



Associations of coolness and social goals with aggression and engagement during adolescence

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ABSTRACT

This study examined associations of coolness and social goals with aggression and academic engagement, and whether social goals and gender moderated associations across the fall and spring of sixth grade (first year of middle school). Students ($N = 347$; 49% females) self-reported social goals (popularity, dominance, intimacy) and engagement (involved, disruptive behavior) and peer-reported coolness and aggression (overt, relational). Results indicated relations of coolness and social goals with subsequent aggression and engagement, and goals and gender moderated associations. Cool youth who endorsed intimacy goals had higher overt aggression; cool boys with low popularity goals or high dominance goals had higher overt aggression. Cool youth endorsing dominance goals and cool girls endorsing popularity goals had higher relational aggression. Cool youth and boys endorsing dominance goals reported lower involved behavior. Youth endorsing popularity goals and cool youth endorsing dominance goals reported higher disruptive behavior. Implications for examining adolescent coolness and social motivation are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Coolness is a salient feature of the peer context and has been found to have significant implications for social and academic functioning during early adolescence, especially during the first year of middle school (Bellmore, Villarreal, & Ho, 2011; Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Hoff, Reese-Weber, Schneider, & Stagg, 2009; Jamison, Wilson, & Ryan, 2015). Students are often concerned with fitting in with perceived peer group norms (Galván, Spatzier, & Juvonen, 2011) and being cool (Bellmore et al., 2011) as they navigate a larger, more complex peer system (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Due to changing social norms (e.g., becoming more favorable towards aggression and less favorable towards academic engagement), high peer status is increasingly related to aggressive and disengaged behavior in middle school (Bellmore et al., 2011; Bowker, Rubin, Buskirk-Cohen, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth-LaForce, 2010; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007). Students also strive for a variety of social goals among peers, including popularity, dominance, and intimacy, which have significant implications for social and academic behaviors (Anderman, 1999; Kiefer & Ryan, 2008; Patrick, Anderman, & Ryan, 2002). Although related, coolness and social goals are conceptually distinct as coolness is an index of social status that reflects a consensus in the peer system (Jamison et al., 2015; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006), whereas social content goals reflect cognitive

representations of what individuals are trying to achieve in peer interaction (Wentzel, 2000).

The present study makes a unique contribution to the field, studying the intersection of social and academic factors in school by examining the associations of coolness and social goals with subsequent aggression and engagement during the first year of middle school. Although cool peer reputation and social goals have important implications for students' functioning in school (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008; Rodkin, Ryan, Jamison, & Wilson, 2013), research examining relations among constructs across the school year is scarce (see Dawes & Xie, 2014; Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014 as exceptions). Studies have focused on aggression as an outcome, yet additional research is needed to distinguish between separate forms of aggression (overt and relational; Cillessen, Mayeux, Ha, de Bruyn, & LaFontana, 2014). Additionally, academic engagement has been understudied in relation to high social status and social goals. It is important to examine factors that shape engagement, as it is a precursor to achievement and amenable to change (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Examining the relations of status and goals with aggression and engagement may provide a comprehensive understanding of the behavior characteristic of high status youth motivated by certain goals. Further, dominance goals are relatively under-examined (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008) and most studies have not simultaneously investigated popularity, dominance, and intimacy goals in relation to adjustment. Although recent research has examined social goals (i.e., popularity goals) as moderating relations between high social status and aggression (Cillessen et al., 2014; Dawes & Xie, 2014; Ojanen & Findley-Van Nostrand, 2014), there is much we do not know.

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The current study had two main aims: to examine the associations of coolness and social goals with later aggression (overt and relational) and academic engagement (involved and disruptive behavior), and to examine social goals and gender as moderators of these associations across the sixth grade (i.e., first year of middle school). Research indicates relations of high social status with aggression (Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux, 2011; Dawes & Xie, 2014; Xie, Li, Boucher, Hutchins, & Cairns, 2006) and engagement (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006). However, there is not a consensus regarding the role of gender in moderating these relations. There is evidence for gender differences in relation to coolness, social motivation, aggression, and engagement (Cillessen et al., 2011; Xie et al., 2006), but relations have not been found in other studies (Dawes & Xie, 2014). Additional research is needed to clarify gender effects on cool status and adjustment (Rose, Glick, & Smith, 2011). We examined mean-level gender differences and changes in variables across the first year of middle school due to puberty, social development, and school transition-related factors (Eccles, 2004; Pellegrini & Long, 2002).

2. Cool peer reputation: associations with aggression and academic engagement

Cool peer reputation, or coolness, refers to “the embodiment of some combination of attributes that wins approval or earns the attention of others,” (Jamison et al., 2015, p. 384). Coolness encompasses a range of individual characteristics, including behaviors and attitudes, which not only win youth approval among peers but also express rebellion towards parents or other authorities, and eventually place them on the cutting edge of peer norms (Pountain & Robins, 2000). For example, coolness may include fashionable appearance and dress styles, trendy possessions, and sophisticated interpersonal skills (Adler & Adler, 1998; Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992). Coolness is a social construction that is in constant flux (e.g., joining a jazz club in 1950's and punk explosion in 1970's; Pountain & Robins, 2000) and continually negotiated as youth determine a consensus of what is valued in the peer system (Adler et al., 1992). Cool youth are also characterized as being precocious (Pountain & Robins, 2000) and pseudomature (Allen, Schad, Oudekerk, & Chango, 2014). This aligns with Moffitt's (1993) “maturity gap”, which indicates early adolescence is a time youth strive to appear mature and adopt features associated with adult status that represent increased autonomy and less childlike behaviors.

Cool peer reputation is used as an indicator of high social status. Research indicates the need to investigate coolness as an index of social status in addition to others, such as popularity (Bellmore et al., 2011; Rodkin et al., 2006). Youth can best define what coolness is for themselves (Pountain & Robins, 2000; Rodkin et al., 2006). Thus, peer nominated coolness is a developmentally appropriate index of high social status that allows adolescents to fully capture the authentic meaning of coolness. Although cool youth are a heterogeneous group with some subgroups identified as displaying aggressive and antiacademic behaviors and others displaying prosocial and positive academic behaviors (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000), they are often viewed as the most mean and manipulative of all peers, and are often not well-liked (Eder, 1985; Merten, 1997; Rodkin et al., 2006). Conceptually, coolness is similar to perceived popularity as they both assess peer status. However, coolness is distinct from perceived popularity. Coolness focuses on individuality and gaining peer approval or attention (Jamison et al., 2015; Pountain & Robins, 2000), whereas popularity reflects social centrality and prominence within the peer group (Cillessen et al., 2011; Rodkin et al., 2006). Although youth nominated as cool may be popular, social centrality by itself is not sufficient for coolness. We anticipate that coolness may relate to study variables in similar and different ways from popularity and have unique implications for adjustment. For example, coolness and popularity may have similar relations with aggression and engagement as they indicate high social status, yet relations may differ

as cool youth focus on individual attributes rather than social network centrality. We expected that coolness will be relatively stable across time, given research examining cool peer nominations during early adolescence (Bellmore et al., 2011; Jamison et al., 2015).

Coolness has been found to be associated with overt and relational aggression during early adolescence (Bellmore et al., 2011; Hoff et al., 2009; Rodkin et al., 2013; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Social status is increasingly linked to peer-reported overt and relational aggression (Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Rose et al., 2004) and both forms of aggression are used to gain and maintain status during early adolescence (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Hoff et al., 2009; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2013). Research has identified a subset of overtly aggressive, high status youth (Rodkin et al., 2000; Rodkin et al., 2006) and ethnographic research indicates cool youth use relational aggression to maintain peer exclusivity and influence peers and group norms (Adler & Adler, 1998; Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). Although we expected coolness to be related to both overt and relational aggression, we hypothesized that the link with relational aggression would be stronger than overt forms as overt aggression is less approved by peers during this developmental period (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Hoff et al., 2009).

Compared to the abundant research examining links between social status and aggression, less is known regarding academic engagement. We examined relations of cool peer reputation with aggression and engagement as few studies have examined social status in relation to both social and academic functioning (see Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007 as an exception). Coolness is associated with a negative academic reputation across the first year of middle school, although this varies across subgroups and is contingent upon prior disruptive behavior (Jamison et al., 2015). Cool status is increasingly associated with academic disengagement (Schwartz & Gorman, 2011) and viewed as being incompatible with effort and achievement during adolescence (Anderman, 1999; Galván et al., 2011; Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). Aligning with changing norms is critical in ‘staying cool’ during the first year of middle school and has implications for aggression (Bellmore et al., 2011), yet it is unknown what implications coolness may have for academic engagement. Would adolescents consider “downplaying effort” or “being disruptive” as individual attributes that embody coolness? We anticipated that cool peer reputation will be positively related to subsequent disruptive behavior and negatively related to later involved, on-task classroom behavior.

3. Social goals: associations with aggression and academic engagement

Two complementary approaches to social goals include an achievement orientation approach and a goal content approach. Achievement goal theory within the social domain focuses on the development or demonstration of social competence, as well as relations between students' goal orientations, beliefs, and behaviors (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). The achievement orientation approach focuses on students' different orientations towards social competence and transcends specific goals (e.g., reasons why an individual is trying to achieve; Ryan & Shim, 2008). In the current study, we asked students what they like to strive for when they are with peers; thus the focus was on outcomes that would make students feel happy or successful. Specifically, we assessed popularity, dominance and intimacy goals. This is aligned with a goal content approach (e.g., cognitive representations of what an individual is trying to achieve) and often serves to direct their behavior towards outcomes (Ford, 1992; Wentzel, 2000). This conceptualization and operationalization is similar to prior social goals research (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996) and has been found to have significant implications for early adolescents' adjustment in school (Anderman, 1999; Patrick et al., 2002).

Compared to popularity and intimacy goals, dominance goals have been relatively understudied (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008) and few studies

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