception of changeability of the stressor can be conceptualized as a type of belief on control over task outcome (Rotter, 2004), then individuals with chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring, out of a sense of competence arising from a history of task success, would hold strong belief of outcome control and would thus perceive the stressor as amendable to change. On the other hand, individuals who are less efficacious and caring would harbor a lesser sense of control over task outcome and would perceive stressors as less amendable to change. As such, we hypothesized that spurned teachers with chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring, relative to those who are less efficacious and caring, would find peer rejection as more amendable to change. The perceptions of the changeability of peer rejection in spurned kindergarten teachers who held chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring may have partly influenced such teachers to employ a predominantly problem-focused coping style in dealing with peer rejection, whereas the perception of peer rejection as less amendable to change in spurned teachers who are less efficacious and caring may have, in part, led them to deploy a

predominantly emotion-focused coping style.

In sum, our hypotheses were: (a) kindergarten teachers in Guangzhou would experience a higher degree of being spurned by their peers than would secondary school teachers in Guangzhou; (b) being spurned by peers would induce depersonalization in kindergarten teachers; (c) spurned teachers with chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring would adopt a predominantly problem-focused coping style while spurned teachers who are less efficacious and caring would tend to employ a predominantly emotion-focused coping style; (d) a predominantly problem-focused coping style would be more effective than a predominantly emotion-focused coping style in reducing the magnitude of depersonalization in kindergarten teachers who are spurned; and (e) spurned teachers with chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring, relative to those who are being less efficacious and caring, would find peer rejection as more amendable to change.

## Method

### Respondents

Graduates from teacher training institutes in Guangzhou were invited, immediately following their graduation, to participate in a study on their ensuing job experiences as kindergarten teachers. Out of a total of three hundred and twenty graduates who revealed that they had secured a teaching post in a kindergarten setting, two hundred and thirty agreed to take part. The sample was mainly female (99%), the average age being 22.13 (SD = 14.07). The participants were requested to respond to a questionnaire that assessed their chronic self-perception regarding being efficacious and caring. Five months into their first year of service, the participants were requested to respond to a questionnaire that measured the degree to which they were spurned by peers, the way they coped with such resistance, and the degree to which they viewed peer rejection as amendable to change. Two hundred and nine participants returned the questionnaire.

Another five months later, the participants were asked to respond to another questionnaire that measured the extent of depersonalization experienced. One hundred and ninety-four participants returned the questionnaire. Questions on all the questionnaires were written in Chinese.

### Measures

Self-perception of efficacy and caring. An index of perceived efficacy was formed by averaging participants' evaluations, on 11-point scales, of the following attributes they believed they strongly held for some time: incapable/capable, unskilled/skilled, weak/strong, unsophisticated/sophisticated, incompetent/competent, and awkward/poised ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Similarly, an index of perceived caring was formed by averaging participants' extent of agreement that they were: unsympathetic/sympathetic, insensitive/sensitive, and cruel/kind ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

Perceived spurning. A 12-item measure of being spurned was adapted from the spurning scale for teachers developed by Authors [6]. Respondents rated the extent to which peers resist their offers of help, on items each of which ranged from (1) applies very little to me to (11) apply very much to me. Examples of the items are: 'Peer teachers feel more reluctant to approach me for help than to approach other teachers'; 'peer teachers turn down my advice because they question how useful it is'; and 'peer teachers listen to my advice seriously' (a reversed item). A composite was formed by averaging of all the items, after reverse keying three of them. Internal consistency among the 12 items was regarded as adequate, with  $\alpha$  reaching 0.77. The scores ranged from 1.34 to 7.68, with a mean of 3.76 (SD = 23.17).

Coping style. We employed the Ways of Coping Questionnaire [1] to measure the degree to which problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies were adopted by the

participants. Four items, all on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = a great deal), assessed the degree to which the respondents employed problem-focused strategies to deal with refusal to their offers of help, and four items, again on a 4-point scale (1 = not at all; 4 = a great deal), measured the extent to which they used emotion-focused strategies to handle the resistance to accepting their offers of help. The problem-focused coping items reflected mainly 'confrontative problem solving', while the emotion-focused coping items reflected 'emotion work' and 'wishful thinking'.

Internal consistency of the coping scale was regarded as acceptable ( $\alpha$  for problem-focused coping = .85;  $\alpha$  for emotion-focused coping = .58). For each of these two types of coping, a composite score was formed by averaging of the items.

Changeability of clients and/or peer resistance to being helped. An item, on an 11-point scale (1: not changeable at all; 11 highly changeable), was used to assess participants' views of the extent to which refusal of offers of help by peers can be overcome.

Depersonalization. We used a five-item measure to assess the extent to which the kindergarten teachers experienced depersonalization. Items in the scale ranged from (1) applies very little to me to (11) apply very much to me (e.g., I don't care much about whether or not my peers can do their work well). The internal consistency of the items was of acceptable magnitude ( $\alpha$  = .87). A composite measure was constructed by averaging of the items (scores ranged from 1.23 to 7.21,  $M$  = 4.42,  $SD$  = 26.45).

## Results

### Extents of being spurned

A t-test was conducted to assess the degrees of being spurned experienced by the kindergarten teachers in Guangzhou ( $M$  = 3.76) and by the secondary school teachers in the same city (data on the latter group were gathered in a previous study by the author (Authors, 2000),  $M$  = 2.14). The results showed that the kindergarten teachers were relatively more spurned by their peers,  $t = 6.08$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### Impact of being spurned on depersonalization

To examine the predicted 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 showed, in line with what was hypothesized, that being spurned was positively associated with depersonalization,  $B = .342$ ,  $F(1, 188) = 15.58$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that the more spurned the teachers were five months after they started teaching in a kindergarten, the more depersonalized they felt towards their peers five months subsequently.

### Coping styles employed

To examine the hypothesis that kindergarten teachers who held chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring would tend to employ a predominantly problem-focused coping style in dealing with peer resistance (high on problem-focused coping and low on emotion-focused coping), whereas kindergarten teachers who viewed themselves as less efficacious and caring would adopt a predominantly emotion-focused coping style (low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping), teachers who were above the median on the efficacy index and above the median on the caring index were grouped as those who harbored chronic perception of being efficacious and caring, while those who were below the median on the efficacy index and below the median on the caring index were grouped as those who were as less efficacious and caring, in preparation for analyses involving chronic self-perception of efficacy and caring as an individual differences variable.

Eight-five teachers fell under the first group and seventy-two teachers were in the latter group.

A t-test was conducted to assess the employment of problem-focused coping in the two groups. The results revealed that the former group adopted this type of coping to a greater extent ( $\underline{M} = 5.12$ ) than did the latter group ( $\underline{M} = 3.65$ ),  $t = 7.34$ ,  $p < .02$ . A t-test was also conducted to assess the use of emotion-focused coping in the two groups, with the results showing that those teachers perceiving themselves as efficacious and caring ( $\underline{M} = 5.34$ ) employed this type of coping to a similar, high extent as teachers who found themselves to be less efficacious and caring ( $\underline{M} = 5.01$ ),  $t = 1.09$ ,  $p > .05$ . Taken together, the results revealed that teachers who viewed themselves as efficacious and caring adopted both problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, whereas teachers who were less efficacious and caring employed emotion-focused coping much more than problem-focused coping. The results therefore did not support what was hypothesized for the former group, but lent support to what was predicted for the latter group.

#### Effects of being spurned and coping style on depersonalization

To assess the hypothesized effects of coping style on depersonalization, the respondents were first then classified as those who were more spurned and those who were less spurned through a median split, in preparation for analyses involving self-perception as an individual differences variable. A two-way analysis of variance with being spurned (more spurned versus less spurned) and self-perception of efficacy and caring (high efficacy and high caring versus less efficacy and less caring) and depersonalization as the dependent variable was conducted. As indicated in the previous section, teachers who viewed themselves as efficacious and caring adopted a coping style high on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping, while the group of teachers who were as less efficacious and caring used a coping style low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping.

As hypothesized, the interaction effects were significant,  $F(1, 154) = 9.11$ ,  $p < .01$ , showing that for kindergarten teachers who were less spurned, those who were efficacious and caring experienced the same level of depersonalization ( $\underline{M} = 2.67$ ) as did teachers who were less efficacious and caring,  $\underline{M} = 2.81$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 1.12$ , *ns*. On the other hand, for teachers who were more spurned, those who were efficacious and caring experienced less depersonalization ( $\underline{M} = 2.87$ ) than did their counterparts who were less efficacious and caring ( $\underline{M} = 4.45$ ),  $F(1, 74) = 6.12$ ,  $p < .05$ . Such results therefore revealed that the coping style employed by more efficacious and caring teachers was more effective in reducing the impact of depersonalization than did the coping style adopted by less efficacious and caring teachers.

#### Perception of the changeability of peer resistance

To examine the extent to which peer resistance to being helped was perceived as changeable, a t-test was conducted to examine the degrees of perceived changeability of peer resistance between respondents who perceived themselves as efficacious and caring and those who viewed themselves as being less efficacious and caring. The results revealed, as hypothesized, that the former group perceived peer resistance as more amenable to change ( $\underline{M} = 7.21$ ) than the latter group ( $\underline{M} = 5.41$ ),  $t = 21.87$ ,  $P > .03$ .



## **Discussion**

### 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 the city of Guangzhou. The obtained mean score of being spurned ( $M = 3.76$ ) shows that being spurned by peers was, indeed, experienced by the kindergarten teachers participating in this study. Together with the results showing being spurned in secondary school teachers in Hong Kong [6] and secondary school teachers in Guangzhou [7], 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 in the same city [7], kindergarten teachers were spurned by their peers to a greater extent. In our view, 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 to young children and interact with one another frequently and closely (Rao & Koong, 2000). As such, teachers in kindergartens would have relatively more opportunities than secondary school teachers for offering help to peer teachers, and consequently more opportunities for rejection to occur. Second, the norm of caring and support that is more prevalent among kindergarten teachers (Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000; Humphries & Senden, 2000; Rodd, 1998), which may have led kindergarten teachers to be more empathic to the feelings of peers and to be more enthusiastic in offering help, thus increasing the opportunities for offering help, also at the same time increases the opportunities for rejection to take place. Third, the professionalization of kindergarten teaching in Guangzhou, marked by a trend towards mandatory requirement of professional qualification for entry to kindergarten teaching and salary increases, has induced greater importance attached to task competence and has made acceptance of help from peers more indicative of one's task incompetence (Nadler, 2004). This in turn may have led to increased rejection of the offers of help from peers. Future research would need to examine if these are the key reasons that have resulted in kindergarten teachers rejecting offers of help from peers. Insofar as kindergarten teachers in other places perform similar work in providing guidance and care to young children as kindergarten teachers in Guangzhou, 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 Guangzhou.

### 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 [13], and giving decreased attention to clients [10]. 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, as new arrivals to the work of kindergarten teaching, 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 new kindergarten teachers have started their professional duties and be measured again at the end of the first year. If being spurned measured at the first point in time turns out not to be associated with depersonalization measured at the same point in time, but is associated with depersonalization measured subsequently, the causal linkage between being spurned and depersonalization can be inferred.

According to our model, the impact of being spurned on depersonalization is posited to be mediated by threat to the self and a motive to maintain positive self-evaluation. However, self-threat was not measured in the present study in light of possible social desirability effects in responding to such a measure. Had a valid measure of self-threat been used and had the effects of being spurned on depersonalization been decreased when the self-threat scores was controlled, the proposed mediating effects of self-threat would be supported. It seems plausible that as a form of endangerment to one's well-being (Schachter & Singer, 1962), self-threat is likely to be associated with heightened physiological arousal, a measure of which can be used in future research in the lab setting to ascertain whether self-threat arises from rejection of an offer of help.

#### Individual differences in coping with being spurned

Regarding how the spurned kindergarten teachers coped with being spurned by peers, we took an individual differences approach, contrasting teachers who held chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring with those who were less efficacious and caring. The individual differences approach has been adopted in the study of coping with stress and has shown to be fruitful such as research on how individuals varying in locus of control [14], in having a hardy personality [2][12] and in being a Type A person [Bartlett, 1998] deal with stress. Grounded on our laboratory findings that rejected helpers with chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring coped with the rejection with strategies that were confrontational in eliciting subsequently acceptance of offer of help, we posited that spurned teachers who held chronic self-perception of being efficacious and caring would tend to employ a predominantly problem-focused coping style while spurned teachers who were less efficacious and caring would tend to use a predominantly emotion-focused coping style. The results on the latter group conformed to what was hypothesized, showing that such spurned teachers tended to minimize the importance of the rejection in reflecting on one's efficacy or blame the rejecting peers for the rejection rather than dealing directly with the rejection in ways that can lead to acceptance. We interpret such coping as defensive maneuvers adopted to protect the self-perceived less efficacious self-images in that through externalizing the blame for the interpersonal failure of rejection, or subjectively diffusing the self from the responsibility for the interpersonal failure of rejection, such teachers could convince themselves the source of the interpersonal failure is not their own efficacy and thus they were still interpersonally competent and caring people.

On the other hand, the results on spurned teachers who viewed themselves as efficacious and caring showed, contrary to what was predicted, that these teachers utilized a style high on both types of coping. Inspection of the items on emotion-focused coping of these teachers showed that they scored high on items regarding actions taken to deal with the emotional distress arising from being spurned rather than on 'wishful thinking' items. Thus, these teachers confronted and attempted to overcome resistance of peers to being helped, and at the same time, attempted to manage the emotional distress they were experiencing. We interpret such a style of coping as reflective of the teachers' self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring: Their strong and stable senses of being competent and caring allowed them to acknowledge the existence of a problem

regarding interpersonal failure, to attempt to deal actively and constructively with the problem, to admit the emotional distress arising relating to the interpersonal failure and to try to address such distress, while at the same time still enabled them to view themselves positively and favorably.

The obtained significant Being Spurned X Coping Style interaction effects showed that a coping style high on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping was more effective in reducing depersonalization than was a coping style low on problem-focused coping and high on emotion-focused coping. The relative effectiveness of the former style over the latter is understandable in that the former style involves attempts to reduce the emotional distress the spurned teachers were experiencing, which would be beneficial for mood and emotional well-being, and also attempts to overcome resistance of the rejecting peers to being helped, such as increased interactions with peers to understand why they might have turned down an offer of help, increased interactions with peers to see what kind of help they wish to have, and offering help to peers in a more tactful manner so as to elicit acceptance of help. Such behaviors are likely to result in an increased understanding of peers, an increased liking of them, and/or increased acceptance of help by such parties. Such increased understanding and liking of peers would therefore explain the decreased level of depersonalization experienced by such spurned teachers. The effectiveness of this style of coping is consistent with the literature regarding 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; Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002).

On the other hand, spurned kindergarten teachers who used a predominantly emotion-focused coping style diffused themselves from the responsibility for the interpersonal failure of rejection through blaming the rejecting peers for the rejection. As such, they would view the rejecting peers in a negative light and would likely distance themselves from such parties. Such behavior would explain why these spurned kindergarten teachers experienced a higher level of depersonalization towards the rejecting clients and/or peers. Further, blaming the rejecting peers for the rejection would foreclose their consideration of the possibility that the rejection may have come about because they were not sufficiently skilful in the way the offer of help was made. Thus, while a predominantly emotion-focused coping style could enable the spurned teachers to still maintain a subjective sense of efficacy and caring in helping others, it also produced the negative consequence of depersonalization, did not contribute to understanding the real causes of the rejection, and did not adequately prepare the spurned teachers to deal constructively with the rejection. This being the case, it is not just how individuals who are less efficacious and caring view themselves (Baumeister, 1993), but also the way they cope with the stressor that may result in a vicious cycle of negative interpersonal perceptions, negative interpersonal interactions and repeated interpersonal failures.

On the claim made (e.g., Cooke, et al., 2003; Sirois, et al., 2006) regarding the propriety and effectiveness of problem-focused coping over emotion-focused coping only when stressor is amendable to change, the results showed that, consistent with the claim made, kindergarten teachers who held chronic self-perceptions of being efficacious and caring found peer resistance as changeable. On the other hand, contrary to the claim made, spurned kindergarten teachers who were less efficacious and caring also found peer resistance as changeable. Taking such perceptions and the way kindergarten teachers who were less efficacious and caring coped with rejection, it can be said that even in situations where the stressor is perceived as amendable to change and where the use of problem-focused coping is viewed as appropriate, certain individuals may not adopt problem-focused coping, probably for reasons related to their self-perception of efficacy and caring or reasons related to their personality.

In sum, as part of our continuing effect to examine the phenomenon of being spurned by peers in classroom teachers, the present study revealed that kindergarten teachers in Guangzhou were moderately spurned, and that being spurned produced the adverse effects of depersonalization. When spurned, a coping style high on both problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping

would be instrumental in reducing depersonalization, suggesting that training on using such a style can be offered to serving kindergarten teachers to help them deal with rejection by peers.

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