



# Social status and its link with personality dimensions, trait emotional intelligence, and scholastic achievement in children and early adolescents



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether: (a) personality dimensions and trait emotional intelligence relate to actual and perceived social status, (b) social status influence scholastic achievement, and (c) if such associations are moderated by gender. A sample of 595 Italian children and early adolescents completed measures for personality variables, non-verbal cognitive ability, while end of year grades were obtained from school offices. In a sociometric approach, participants rated the degree of each other acceptance and rejection, as well as their own perception of acceptance and rejection within the classroom context. Results indicate that gender moderates the association of personality traits and trait EI with actual social status for early adolescents, and with perceived social status for children. Overall, personality impacts social status for female only. Gender also moderates the effects of actual social status on scholastic achievement, with adolescent females being more affected by poor acceptance. Implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

A significant developmental goal is to establish relations with peers and to gain a sense of belonging within the peer group (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Classrooms are often the context of the first experiences with peer acceptance, rejection, and closeness (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2007), thus representing important settings for children and young adolescent relationships (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993). Not only relationships with schoolmates contribute to cognitive and emotional development (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003), but they are also a crucial component of scholastic wellbeing as they provide indication to the extent of children's adjustment to their classroom. There is a wide body of research attesting for the role of social status, an indicator of the degree of acceptance of each child in a specific context, as a protective factor in scholastic adjustment in both childhood and adolescence (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For instance, high-accepted pupils tend to show a higher degree of engagement in academic tasks (Rubin et al., 2007; Wentzel, 2005), and to be more academically successful (DeRosier, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 1994; Wentzel, 2003; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002; Fantuzzo, Sekino, & Cohen, 2004) compared to children who

are low-accepted by their classmates. Thus, it is not surprising that rejection has been found to have detrimental effects on children and adolescents' emotional wellbeing (Sandstrom & Zakriski, 2004), on their participation in classroom activities (Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Reiser, 2008), and on their mental and social development, putting them at risk for later maladjustment (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; McDougall, Hymel, Vaillancourt, & Mercer, 2001; Oldehinkel, Rosmalen, Veenstra, Dijkstra, & Ormel, 2007; Rubin et al., 2007).

The educational literature also attests for the existence of gender differences in a variety of peer processes, including behaviors and socio-cognitive aspects of relationship styles (Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Rose & Smith, 2009). For instance, findings of a qualitative review on gender differences in peer relations attest that girls tend to have a greater propensity to self-disclosure with peers, longer dyadic interactions, and a greater likelihood of support seeking, emotional expression, and rumination than boys (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Additionally, males and females vary in how they perceive peer acceptance, as boys show a greater inaccuracy for perceived acceptance by same-sex peers compared to girls, while girls seem to have a more negatively biased perception of opposite-sex acceptance compared to boys (Smith, Van Gessel, David-Ferdon, & Kistner, 2013). Along this line, given the progressive saliency that peers gain as interaction partners from middle childhood to puberty, differences in social processes across developmental stages have been also demonstrated. For example, adolescents increasingly

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rely on peers for social comparison and emotional support (e.g., Hay & Ashman, 2003), and give higher priority to peer reputation than children (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). In fact, another factor influencing children's wellbeing and behavior is their interpretation of their social status (Bellmore & Cillessen, 2003). Regardless of its accuracy, and whether discrepancies in accuracy reflect inflation or deflation, evidence from several sources supports the idea that children's perception of their social status may have implications over their emotional wellbeing and future adjustment. For instance, low self-perceived social acceptance has been associated with depressive symptoms (McGrath & Repetti, 2002), whereas self-perceived rejection has been related to externalizing behaviors in a different fashion for boys and girls (Guerra, Asher, & DeRosier, 2004).

### 1.1. Personality and trait emotional intelligence

Research indicated that a taxonomy of five higher-order personality dimensions (i.e., the Big Five: Openness to experience, emotional stability alternatively conceptualized as Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) can help classify and account for the variation in most of the existing lower-order or narrower traits (e.g., John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 1997). Despite few exceptions (e.g., Block, 2010), there is a general growing consensus that the Big Five dimensions account for cross-culturally valid, coherent, and stable personality self-perceptions not only in adults, but also in children and early adolescents (Barbaranelli, Caprara, Rabasca, & Pastorelli, 2003; Barbaranelli, Fida, Paciello, Giunta, & Caprara, 2008; Caspi & Shiner, 2006; del Barrio, Carrasco, & Holgado, 2006; Measelle, John, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005; Tackett et al., 2012). In addition, research has demonstrated the crucial role of the Big Five over many important outcomes, including scholastic achievement (Poropat, 2009) and the development of social relationships (Asendorpf & Denissen, 2006).

Thus far, the scientific literature provided strong evidence that the behavioral norm into peer groups may be precursors of peer acceptance and rejection (e.g., Chang, 2004; Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli, & Voeten, 2007). On the contrary, few studies have investigated the relationship between the Big Five dimensions and social status (e.g., Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Scholte, van Aken, & van Lieshout, 1997; van der Linden, Scholte, Cillessen, Nijenhuis, & Segers, 2010). Among these, those focusing on school-age samples have generally taken into consideration the positive pole of social status, which is represented by indices of acceptance (or likability) and popularity. Such investigations consistently suggest that peer social acceptance positively relates mainly to two dimensions, namely Extraversion and, to a less extent, Agreeableness (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Lubbers, van der Werf, Kuyper, & Offringa, 2006; Mervielde & De Fruyt, 2000; van der Linden et al., 2010; Wolters, Knoors, Cillessen, & Verhoeven, 2013). Moreover, research on adolescent's peer-acceptance showed the negative effects of Emotional Instability over actual peer acceptance (Anderson et al., 2001; Mervielde & De Fruyt, 2000; van der Linden et al., 2010). However, potential gender and developmental stage differences have been systematically overlooked in the study of these patterns of associations. Additionally, none of these investigations has taken into account primary-school aged children.

The literature of the last two decades has also increasingly paid attention to the construct of emotional intelligence (EI) as a potential predictor of many crucial health-related phenomena, including a better scholastic adjustment during development (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004; Petrides, Sangareau, Furnham, & Frederickson, 2006; Russo et al., 2012). The trait-based model of EI (trait EI or trait emotional self-efficacy; Petrides & Furnham, 2000, 2001) is conceptualized as a lower order personality trait covering a set of emotional self-perceptions and dispositions measurable through self-report questionnaires (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). For this reason, and considering the degree of overlap between trait EI and higher order

personality dimensions, particularly with Neuroticism, one of the main criticisms to the construct pertains its incremental validity beyond higher order personality dimensions, such as the Big Five (e.g., Landy, 2005; Schlegel, Grandjean, & Scherer, 2013; Schulte, Ree, & Carretta, 2004). While such issue has been addressed extensively by studies focusing on adults attesting that trait EI can meaningfully predict affect-related criteria over and above the Big Five (Andrei, Siegling, Aloe, Baldaro & Petrides, *in press*), the literature provides only preliminary evidence in samples of children (e.g., Mavroveli & Sanchez-Ruiz, 2011; Russo et al., 2012) and adolescents (Andrei, Mancini, Trombini, Baldaro, & Russo, 2014).

Even though the study of trait EI during development is still at its embryonic stage, the educational literature on children and early adolescence shows that higher levels of trait EI predict higher levels of self-reported and peer-reported pro-social behavior (Frederickson, Petrides, & Simmonds, 2012; Mavroveli, Petrides, Rieffe, & Bakker, 2007; Petrides et al., 2006), while investigations aimed to explore a direct link between trait EI and academic achievement have provided inconsistent evidence across studies (Mavroveli & Sanchez-Ruiz, 2011). Moreover, results of a meta-analysis on the relationship of trait EI with academic performance revealed that the significant predictive contribution of trait EI over scholastic achievement is in turn influenced by academic level and age (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013). The meaningful role of academic level in the prediction of students' achievement by both ability and trait EI has been also supported by recent longitudinal findings (Costa & Faria, 2015). There is also some evidence attesting that girls show higher overall trait EI levels compared to boys (e.g., Andrei et al., 2014; Mavroveli, Petrides, Sangareau, & Furnham, 2009). However, the EI literature focusing on developmental age has generally overlooked gender differences in investigating the association between trait EI and relevant outcomes (Resurrección, Salguero, & Ruiz-Aranda, 2014), thus requiring further explorations.

### 1.2. The present study

To our knowledge there is no direct evidence linking the personality dimensions of the Big Five to the processes of peer social acceptance and rejection considering simultaneously two perspectives of children's peer experience: classmates' as well as the child's perceptions of their own status. Hence, the present study aims to contribute to the literature on peer-relationships by investigating the Big Five personality dimensions and trait EI as determinant of actual and perceived peer social acceptance and rejection. A second objective is to test the role of such indicators of social status over academic achievement, by taking into account concurrent effects of general cognitive ability, trait EI, and the Big Five dimensions traditionally associated with scholastic performance, viz., Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness (Poropat, 2009). The last goal is to test for the moderating role of gender in the relationship between individual differences predictors (i.e., the Big Five, trait EI, social status) and the specific criterion taken into account by each model. To this end two independent samples of primary and secondary school pupils were selected. In line with the foregoing, it was hypothesized that:

- (1) Agreeableness and Energy/Extraversion will be the strongest positive determinant of both actual and perceived social acceptance together with trait EI, while Emotional Instability will be the strongest negative predictor. A similar pattern of findings was expected for peer rejection, but with opposite directions;
- (2) Trait EI will show incremental predictive validity beyond the Big Five over social status indices and scholastic performance;
- (3) Gender will moderate such associations in both age groups (children and early adolescents). It is expected that personality dimensions, including trait EI, will have a substantial effect on social status particularly for females than males in both age-groups.

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