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Early Adolescents' Social Goals in Peer Conflict Situations: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

Identification of goals is a key social-cognitive process that guides whether adolescents engage in aggressive or nonviolent behavior during social conflicts. This study investigated early adolescents' goals in response to hypothetical social conflict situations involving close friends and peers. Participants ($n = 160$; $M_{\text{age}} = 12.7$, 53% female) were 7th graders from two urban and one rural middle school. On average, participants identified 2.5 goals for each situation. Qualitative analysis using a grounded theory approach identified nine themes representing the goals generated by participants: *instrumental-control*, *relationship maintenance*, *maintain image and reputation/self-defense*, *conflict avoidance*, *seek more information*, *revenge*, *tension reduction*, *moral*, and *stay out of trouble*. Quantitative analysis indicated that female participants identified more goals than male participants, but there were few differences in their types of goals. There were few differences across school sites. The findings highlight the variety of social goals specific to the developmental period of early adolescence.

Keywords

early adolescence; goals; qualitative analysis; social conflict; social cognition

The selection of social goals is a critical step in a series of social-cognitive processes that guide how individuals interpret and respond to social situations. According to the social information-processing model (Crick & Dodge, 1996), these processes include encoding situational cues, interpreting and creating a mental representation of cues, clarifying internal or external goals, accessing possible responses from memory or generating new responses, evaluating and selecting a response, and enacting the response. Each process is influenced by the adolescent's internal database, which includes memories from past experiences, values, beliefs, and social schemas. Adolescents' desired goals or outcomes for a given social situation are generated after interpreting situation-specific cues (Crick & Dodge, 1996). Adolescents engaging in goal-directed behavior are expected to choose a response they believe will help them achieve their desired outcome. Social goals are considered prosocial if they enhance or maintain relationships with others, whereas antisocial goals

promote conflict or advance personal interests over those of others (Erdley & Asher, 1996; Rose & Asher, 1999).

Prior research indicates that holding antisocial goals (e.g., dominance, control, revenge) increases the risk for aggressive responses to peer conflict, whereas prosocial goals (e.g., build or maintain relationships) may reduce the risk of aggressive behavior and promote nonviolent responses to conflict. This was supported by a meta-analysis of 21 studies that found small global effect sizes indicating positive relations between antisocial goals and aggression, and negative relations between prosocial goals and aggression (Samson et al., 2012). However, most of studies focused on early or middle childhood, with some samples including both elementary and middle school students. Less is known about the nature and variety of goals that influence the behavior of adolescents, particularly within diverse samples of adolescents. The purpose of this study was to address that gap by using qualitative methods to identify early adolescents' social goals in response to common, stressful peer conflict situations.

A key challenge for studies examining goals is the availability of relevant measures. Prior studies have typically assessed goals by presenting vignettes depicting a social situation and asking participants to rate their support for specific goals provided by the researchers. Chung and Asher (1996) identified goals using a qualitative approach based on 4th through 6th grade children's descriptions of their goals for hypothetical peer conflict situations. Their analysis identified four goal categories (relationship, control, self-interest, and avoidance) that provided the basis for the Children's Conflict Resolution Measure (CCRM), which is commonly used in the literature. Subsequent measures assessed similar goal categories across varying situations, including ambiguous provocations (e.g., Erdley & Asher, 1996) and peer conflicts (e.g., Rose & Asher, 1999). Other researchers have adapted the CCRM to assess new goal categories (e.g., revenge, tension reduction; Delveaux & Daniels, 2000; Rose & Asher, 1999) or created measures using items derived from theory, such as the Social Goals Measure (Lochman et al., 1993) and the Interpersonal Goals Inventory for Children (Ojanen et al., 2005). A common feature of these measures is that they limit participants to rating their support for goals listed on the measure. This makes it critical that the goals that are provided adequately represent the range and variety of goals relevant to a specific population.

Further work is needed to develop relevant measures of goals for adolescents, particularly those representing more diverse populations. During adolescence there are marked cognitive developments in abstract reasoning and decision-making, and a social shift towards affiliation with peers (Steinberg, 2005). This makes it likely that adolescents may differ in their goals, generate distinct and more complex goals, weigh multiple goals at once, and better articulate their thought processes compared with younger children. Moreover, few studies have expanded the literature to explore goals of more diverse samples that include significant representation of adolescents of color. Most current measures have been developed and validated with primarily White samples during middle childhood. Although few studies have investigated racial differences in social cognitions, it is evident that racially minoritized youth in urban settings are systemically and disproportionately exposed to contexts such as concentrated disadvantage and community violence exposure

that increase their risk of developing social-cognitive processes that support aggressive behavior (Zimmerman & Messner, 2013). Social information processing theory highlights the relevance of contextual influences on cognitions, such that violence exposure leads to the development of scripts that favor aggression (Huesmann, 1988). Indeed, studies have found that children exposed to economic disadvantage and community violence are more likely to support social goals favoring aggression or avoidance (Bookhout et al., 2021; Sypher et al., 2019). This suggests that different social contexts for diverse adolescents, including youth of color and those from different settings (e.g., urban and rural), may lead them to develop unique social goals. This raises questions regarding the extent to which current measures of social goals have sufficient content validity, or relevance for research with these populations, highlighting the need for research designed to identify relevant social goals among more diverse samples of early adolescents to inform the development of improved measurement tools. Due to potential differences in risk factors between adolescents in different settings, research is needed that explores differences in social-cognitive constructs such as goals among samples from different settings.

Although theory posits that an adolescents' memory and social knowledge impacts their goals for social conflicts, few studies have considered situational factors, such as an adolescent's relationship with the peer, when examining social goals. Some evidence suggests that adolescents may have more prosocial goals if a conflict involves a friend or peer that they like. For example, Salmivalli and Peets (2009) found that Finnish early adolescents (i.e., 11- and 12-year-olds) rated prosocial goals as more important when the conflict involved a liked peer and rated antisocial goals as more important when the conflict involved a disliked peer. In a qualitative study on the use of nonviolent problem-solving strategies during peer conflicts, adolescents reported that they were more likely to identify and use nonviolent problem-solving strategies if they had a close relationship with the peer (Farrell et al., 2009). This suggests that adolescents might have more prosocial goals in conflicts with close friends. Little research has investigated whether adolescents consider relational proximity (i.e., close friend versus a peer) when generating and considering goals in a conflict. Studies have typically described a hypothetical situation in which the aggressor is either a peer (e.g., Erdley & Asher, 1996) or a friend (e.g., Rose & Asher, 1999). However, it is unknown whether adolescents would generate similar goals if the conflict was with a close friend compared with a more distant peer.

There is also mixed evidence regarding sex differences in adolescents' social goals in social conflict situations. A study of 4th and 5th grade students found that girls reported stronger agreement with relationship maintenance goals, whereas boys reported stronger agreement with instrumental-control and revenge goals (Rose & Asher, 1999). Similarly, a study of 4th to 6th grade students found that girls were more likely to support goals to maintain their relationship with a peer, whereas boys were more likely to support self-interest and revenge goals (Delveaux & Daniels, 2000). In contrast, a study of 4th and 5th grade students' responses to a hypothetical situation involving conflict with a friend found that girls were more likely than boys to endorse relationship maintenance goals, but there were no differences in their support for control or revenge goals (MacEvoy & Asher, 2012). Results generally suggest that girls may be more likely to pursue goals that promote prosocial resolutions to peer conflict, but differences have not been investigated among adolescents.

These findings also suggest that the type of conflict may influence social goals. It is possible that sex differences in goals exist for only some types of conflict (e.g., conflicts with friends versus conflicts with peers or more distant others).

The primary aim of this study was to identify the types of goals generated by early adolescents in response to situations involving conflict with peers. This was addressed using a qualitative interview to identify goals generated by adolescents in response to two social conflict situations: one with a peer and one with a close friend. This study builds on the existing literature by expanding the focus to early adolescents and identifying goals generated by a racially and ethnically diverse sample of youth. Moreover, the use of qualitative methods offers a particular advantage over prior studies by allowing adolescents to generate and discuss their own goals in situations of conflict, rather than constraining them to select or rate goals from a predetermined list. To further expand the literature on social goals across situational contexts, this study explored adolescents' goals for conflicts with a close friend and a peer. The narrative descriptions for each identified goal theme included comparisons across the two situations. Theory and prior research also suggest that adolescents' goals during a conflict are influenced by their gender and the social context. Thus, a second exploratory aim was to investigate differences in identified social goals across gender and school setting (i.e., rural vs urban). A mixed methods approach was used in which a qualitative grounded theory approach was used to identify goals, and a quantitative approach was used to explore gender and setting differences.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 7th grade students (age range = 12 to 14 years, mean age = 12.7) randomly selected from participants in a randomized trial that evaluated a 6th grade violence prevention program (author reference). Parental consent and student assent were obtained from 167 of 184 (i.e., 91%) eligible participants. Of these, four later chose not to participate and three could not be scheduled, resulting in 160 completed interviews (87% of those eligible). This sample included students from two urban schools ($n = 81$; 81.0% non-Hispanic Black, 13% multiracial, 2.5% non-Hispanic White, 1.3% Latinx, 2.5% other categories) and a rural school in a nearby county ($n = 79$; 39.2% non-Hispanic Black, 8.9% multiracial, 49.4% non-Hispanic White, 2.5% other categories) in the southeastern United States. Participants identified themselves as female ($n = 84$; 52.5%) or male ($n = 74$; 46.3%); two did not report their gender. Other response options for gender identity were not included in the survey. About 40% were from classrooms where the intervention was implemented the previous school year. All procedures were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

Measure

The Problem-Solving Interview (PSI), which was developed for this study, is a semi-structured interview designed to assess adolescents' social information processing in response to two hypothetical situations involving conflicts with a peer. One situation involves conflict with a *close friend*: "You told a close friend something private, and they

told it to other people. This close friend promised they wouldn't tell anyone but went behind your back and told other people." The other involves a *peer conflict*: "Another student at your school has been teasing you. One morning at school this student comes up to you and says something disrespectful about your family to you in front of other students." The situations were derived from qualitative studies in which African American students at urban middle schools identified problem situations involving peers and rated their relevance, frequency, and difficulty (author reference). The two situations selected for the PSI were among the most frequently experienced situations and were reported as the most difficult to handle. A pilot study of the PSI conducted with 46 sixth grade students from the same urban school system supported the significance of the selected situations, with 79% of students having experienced the situations and all but one student reporting that the situation would bother them at least "a little."

For each situation, the interviewer asked the adolescent to: (1) describe how the situation might happen to them, including imagining who would be the other person; (2) generate responses they would engage in and evaluate the first response (i.e., effectiveness and consequences); (3) identify their goals and rate the importance of each goal; (4) evaluate the likelihood that their first response would help them reach the goals they identified and several predetermined goals; and (5) describe the consequences of predetermined provocative, aggressive, and nonviolent responses.

Interviewer Training—Interviewers were clinical psychology graduate students and post-bachelor research assistants. They included four Black women who conducted 13% of the interviews, one Black man (2% of interviews), five White women (47% of interviews), three White men (25% of interviews), and one woman of unidentified ethnicity (11% of interviews). No attempt was made to match the sex and race of interviewers and interviewees. Interviewers were trained in general interviewing skills and on administering the PSI. This included reviewing the purpose of the PSI, observing a sample interview, and practicing the interview in pairs and in a group. Clinical psychology graduate students supervised the interviewers by reviewing audiotapes of practice interviews and interviews conducted in the schools. Interviewers were not approved to conduct interviews until they had demonstrated their competence based on completing at least three practice interviews that were recorded and reviewed by supervisors, who provided them with written feedback. Interviewers also received feedback based on recordings of at least their first three interviews with participants.

Interview Procedures—Interviews were conducted in classrooms or other spaces in the schools during the school day and lasted approximately one hour. Interviewers suspended the interview if another person came into the room to maintain participants' privacy. The order of presenting the situations was randomized across participants. The focus of the current study was on the goals that participants generated for each situation. Interviewers restated the situation, including details provided by the participant such as the other person's name and actions, and then asked, "What would be your most important goal? How would you want it to work out or end?" Follow-up questions asked students to explain the reason they identified each goal. Interviewers asked students to report additional goals until the

student indicated they could think of no other goals. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded. A minimum of 20% of interviews were verified for transcription accuracy and 20% or more of all interviews were coded twice to evaluate inter-rater reliability.

Coding and Analyses—The research team conducted open coding whereby several researchers read through the goals and identified broad categories. The resulting categories were triangulated with a priori categories of social goals developed in previous studies, including goals related to conflicts with friends (Rose & Asher, 1999), broader goals involving personal striving (Ewart et al., 2002), and goals suggested by prior qualitative research (author reference). Based on this review, a priori goals included relationship-maintenance, moral, tension reduction, instrumental-control, revenge, self-defense, sympathy, approval seeking, self-improvement, and competitive striving. During the triangulation process, several categories were combined, and a priori categories that were not supported by the open coding process were removed. A coding manual was developed that gave examples of each code from the pilot studies. See Table 1 for the final set of codes and their definitions. After coding was completed, transcripts were audited by experienced qualitative researchers to determine whether codes were appropriate.

Coders were clinical psychology graduate students who completed training that included reviewing a coding manual and coding examples from the pilot study. Standards for training were developed by two independent coding experts who were involved in the development of the interview and coding. Coding standards were based on codes assigned by both coders, or those agreed upon following discussion by the expert coders. Coders did not begin coding until they achieved reliability based on a kappa of .40 or greater and 80% or higher agreement between coders (Hartmann, 1977). Three coders rated each goal identified by participants. Final codes were assigned based on agreement by at least two of the three coders. Overall, acceptable inter-rater reliability was achieved between coders (kappas = .525 – .883). All three coders agreed 67% of the time and two of three coders agreed on the remaining 31%.

Results

Qualitative Results

Two students elected to discontinue participation after completing the interview for the first situation. This resulted in data from 160 participants for the peer situation and 158 for the close friend situation. Students identified one to eight goals for each situation. The average number of goals identified did not differ between the close friend ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.48$) and peer ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.28$) situations, $t(157) = 1.49$, $p = .138$. Nine mutually exclusive goal themes emerged from the coding (see Table 1). Four themes emerged from open coding that were not among those in the a priori codes: *maintain image and reputation/self-defense*, *stay out of trouble*, *conflict avoidance*, and *seek more information*. Five themes were supported by the open coding process and the a priori codes: *instrumental-control*, *relationship maintenance*, *moral*, *revenge*, and *tension reduction*. The number of students

who generated at least one goal for each theme is reported in Table 2. The following sections describe the nine goal themes in decreasing order of prevalence.

Instrumental-Control—*Instrumental-control* goals involved participants' efforts to gain control over the situation to meet their own needs. This was the most frequently mentioned theme, with 75% and 78% of students generating at least one *instrumental-control* goal in the close friend and peer situations, respectively. Some students stated that they wanted to control the relationship and prevent future conflicts in the close friend situation by no longer sharing secrets with the close friend. One male student said, "I'll just tell him, 'I'm not gon' tell you nothing personal like that no more.'" Other students' goals were to prevent the friend from spreading their secrets. A female student explained:

That she would promise me if I told her something like that she wouldn't tell the people anymore and, you know, that I can trust her and of course I would have to gain her trust back again but, you know, she wouldn't tell anybody else.

Several students mentioned goals that involved receiving a sincere apology from their friend. One male student stated that after an apology "everything would go back to normal." Others said their goal would be to stop talking to their friend or end the friendship. For example, a female student said, "I probably wouldn't be her friend. . . Because I don't want to hang out with anybody that talks behind my back." Several others indicated that a primary goal was to stop the specific problem. For example, one female student's goal was that "There will be no more rumors about me or just everything just comes to an end."

Several students reported similar goals for the peer situation. Some wanted to receive an apology, like one female student who said, "At the end, I want her to look me in my face and apologize to me." Some indicated that an apology would resolve the situation because the provocateur did not have malintent. As one female student explained, "He didn't really mean it. He was just trying to get to me." In contrast to the close friend situation, few students mentioned repairing the relationship with the provocateur in the peer situation. Rather, some students indicated that they would not want further communication with the peer. Many students simply wanted to stop the peer from saying disrespectful things about them. One female adolescent's goal was "for her to stop saying stuff about other people family and mine. . . 'Cause if she says nothing else about everybody else family, then maybe she'll stop get to fighting with people over this stuff." In other words, preventing the peer from saying disrespectful things about others' families might prevent fighting. Although preventing fighting was not a common explanation for *instrumental-control* goals in the close friend situation, multiple students reported that they wanted to gain control over the peer situation so that the conflict would not lead to a physical fight. Some suggested that a physical fight was inevitable if the situation continued, like this female student: "Because if she doesn't forget about it and she just keeps talking about [it], it's just gonna lead to bigger problems." Several students implied that the situation could cause them to become so angry that they would fight their peer. As one female student said, "Imma get more mad and want to fight her." Others stated that they might feel it was necessary to fight the provocateur to stand up for themselves and their family. In other words, fighting might be a final effort for adolescents to achieve their goal of controlling the situation.

Relationship Maintenance—*Relationship maintenance* goals involved wanting to maintain or improve the relationship or friendship with the other person, including specific aspects (e.g., trust). Over half (53.8%) of the students identified a *relationship maintenance* goal in the close friend situation. When discussing goals to repair or maintain their relationship with the friend who provoked them, students cited the length of the friendship as a reason to maintain the relationship, including a female student whose goal was as follows: “That we can still be friends. Because we’ve, like, been friends for a long time...Because she’s like my sister, and if we are not friends anymore, I don’t know what I would do.” Students did not want to lose a friend they had been friends with for a long time, or someone they considered to be one of their closest friends. A male student said, “I only have a few friends so he’s one of my closest friends so I wouldn’t want to lose that friendship with him.” Students also reported that they would still care about their friend even after the conflict. One female student said, “So she can know that I still love her and, and, I still want to be friends even though you might have told a lot of people.” Some students thought that maintaining the relationship would prevent future conflicts. They reported that they did not want to hold grudges or stay angry at a friend, and they did not want to create enemies. For example, a male student said, “if he was my friend for a long time, I would want him to still be my friend instead of being enemies.” Many students suggested that their sense of self or identity was related to having low conflict in their social relationships. One female student explained, “I just don’t want to be known as the person who, they, can like they can get mad easily.”

Some mentioned that trust was very important in their relationships. They reported that they wanted to repair the trust in their friendship and for their friend to prove that they were trustworthy again, like this female student: “I probably would want us to be friends again and probably make her do something that would – maybe I would trust her again.” Finally, some students wanted to maintain some level of friendship or relationship with the other person but expected some aspects of the friendship to be different. For example, one female student said:

Like I would still want to be her friend because she made a mistake—mistakes—everybody makes mistakes no matter what. So I would still want it to work out good in the end but not... as close as we were before. I wouldn’t tell her any of my secrets.

In the peer situation, about 29% of students identified a *relationship maintenance* goal. In contrast to the close friend situation, none mentioned a need to trust the peer provocateur. Students did, however, reference the length of the relationship as a reason to maintain it. Similarly, students mentioned wanting to avoid “drama,” future conflicts, or having “enemies.” Adolescents generally indicated that they would want a peaceful resolution to the conflict, like this male student who said, “I don’t want to start any fights or nothing.” Even if they are not friends with the other person, students reported that they wanted to be “friendly” with them, such as this female student: “Um... I probably want us to be sorta friends...She don’t say nothing to me, I won’t say nothing to her. Hi, bye, how you doing? That’s it.”

Maintain Image And Reputation/Self-Defense—*Maintain image and reputation/self-defense* was represented in open coding and subsumed three a priori categories: approval-seeking, competitive striving, and self-defense. Differentiating between image and reputation versus self-defense was difficult because most students perceived that maintaining a certain image was self-protective. These categories were therefore merged. This category included goals seeking to protect or improve how oneself is viewed by others through damage control, approval seeking, or self-defense tactics. Whereas 22% of students identified this goal in the close friend situation, only 5% did so in the peer situation. In the close friend situation, several students reported that their goal was to maintain their privacy in order to protect or repair their image. Some wanted to make others believe that the private information was not true, like one male adolescent who wanted to “make sure people knew they were lies.” Others wanted to correct or control the spread of false information. As one female student said, “instead of it expanding and spreading, just try to contain it so that it would eventually wear off easier.” Several students had goals to protect themselves and stop criticism by getting others to move past what happened. One female student stated: “I just want everybody to accept the fact that if it was an embarrassing that it happens and it’s over.” In the peer situation, students also reported wanting to protect themselves by maintaining the privacy of their secrets. For example, one female student said, “I wouldn’t really want the whole school to know my personal business.” Other goals involved reducing criticism, such as a male student who said, “I wouldn’t want anybody criticizing [me].”

Conflict Avoidance—*Conflict avoidance* goals were aimed at preventing escalation of the situation. A *conflict avoidance* goal was mentioned by 5% of students in the close friend situation, and 17% in the peer situation. In the close friend situation, students wanted to avoid actions that would lead to more conflict. For example, a male student said that they would avoid saying anything to their friend because “I don’t want it to just start up again.” Several youths said they wanted to stop the situation from escalating to a physical fight. One female student’s goal was “not to hit them” and a male adolescent wanted it to end “not in a fight... verbal or physical.” Similarly, in the peer situation, students reported that they would try to avoid the other person to prevent further conflicts. One female student wanted to “not deal with that person anymore... so I wouldn’t start any more problems with that person.” Students also reported wanting to avoid more conflict with the peer. One female student stated that their goal was “me and her not arguing... arguing is really not worth it, really.” Also as in the close friend situation, students wanted to avoid escalation to a physical fight. Some reported that they wanted to avoid fighting because it did not align with their identity. One female student explained, “Because I don’t, I’m not a fighting person. I wouldn’t like to fight, fight people.” Others thought a peaceful resolution would more effectively resolve the conflict, like a male adolescent who wanted “to solve the problem peacefully... because like, like I said before fighting really isn’t the answer to anything.”

Seek More Information—*Seek more information* involved goals to obtain more information about the circumstances or figure out why it occurred. This goal was generated by about 11% and 10% of students in the close friend and peer situations, respectively. In the close friend situation, students wanted to learn why their friend shared the secret. As a male adolescent said, “My most important goal would be to find out why they...felt like they

needed to tell a personal thing that I told them.” Some students wanted to figure out why it happened so they could continue being close friends. For example, a female student reported that their goal was “for her to tell me a reason why she did it so I can trust her more.” In the peer situation, participants also wanted to understand the motivation of the peer. Some suggested that there might be a reason for the peer to tease them. One female student said they would confront the peer: “Ask her, ‘What did I do [to] you to make you say that about my momma?’” A few students indicated that seeking more information might prevent the provocateur from teasing others about their family. As a male student explained, “I’d want to know why he’d talked bad about my parents – family... He would think about what he’s done and not do it again.”

Revenge—*Revenge* goals included goals to get even, harm, or punish the other person, including through interpersonal means or by getting the other person in trouble with a third party. Although only 4% of students generated a *revenge* goal in the close friend situation, over 16% did so in the peer situation. In the close friend situation, students discussed revenge as a way to get back at their friend, such as a male student who wanted their friend to “get in trouble” because “he’s really not a friend if he’s spread a rumor about me.” A few students reported that they wanted to get even with the provocateur by making him or her understand how they felt. For example, a male student reported:

I would want it to end by telling people—everybody—a secret about them just to get even or so they’ll know how it feels... Because normally I wouldn’t do that, but if it’s really big secret then I would do that. Then I would do that back because they really did that to me, and I would try to find their deepest, darkest secret and then try and do that to them – trying to ruin their lives just like they ruined mine.

Students also generated goals to get even in the peer situation. For example, one female student said “I want her to hurt like it probably hurt me, it might hurt me... If my feelings are hurt, your feelings should be hurt 10 times worse than mines.” Students also mentioned goals related to getting justice. For example, a female student said: “I would want her to get what she deserves out of being rude... Because she, she just walks around being mean to people for no reason.” Multiple participants said they would want to get back at the other person so that the person would gain perspective and change their behavior. For example, one female student listed revenge as a goal because “I would want her to know how I felt the way she was treating me. So hopefully she would stop doing it to others, including me, so nobody else has to feel the way that I did.” Some students believed that getting revenge would prevent future conflict. For example, one male student’s goal was to get the perpetrator in trouble: “Him getting caught by a teacher... so he won’t do it to anyone else.”

Tension Reduction—*Tension reduction* goals involved reducing negative emotions, including anger, worry, or other distress. About 10% of students identified at least one *tension reduction* goal in the close friend and peer situations. In the close friend situation, some students wanted to avoid getting angry. A female student explained, “[I] Try not to let it bother me a lot... Because I don’t wanna just get mad over anything.” Several students reported that they would not want to worry about the conflict or that they did not consider the situation to be a major problem that needed to be addressed. For example, one female

student said, “Well, I’d be like, ‘It’s okay, ‘cause I know that you can’t hold secrets in. And it’s really not a big deal.’” Students also thought that reducing tension would prevent conflict and stop others from talking about it, like this female student: “Well a goal would be to not like, bring any tension. To deal with it calmly.” A male student wanted to show others that “no one can really get to me.” They explained “if people think that can get to you, they will just keep trying until they finally do.” In the peer situation, students also wanted to reduce or eliminate their distress or worry about the situation. They often rationalized this goal because the disrespectful statement was not true. For example, a female student said that their goal was to “make sure I don’t let it get to me... because I know it’s not true.” Some students aimed to behave as though the conflict did not occur to avoid tension, like a female student who said they wanted to “brush it off and whatever happens just pretend that it didn’t even happen... I don’t want to like carry it with me after that.”

Moral—*Moral* goals emphasized doing the right or moral thing and teaching the other person that his or her actions were wrong. Although some *revenge* goals also touched on aspects of morals, these categories differed in their intent. Whereas *revenge* goals emphasized getting back at the other person to harm them or get even, *moral* goals involved the provocateur learning that their behavior caused harm, but not necessarily experiencing harm or hurt. Moral goals were identified by about 2% of students in the close friend situation, and 7% in the peer situation. In the close friend situation, several thought that the provocateur might not have understood the consequences of their actions, like this female student: “Sometimes people don’t realize that they’re hurting others until, you know, they get told that... ‘You know, I didn’t like what you did.’ And maybe they stop doing whatever.” In the peer situation, students also wanted the provocateur to realize the harm they were causing to others. One female student’s goal was “to have somebody let him know that what he said was not nice and that he shouldn’t do that... That way nobody else ever has to feel the way that he made me feel.” Although infrequent, a female adolescent emphasized that the peer needed to learn to respect others because being disrespectful could have serious consequences: “Because if we didn’t have respect for each other, we’ll probably be fighting all the time, and it wouldn’t be right, it’ll, it’ll be a blood—a blood bath.”

Stay out of Trouble—A small number of students wanted to avoid trouble with authority figures in both situations. For instance, in the close friend situation one female student said that her goals was, “for this not to show up in my record... Um, because at times and situations like this, I have a vibe that I might get in a fight or somethin’, and I don’t want for that to be on my record.” Similarly, in the peer situation a male adolescent wanted to avoid serious trouble that might result from conflict, saying, “I don’t feel like going to court.” Other students did not mention a specific authority figure but reported wanting to avoid getting in trouble in general.

Gender and Setting Differences in Goals

Female adolescents identified an average of 1.56 more goals than did male adolescents ($M_s = 2.78, 1.22$; $SD_s = 1.28, 1.03$; $p < .01$). Gender and setting (i.e., urban versus rural schools) differences in the percentage of participants who mentioned each goal theme were examined through logistic regression analyses. These analyses were only conducted for the goal

categories identified by at least 15 students (Table 2). Significant gender differences were found on two of the nine comparisons. The odds of identifying a *relationship maintenance* goal were higher for female than for male adolescents, but only in the close friend situation ($OR = 1.91, p = .045, 95\% CI [1.01, 3.61]$). The odds of identifying a *seek more information* goal were also higher for female than for male adolescents, but only in the *peer situation* ($OR = 3.95, p = .040, 95\% CI [1.064, 14.64]$). There was only one significant difference across sites. The odds of identifying a *conflict avoidance* goal were higher for students in the urban school than for those in the rural school, but only for the *peer situation* ($OR = 3.45, p = .009, 95\% CI [1.36, 8.72]$).

Discussion

According to social-cognitive theories, identification of goals is a key cognitive process that influences adolescents' choice to engage in aggressive or nonviolent behavior during social interactions (Crick & Dodge, 1996). There is evidence that children and adolescents' endorsement of certain social goals is associated with aggressive behavior (e.g., Rose & Asher, 1999; McDonald & Lochman, 2012). However, to our knowledge, no prior studies have used qualitative methods to obtain adolescents' perspectives on the goals that influence their behavior during conflicts with peers. Most current measures reflect goals based on children's reports or are generated by researchers. This may limit their relevance for adolescents, whose level of social cognitive development and increasing susceptibility to peer influences may lead them to consider a greater variety of goals (Steinberg, 2005). During this important period of identity development, adolescents' sense of self is highly influenced by their social interactions and relationships. It is therefore critical to understand factors such as social goals that impact early adolescents' relationships with their peers. The current study addressed this gap by engaging a diverse sample of 7th grade students in generating and explaining goals that would influence their response to two conflict situations involving close friends and peers, and the extent to which these goals differed by gender and school setting. This study contributes broadly to the understanding of adolescents' social goals and could guide efforts to increase the relevance of measures designed for use with adolescents.

Interviews with adolescents identified four goals that have not emerged in prior research with children. *Maintain image and reputation/self-defense* was a complex theme that encompassed several a priori goal categories and themes identified by open coding. Students' goals to maintain their image or reputation were often self-protective in nature, suggesting that some adolescents' goals are impacted by their desire to maintain their social status. The emergence of *conflict avoidance*, which focused on avoiding escalation of conflict with peers, may also be explained by adolescents' desire to be accepted by their peers. Such themes are not surprising given the importance of peers and adolescents' strong desire to maintain positive social relationships (Steinberg, 2005). Moreover, it has been argued that moral reasoning, or the ability to judge right from wrong, typically focuses on self-interest during early adolescence, with a shift toward maintaining positive relationships with others throughout adolescence (Colby et al., 1983). These goals may thus represent adolescents' efforts to balance their own interests (e.g., protecting the self) with their desire to be liked by peers (e.g., no conflict, positive image).

Several students identified the goal to *stay out of trouble* with authority figures. Although this is similar to “avoidance goals” previously identified among children (Chung & Asher, 1996), it was identified by only seven adolescents in this study. Most goal themes centered around friend or peer relationships rather than relationships with authority figures, further highlighting the important role that peers play in motivating early adolescents’ thoughts and behavior. Finally, the identification of a goal to *seek more information* may reflect cognitive developments during adolescence in brain regions that have been linked to the ability to take others’ perspectives (Choudhury et al., 2006). The enhanced ability to consider their friend’s or peer’s perspective may have contributed to adolescents’ desire to learn the other person’s side of the story before acting. Overall, these goal themes highlight the importance of considering developmental differences between children and early adolescents when assessing constructs such as social cognitions.

Adolescents in the current study identified several goal themes similar to prior research, including *instrumental-control*, *relationship maintenance*, *tension reduction*, *moral*, and *revenge*. However, the participants provided adolescent-specific explanations of these goals that were more nuanced than in previous definitions. *Instrumental control* goals were more layered than previously described such that participants often reported that their needs had to be met (e.g., receive an apology) first in order to maintain a friendship (e.g., regain trust). This demonstrates that *instrumental-control* goals among adolescents are not as simple as “pursuing one’s own needs” (Chung & Asher, 1996), but represent an internal conflict between the individual’s self-interests and the desire to maintain relationships. Maintaining a close relationship may actually be a primary goal of adolescents, in contrast to simpler priorities of younger children (e.g., “When a peer refuses to return a puzzle piece, my goal is to finish the puzzle”; Chung & Asher, 1996). *Relationship maintenance* goals generally aligned with previous definitions, but a distinction was drawn between conflicts with close friends and more distant peers. Whereas adolescents wanted to maintain an intimate, trusting relationship with close friends, they simply wanted to avoid serious conflict with more distant peers. This contrast may be explained by social development during adolescence such that youth begin to develop more intimate, reciprocal friendships based on shared values and interests (Rubin et al., 2008). These results also denote the importance of situational context, including with whom they are interacting, for adolescents’ social cognitions.

Another goal theme reflected in prior research was *revenge*, but it was mentioned infrequently in this sample. Its low prevalence might be explained by decreasing support for revenge goals as children age. In a prior study, only 8% of youth reported increasing support for revenge goals in grades four through eight (McDonald & Lochman, 2012). Again, adolescents may report less support for goals that perpetuate conflict due to the importance of social relationships and developments in moral reasoning. More students generated a *revenge* goal for the peer situation than in the close friend situation, suggesting that adolescents are more likely to want to return harm to their peers than to close friends.

The current study also examined gender and setting differences in participants’ frequency of mentioning specific goals in each situation. Male and female adolescents identified similar goals in conflict situations, with only two exceptions. Female students were more likely

than male students to mention *relationship maintenance* in the close friend situation and *seek more information* in the peer situation. This is similar to previous evidence that female students are more likely to support goals to maintain relationships (Delveaux & Daniels, 2000; MacEvoy & Asher, 2012). However, we also found that male and female adolescents were equally likely to identify relationship maintenance goals during conflicts with peers. These results generally point to more consistency in male and female adolescents' social goals than differences. There was only one significant difference between students at the urban and rural schools, suggesting some degree of consistency across contexts in the goals adolescents generated within these conflict situations. More research is needed to better understand potential differences based on gender and school setting.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that warrant discussion. The school-based sample may have excluded students who were more likely to be absent. Because evidence suggests that youth engaging in problem behavior are more likely to be absent from school (Vaughn et al., 2013), we may have under sampled students more likely to engage in problem behaviors. The use of measures that relied on hypothetical situations is also a limitation. Participants were asked to orient themselves to the situation by describing how each situation might occur in their real life, including naming a provocateur and what they would say. Although this may be the most effective approach to orient adolescents to the situation, context is an important factor that influences goal identification (Crick & Dodge, 1994) and participants' ability to imagine the situation and variability in the details may have impacted their responses. Another consideration is that social desirability during the in-person interviews may have led participants to report fewer undesirable goals. Although all interviewers were trained to establish rapport with interviewees, we recognize that the extent to which the interviewer and interviewee's sex and race matched may have influenced the responses in some interviews. Moreover, although we discuss the percentage of students who identified each goal category, this study was designed to identify goals relevant to adolescents and not to make comparisons between adolescents. That would be better addressed by a quantitative study in which participants could rate the relevance of specific goals.

Although these findings may be more generalizable to African American or Black and multiracial adolescents than prior research which focused largely on White samples of youth, the results may not generalize to other populations that were not represented in this sample (e.g., Latinx youth). Moreover, although there was one difference in goals between students at urban and rural schools, this is difficult to interpret because school setting is confounded with other differences, including racial-ethnic makeup of the student body and community access to resources. Despite these many differences across settings, students at urban and rural schools generally reported similar goals. However, because this study only compared goals across two urban and one rural middle school, these findings cannot be generalized broadly. Future research should continue using qualitative methods to study the goals of adolescents socialized within different contexts (e.g., racial-ethnic background, socioeconomic status, urbanicity).

Implications for Research and Prevention

An important finding of the current study was that most participants identified multiple goals for each situation, and their descriptions often included both antisocial and prosocial themes. Although *instrumental-control* goals have generally been considered antisocial due to their associations with aggression (e.g., Rose & Asher, 1999), the current results suggests that this need not be the case. For example, adolescents reported that they wanted to control interactions with their friend (e.g., no longer share secrets) so they could prevent conflict and gradually rebuild trust in the relationship. In other words, they focused on protecting themselves from harm in the short-term, while simultaneously wanting to maintain the relationship in the long-term. This suggests classifying categories of goals as either prosocial or antisocial goals is an oversimplification of the nuanced thought processes that guide adolescents' social behavior. This oversimplification also promotes black and white thinking which is, in fact, counter to the goals of youth violence prevention. A primary goal of many youth violence prevention programs is not to teach right from wrong, but to promote decision-making skills (Sullivan et al., 2008). It may not be possible for an adolescent in a conflict situation to select a behavior that benefits everyone else *and* protects their safety and identity. Effective decision-making skills should enable adolescents to *balance* all considerations, but not prioritize outcomes for others over their own well-being. This suggests that categorizing particular goals as antisocial or prosocial may not support the overall goal of promoting positive youth development. Efforts to advance research in the areas of adolescents' social goals must include redefining social goals as complex patterns that are not categorized as good or bad.

Compared with other aspects of social cognition (e.g., response selection, beliefs), social goals have been relatively understudied in adolescents. The current mixed-method study highlights the importance of using adolescent-generated goals to study the role of goals in social-information processing. Given the relevance of social cognitions for the study and prevention of adolescent aggression, it is vital that researchers continue to triangulate definitions and develop measures that are relevant to a specific target population. These results provide a starting point for the development of a social goals measure with stronger validity and relevance for use with adolescents, which will therefore be more appropriate for evaluations of violence prevention programs that target social cognitions.

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Table 1

Goal Coding Themes and Definitions

Goal Category	Definition
<i>Conflict Avoidance</i>	The goal is to prevent any escalation of the conflict by forgetting about the situation, ignoring the situation, or more generally avoiding any conflict.
<i>Instrumental-Control</i>	The goal is to control the situation in order to meet one's own needs. Responses reflect a focus on getting what he/she wants, including keeping control over the interaction and not being pushed around by the peer (i.e., "winning"). This includes getting the specific problem to stop.
<i>Maintain Image and Reputation/ Self-Defense</i>	The goal is to protect or improve the way that one is viewed by others. This includes seeking approval from others. This also includes components of self-defense, such as trying to stop hostile criticism, rumors, abuse of you or your family/friends. This includes goals that are generally focused on avoiding a negative view by others (e.g., saving face, damage control).
<i>Moral</i>	The goal emphasizes wanting to do the right, moral, or fair thing.
<i>Relationship Maintenance</i>	The goal is to maintain the relationship or friendship, rather than prevailing in conflict. This includes goals of wanting components of a friendship to succeed or improve by the end of the situation (e.g., trust).
<i>Revenge</i>	The goal is to get even, harm or punish the other person in retaliation for their action in the situation. This includes using a 3rd party for revenge, such as trying to get the person in trouble with adults or ruining his/her relationship with peers. This includes interpersonal revenge (e.g., ending a friendship) and getting another student in trouble to get back at them.
<i>Seek More Information</i>	The goal is related to obtaining more information about the peer or the circumstances in order to try to figure out how things happened.
<i>Stay out of Trouble</i>	The goal is focused on not getting in trouble with authority figures (e.g., teachers, parents). This does not include getting in trouble with peers.
<i>Tension Reduction</i>	The goal is trying to reduce negative emotion, such as anger, by controlling oneself. Could reflect keeping oneself from getting anxious, upset, or tense.
<i>Other</i>	Any goal that is not coded in previously listed categories. This includes responses that are too vague to be accurately categorized or that appear to have no connection to the problem situation.

Table 2

Number of students who identified each goal for each situation by gender and location of school

Goal category	Full sample n (%)	% Male	% Female	% Urban	% Rural
<u>Close Friend Situation (N = 160)</u>					
Instrumental-control	120 (75%)	71.4	78.4	70.9	78.5
Relationship maintenance	86 (53.8%)	61.9	45.9	54.4	54.4
Maintain image and reputation/ self-defense	35 (21.9%)	25.0	18.9	17.7	26.6
Conflict avoidance	9 (5.6%)	6.0	5.4	5.1	6.3
Seek more information	17 (10.6%)	13.1	8.1	8.9	12.7
Revenge	6 (3.8%)	4.9	2.7	2.5	5.1
Tension reduction	17 (10.6%)	11.9	9.5	8.9	12.7
Other	11 (6.9%)	8.3	5.4	6.3	7.6
Moral	3 (1.9%)	3.6	0.0	1.3	2.5
Stay out of trouble	2 (1.3%)	1.2	1.4	1.3	1.3
<u>Peer Situation (N = 158)</u>					
Instrumental-control	123 (77.8%)	78.6	76.7	73.4	82.1
Relationship maintenance	46 (29.1)	25.0	34.2	25.3	33.3
Maintain image and reputation/ self-defense	8 (5.1%)	7.1	2.7	2.5	7.7
Conflict avoidance	27 (17.1%)	16.7	17.8	25.3	9.0
Seek more information	15 (9.5%)	14.3	4.1	7.6	11.5
Revenge	26 (1.3%)	16.7	16.4	16.5	16.7
Tension reduction	16 (10.1%)	13.1	6.8	10.1	10.3
Other	15 (9.5%)	10.7	8.2	10.1	9.0
Moral	12 (7.6%)	11.9	2.7	3.8	11.5
Stay out of trouble	5 (3.2%)	1.2	5.5	1.3	5.1

Note. Information on gender was missing for 2 students; 2 students did not complete the section of the interview for the peer situation.