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Linking Personality With Interpersonal Perception in the Classroom: Distinct Associations With the Social and Academic Sides of Popularity



Thomas Lösch*, Katrin Rentzsch

Department of Psychology, University of Bamberg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

We investigated associations between the Big Five personality traits and interpersonal perception in the classroom. Extending earlier studies, we differentiate interpersonal perception by domain (social vs. academic) and the interpersonal roles of targets (popularity) and perceivers (preference). In a round-robin design, 358 students rated all classmates in the social (spending free time together) and academic domains (doing academic tasks together). Results from a Bayesian social relations model highlighted the roles of agreeableness and extraversion for interpersonal perception. Neuroticism was linked to rating classmates favorably in the social and academic domains and conscientiousness to being rated favorably in the academic domain. Investigating interpersonal perception by domain and interpersonal role provided univocal results on the distinctive links between personality and interpersonal perception.

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1. Introduction

Personality plays a vital role in shaping interpersonal perception (Wiggins, 1979): An individual's perception of another person is shaped by the personality traits of both people (Back, Baumert, et al., 2011; Funder, 1999; Kenny, 1994). One of the most important constructs of interpersonal perception is *popularity*, which has attracted research attention in the classroom context in particular (Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). In accordance with the interpersonal conceptualization of popularity, previous research has shown that students exhibiting interpersonally oriented personality traits such as extraversion or agreeableness tend to be particularly popular in class (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Rentzsch, Schütz, & Schröder-Abé, 2011; Scholte, van Aken, & van Lieshout, 1997; Selfhout et al., 2010; van der Linden, Scholte, Cillessen, te Nijenhuis, & Segers, 2010).

To date, research has conceptualized popularity as primarily serving the basic *need to belong* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Being liked or being considered a friend satisfies students' need to belong to others and to be an accepted member of the group (Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001; Reitz, Motti-Stefanidi, & Asendorpf, 2016). Yet, in addition to this social side, popularity can help

students get ahead academically (Bellmore, 2011; Kiuru et al., 2015; Lubbers, Van Der Werf, Snijders, Creemers, & Kuyper, 2006). Working together (e.g., by helping each other do homework) can improve students' academic achievement (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). Accordingly, popularity may also serve the *need for competence* (Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002), which is another important human motive. Despite the social and academic relevance of popularity, previous research has almost exclusively focused on the social side of popularity and has largely ignored its academic side. Furthermore, research has mainly focused on the link between personality and being perceived as a suitable interaction partner (e.g., Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Scholte, et al., 1997; van der Linden et al., 2010). Only a few studies have investigated whether personality shapes an individual's tendency to perceive others as suitable interaction partners in the classroom (e.g., Zimmer-Gembeck, Waters, & Kindermann, 2010).

In this study, we investigate distinctive links between personality and interpersonal perception in the classroom by distinguishing popularity in different domains and with respect to different goals: (a) the *social domain*, with the goal of being integrated, and (b) the *academic domain*, with the goal of improving academic achievement. We show that these two domains of interpersonal perception are interrelated but can be distinguished from each other. Furthermore, we distinguish between the interpersonal roles of being rated as a suitable interaction partner (i.e., *popularity*) and rating others as suitable interaction partners (which we call *preference* in the

* Corresponding author at: University of Bamberg, Markusplatz 3, 96047 Bamberg, Germany.

E-mail address: thomas.loesch@uni-bamberg.de (T. Lösch).

following). Finally, we investigate the distinct associations of each Big Five personality trait with interpersonal perception and differentiate these by domain and interpersonal role.

1.1. Domains and roles of interpersonal perception

We argue that interpersonal perception in the classroom should be examined with respect to the social domain and the academic domain. The classification into social and academic domains is novel, but there are relevant theories and empirical research that support this classification. Prior research has shown that the basic needs to *belong* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and *competence* (Elliot et al., 2002) are pivotal factors of students' experiences in school. On the one hand, students have the need to feel socially included and, on the other hand, they have the need to feel competent and earn good grades (Flunger, Pretsch, Schmitt, & Ludwig, 2013; Zhen et al., 2017).

These two needs are well-aligned with the two fundamental dimensions of *communion* and *agency* in interpersonal perception (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Whereas communion describes aspects of warmth, morality, and socialization, agency describes aspects of competence, dominance, or self-growth (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Individuals are described with respect to the degree that they are perceived as communal or agentic and with respect to the degree that they follow communal or agentic goals (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Consequently, the need to belong can be fulfilled by following communal goals, and the need for competence can be fulfilled by following agentic goals.

Therefore, we argue that the dichotomy of communal versus agentic goals and the needs to belong versus competence are reflected in two domains in which students evaluate fellow peers as suitable interaction partners: (a) the social domain, which revolves around the communal goal of being integrated, and (b) the academic domain, which revolves around the agentic goal of improving academic achievement. Still, what the two domains have in common is that they deal with spending time with classmates, and thus, they should have some common ground. Consequently, interpersonal perception in the classroom should entail two domains that are distinct but correlated. For example, a classmate who is fun to hang out with might not necessarily be the classmate who is a good partner to do homework with, but both activities require the classmates to get along with each other.

In addition, conceptualizing popularity in the framework of interpersonal perception emphasizes the idea that students have two roles: Students are simultaneously targets (they receive ratings of whether they are suitable interaction partners) and perceivers (they rate others on whether they are suitable interaction partners; Kenny, 1994; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2010). Following this differentiation, we regard the *target effect* of being rated as a suitable interaction partner as a measure of *popularity* (for conceptually identical differentiation in another research domain, see Schröder-Abé, Rentzsch, Asendorpf, & Penke, 2016). In addition, we regard the *perceiver effect* of rating others as suitable interaction partners as a measure of a person's *preference* for others. So far, research has focused primarily on the target effect (i.e., popularity) when assessing interpersonal perception in the classroom (e.g., Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Scholte et al., 1997; van der Linden et al., 2010). However, not much is known about the perceiver effect (i.e., preference) with regard to interpersonal perception in the classroom context.

In sum, we propose that interpersonal perception in the classroom context should be conceptualized along two axes: by the domain (social vs. academic) and by the interpersonal role (target vs. perceiver). This differentiation results in four measures of interpersonal perception: (a) social popularity, describing the extent to which a student is evaluated by classmates as suitable to spend

free time with, (b) academic popularity, describing the extent to which a student is evaluated by classmates as suitable to do schoolwork with, (c) social preference, describing the extent to which a student rates classmates as suitable to spend free time with, and (d) academic preference, describing the extent to which a student rates classmates as suitable to do schoolwork with.

1.2. The Big Five personality traits are linked with interpersonal perception in the classroom

A large body of research has shown that personality traits are linked to interpersonal perception (e.g., Back, Baumert, et al., 2011; Brunson, Øverup, & Mehta, 2016; Rentzsch, Schröder-Abé, & Schütz, 2015; van der Linden et al., 2010; Wrzus & Mehl, 2015). Yet, with regard to popularity and preference in schools, investigations have primarily focused on targets and the social domain (e.g., Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Scholte et al., 1997; van der Linden et al., 2010). Thus, this prior research has been limited because it has tended to ignore the different domains of interpersonal perception and has not taken into account the idea that individuals are not just targets of interpersonal perception but are also perceivers.

A large amount of research has shown that the interpersonally relevant personality traits of agreeableness and extraversion are positively linked to students' social popularity (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Rentzsch, et al., 2011; Scholte et al., 1997; Selfhout et al., 2010; van der Linden et al., 2010). Agreeableness has been shown to be related to resolving interpersonal conflicts constructively (Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, & Malcolm, 2003), trust (McCarthy, Wood, & Holmes, 2017), and helping behavior and empathy (Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007). Extraverted individuals have been shown to feel positive affect in social situations (e.g., Denissen & Penke, 2008) and to actively seek out social connections (Wrzus, Wagner, & Riediger, 2016). In accordance with prior findings and the social behaviors that agreeable and extraverted individuals tend to engage in, we expected that both agreeableness and extraversion would be linked to social popularity. Whether agreeableness would be associated with preference is presently less clear since earlier studies mostly did not investigate preference (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Scholte et al., 1997; van der Linden et al., 2010). However, the tendency of agreeable individuals to perceive others more favorably (e.g., Graziano, Bruce, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007) may indicate a connection to preference. We, therefore, expected that agreeable individuals would tend to rate their classmates as favorable partners to spend their time with. In regard to extraversion, previous research has shown that extraversion is linked to the number of social contacts students have at university (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; Wagner, Lüdtke, Roberts, & Trautwein, 2014), and extraverted students have been found to nominate more friends (Selfhout et al., 2010). Accordingly, we expected that extraversion would be linked to social preference.

In contrast to popularity's straightforward associations with agreeableness and extraversion, the association between conscientiousness and popularity seems to be more complex. There is a broad consensus that conscientiousness predicts intrapersonal outcomes such as effort and academic achievement (see Poropat, 2009). However, conscientiousness was also suggested to have interpersonal outcomes (Nezlek, Schütz, Schröder-Abé, & Smith, 2011). In line with this notion, some studies have found that conscientiousness was associated with higher levels of acceptance, more and better friendships, and less victimization in the school context (Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Scholte et al., 1997). By contrast, other studies have found that effort and conscientiousness were associated with the tendency to be socially stigmatized,

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