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Brief Report

Affective associations with negativity: Why popular peers attract youths' visual attention



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ABSTRACT

Visual attention to high-status peers is well documented, but whether this attentional bias is due to high-status individuals' leadership and prosocial characteristics or due to their more agnostic behaviors has yet to be examined. To identify the affective associations that may underlie visual attention for high-status versus low-status peers, 122 early adolescents (67 girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 11.0$ years, $SD = 0.7$) completed a primed attention paradigm. Visual attention was measured using eye tracking as participants looked simultaneously at photographs of two classmates: one nominated by peers as popular and one nominated by peers as unpopular. Prior to each trial, the early adolescents were presented with a positive prime, the word "nice"; a negative prime, the word "stupid"; or no prime. Primary analyses focused on first-gaze preference and total gaze time. The results showed a stronger first gaze preference for popular peers than for unpopular peers in the no-prime and negative prime trials than in the positive prime trials. The visual preference for a popular peer, thus, was attenuated by the positive prime. These findings are consistent with the notion that youths may visually attend to high-status peers due to their association with more negative characteristics and the threat they may pose to youths' own social standing and ability to gain interpersonal resources.

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Introduction

Studies with monkeys (Deaner, Khera, & Platt, 2005; McNelis & Boatright-Horowitz, 1998), preschoolers (LaFreniere & Charlesworth, 1983; Vaughn & Waters, 1981), early adolescents (Lansu, Cillessen, & Karremans, 2014), and adults (Foulsham, Cheng, Tracy, Henrich, & Kingstone, 2010; Maner, DeWall, & Gailliot, 2008) have shown that high status attracts attention (Koski, Xie, & Olson, 2015). Within adolescent populations specifically, being the recipient of peers' visual attention has been linked to "popularity," that is, being perceived as dominant, "cool," and influential (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002), a commonly studied indicator of high social status. Popular adolescents draw attention over unpopular adolescents both in first gaze preference and in total gaze time (Lansu et al., 2014).

The principal explanation as to why status attracts attention is that socially dominant group members control physical and social resources, making it functional to pay attention to them (de Waal, 1982; Dunbar, 1988; Hawley, 1999). As postulated by resource control theory (Hawley, 1999, 2003), social dominance and control over resources is most effectively gained through a combination of prosocial and agonistic behaviors (see also Pellegrini, 2008; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). Resource control theory has labeled individuals who combine the use of prosocial and coercive strategies as "bistrategics." These bistrategics have been shown to be superior in terms of social power (i.e., access to resources and popularity; Hawley, 2003), and adolescents who exert influence through skillfully using prosocial and coercive behaviors to their advantage have been shown to be high in popularity among peers (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, & van der Meulen, 2011; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). It is unclear, however, whether it is these adolescents' prosocial behavior or their more agonistic behavior that underlies the greater attention these adolescents receive from peers.

The aim of the current study, therefore, was to get more insight into whether the attention-attracting power of popular early adolescents is mainly driven by their positive and prosocial characteristics or by their negative and antisocial characteristics. To accomplish this goal, we used eye tracking to assess visual attention in conjunction with a priming paradigm. Previous research has shown that priming facilitates the processing of stimuli conceptually congruent with the prime, ostensibly due to the activation of conceptual networks and enhanced accessibility of conceptually related constructs. Priming effects have been demonstrated using the affective priming task (Bargh, Chaiken, Gvender, & Pratto, 1992; Hermans, De Houwer, & Eelen, 1994), the Stroop task, and the dot probe paradigm (Everaert, Spruyt, & De Houwer, 2013). Priming also facilitates visual attention for prime-congruent stimuli. Odekar, Hallowell, Kruse, Moates, and Lee (2009) showed that priming a word leads to greater visual attention for semantically related pictures, and Faber and Jonas (2013) found that priming threat-related words leads to greater visual attention for threat-related pictures when an unsafe context is activated. Given that visual attention to a target is facilitated by previous exposure to a conceptually related prime, the first question of the current study was whether visual attention for popular peers is more strongly facilitated after being primed with a positive construct or with a negative construct. A facilitative effect of a negative prime on attention to popular peers would indicate that it is the association between popularity and antisocial traits that draws adolescents' attention to popular peers. The facilitative effect of a positive prime would indicate that it is popular peers' prosocial traits that garner adolescents' attention.

Although the literature shows that popular peers tend to show both positive and negative social behaviors, we expect that attention for popular peers is stronger when a negative construct is activated than when a positive construct is activated. Previous research has shown that negative cues interfere to a greater degree than positive cues with the effective evaluation of stimuli (McNally, Riemann, Louro, Lukach, & Kim, 1992; Mogg, Kentish, & Bradley, 1993), suggesting that cognitive resources are disproportionately allocated to negative information. This includes biases in the deployment of visual attention, particularly when the negative stimuli are threat related, for example, angry faces (Hansen & Hansen, 1988; Yiend, 2010; Öhman, Lundqvist, & Esteves, 2001). Popular adolescents can be a source of threat to many adolescents because popularity is often obtained and maintained through the use of manipulative and coercive behavior such as bullying (de Bruyn, Cillessen, &

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