



Behavioral changes predicting temporal changes in perceived popular status

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ABSTRACT

The primary objectives of this investigation were to determine the extent to which young adolescents are stable in high perceived popular status across the middle school transition and to examine whether changes in social behaviors predict the stability, gain, and loss of perceived popular status after the transition. The sample included 672 young adolescents (323 boys) who completed peer nomination assessments of social behavior and perceived popularity at the end of elementary school (5th grade) and the beginning of middle school (6th grade). Findings indicated that 62% of perceived popular adolescents remained stable in their high popular status across the middle school transition. Multinomial logistic regression analyses revealed that a combination of aggression and arrogance/conceit was associated with *stable* and *newly-gained* perceived popular status after the middle school transition. Taken together, findings highlight the significance of contextual and temporal changes in adolescents' perceived popular status.

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Research over the past three decades has clearly indicated that there are two types of popularity during late childhood and early adolescence: (1) Sociometric popularity (which is assessed by asking adolescents who they “like the most”; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982); and more recently, (2) perceived popularity (which is assessed by asking adolescents to nominate who is “popular”; for recent review, see Asher & McDonald, 2009). Sociometric popularity refers to popularity derived from liking and social preference whereas perceived popularity refers to popularity derived from social visibility and reputation (e.g., Cohen & Prinstein, 2006). Studies of the behavioral correlates and consequences of these two types of popularity have consistently shown that sociometric popularity is associated with positive (e.g., prosocial behaviors) social behaviors (e.g., Coie et al., 1982) whereas perceived popularity is a strong correlate of both positive and negative (e.g., aggressive behavior) social behaviors (e.g., Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). The fact that perceived popularity is associated with both positive and negative behaviors may begin to explain why perceived popular adolescents are well-known, but not necessarily well-liked.

However, recent investigations have also revealed that the behavioral correlates of perceived popularity vary across the middle school transition (e.g., Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Cillessen and Mayeux (2004a), for example, found that aggressive behaviors become more strongly associated with perceived popularity after the middle school transition. Given that perceived popularity is relatively stable during late childhood and early adolescence, even across school transitions (e.g., Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006), these combined findings may suggest that changes (or lack thereof) in the extent to which adolescents engage in positive and negative behaviors across the middle school transition might help to explain stability in high perceived popularity status. This manuscript reports on the first study to test this hypothesis.

Middle school transition and changes in adjustment

In the United States, the developmental shift from childhood to adolescence is often marked by the experience of a transition from elementary to middle school. Both individual and contextual changes coincide with this transition. At the individual level, social-cognitive abilities become more advanced (Selman, 1980), and many biological-psychosocial changes occur with the onset of puberty (Crockett & Petersen, 1987). Contextually, elementary schools in the United States often differ from middle schools with youth moving from small classrooms to large schools, and being introduced to new unfamiliar peers and school staff, along with new rules and expectations (Akos, 2002; Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992).

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Among the notable peer relations changes that occur as young adolescents move from elementary to middle school is the increasing acceptance of antisocial behavior (e.g., Bukowski, Sippola, & Newcomb, 2000). Adolescents' self-reported negative attitudes towards bullying decrease after the transition (Pellegrini & Long, 2002), and aggression becomes increasingly associated with social prominence (Bukowski et al., 2000). A related change is that the association between aggressive behavior and perceived popularity becomes particularly strong after the middle school transition (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004a; Rose et al., 2004). Additionally, there is a considerable increase in substance use during middle school (Oetting & Beauvais, 1990) and perceived popular adolescents, in particular, are likely to increase their alcohol and drug use (e.g., Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008). Lastly, all adolescents face the challenge of reestablishing their group memberships and reputations after the transition, given that the move to middle school is accompanied by the introduction of many unfamiliar peers (Brown, 1990).

If it is the case that perceived popular adolescents in middle school demonstrate behaviors, such as aggression, that appear to be less well-accepted in elementary school, one may surmise that the phenomenon of perceived popularity must be less than stable across the middle school transition. And yet, as noted above, this is not the case. Cillessen and colleagues have reported moderate-to-high stability of perceived popularity across grade level and school (e.g., Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). For instance, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004a) reported a 0.70 correlation coefficient for perceived popularity across the middle school transition (5th to 6th grades). Although stability appears to be relatively high, the correlation noted above suggests that there is flux in the system. Many perceived popular adolescents must assuredly lose their popular status, and at the same time, some adolescents who were not initially considered popular must gain perceived popular status upon new school entry.

Researchers have not thoroughly examined the extent to which such temporal changes in high perceived popular status occur across the middle school transition. Thus, the first goal of this investigation was to examine the stability of high perceived popular status for adolescents identified as highly perceived popular in the final semester of elementary school (5th grade). We also identified those adolescents who were not-perceived popular in the 5th grade and followed these popular and not-popular adolescents longitudinally as they made the transition into middle school (6th grade). Based on their perceived popularity status in the 6th grade, adolescents were further classified into one of the three popular status groups: (1) Adolescents who were consistently viewed as highly perceived popular by their peers in the 5th and 6th grades (*Stable*); (2) adolescents who gained high status in the 6th grade when they were of lower status in the 5th grade (*Gain*); and (3) adolescents who lost their high perceived popular status when they entered the middle school (*Lost*). Only a sizable minority of adolescents were expected to be stable in their high perceived popular status because it was reasoned that maintaining one's high social position would be somewhat difficult when entering a new school in which the peer group comprised many previously unfamiliar peers in a much larger academic venue.

Behavioral change and changes in popular status

The second goal of this investigation was to examine how changes in social behaviors relate to the stability of adolescents' perceived popular status across the middle school transition. According to Moffitt's (1993, 2006) theory of adolescence-limited delinquency, antisocial and aggressive behaviors serve as a declaration of independence, autonomy, and maturity for many adolescents. Therefore, it may follow that those adolescents who defy authority figures by demonstrating antisocial behaviors become highly regarded and respected by their peers. In support of this notion,

researchers have consistently demonstrated that many perceived popular adolescents engage in behaviors with a significant "antisocial edge" (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004b, p. 12), such as physically and relationally aggressive behaviors, and snobby or arrogant/stuck-up behaviors, during the middle school years (e.g., De Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Farmer, Estell, Bishop, O'Neal, & Cairns, 2003; Gorman, Kim, & Schimmelbusch, 2002; Rodkin et al., 2000).

Yet, it appears that highly perceived popular status is often best achieved when antisocial behaviors are accompanied by such "positive" social behaviors as prosocial (i.e., helping, sharing) and leadership behaviors (Hawley, 2003). This may also be in keeping with notions pertaining to Moffitt's (1993) ideas about adolescent-limited antisocial behavior. Some limit-testing and risk-taking may be carried out by confident, popular adolescents who have a previous history of demonstrating socially competent behavior and being accepted by peers. Peers may also be more willing to tolerate or accept aggression when it is accompanied by prosocial or leadership behaviors, both of which are valued by peers and positively associated with peer acceptance (e.g., Puckett, Aikins, & Cillessen, 2008; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). These ideas have been previously supported by studies showing that social competence and peer acceptance in elementary predict substance use in high school (e.g., Rubin, Chen, McDougall, Bowker, & McKinnon, 1995a,b), and perceived popularity is highest when aggression is coupled with high levels of peer perceived leadership, cooperation, or peer sociability (Puckett et al., 2008).

Although there has been no research directly examining behavioral change across the middle school transition in relation to stable and changing high perceived popular status, Moffitt's (1993, 2006) notions may be used to develop hypotheses. Prosocial behaviors are strong correlates of perceived popularity before and after the middle school transition (e.g., Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998), and therefore, adolescents who remain highly perceived popular after the middle school transition (*Stable*) may maintain their level of prosocial behaviors but increase their level of aggressive behaviors. These adolescents might appropriately adjust their levels of aggressive behaviors to fit with the perceived "norms" of middle school and adolescence (Bukowski et al., 2000; Moffitt, 1993). Although leadership and arrogance have been associated with perceived popularity before and after the middle school transition (e.g., Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2008; Puckett et al., 2008; Rodkin et al., 2000), it is not clear whether these specific behaviors become more strongly associated with perceived popularity after the middle school transition. However, we reasoned that increases in these behaviors after the transition may also be viewed by peers as reflecting social confidence at a time when many adolescents are feeling uncertain about their social position (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007) and as a result, may help popular adolescents quickly re-establish their "old" perceived popular status in a new school.

In contrast, the attainment of new perceived popular status for adolescents who were previously not-perceived popular (*Gain*) may require increases in both antisocial (aggression or arrogance) and positive (leadership or prosocial) behaviors. Finally, it may follow that adolescents who lose their status as perceived popular (the *Lost* group) fail to increase their aggressive or antisocial behaviors as they make the transition to middle school, even if they maintain their displays of positive behaviors.

The fact that no investigators have explored whether behavioral changes are associated with changes in perceived popularity status after the transition to middle school is surprising given recent speculation about the importance of increases in aggressive behavior for obtaining new perceived popular status (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004a), and calls for additional research on developmental changes in the behavioral correlates of popular status (Rubin et al., 2006). A better understanding of the role of antisocial and aggressive behaviors in maintaining or achieving perceived popularity in early adolescence

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