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Associations of group level popularity with observed behavior and influence in a dyadic context

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between popularity in the peer group and adolescents' behavior in a dyadic context. After collecting peer nominations for popularity, 218 early adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 11.0$ years) in 109 randomly composed same-sex dyads participated in a discussion task where they planned a party for their classroom. From digital recordings of the sessions, each participant's influence, involvement, skillful leadership, coercive resource control, submissiveness, positivity, and negativity were observed. Analyses with the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) demonstrated that for girls high group level popularity was associated with a socially sensitive interaction style and influence in the dyadic context. For both boys and girls, the interaction partner's group level popularity negatively predicted their use of coercive resource control strategies and negative behavior in the dyad. For girls, in addition, the interaction partner's group level popularity also positively predicted their submissiveness and negatively predicted their task influence. These results indicate that, in particular for girls, adolescents' group level popularity plays an important role in the behavior of both peers in a cooperative dyadic context.

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Introduction

The link between high group status and access to resources has been demonstrated in multiple instances (Gilbert, 1992; Hawley, 1999; Price, Sloman, Gardner, Gilbert, & Rohde, 1994). Hawley, for example, found a link between access to resources and position in the social hierarchy in the social groups of young children (Hawley, 2002; Hawley & Little, 1999) and adolescents (Hawley, 2003). High-status group members have access to resources and the power to distribute them to others. As a result, others will comply with their wishes and desires, giving the person high in social status the power to influence decisions.

When adolescents have high status because their peers see them as powerful and dominant, this is referred to as popularity. Popularity is distinct from acceptance in the peer group both conceptually and in the behaviors associated with both indicators of status (for a review, see Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux, 2011). The recent literature on popularity consistently shows that adolescent popularity is associated with exerting influence through socially skilled and coercive or manipulative behaviors. Most of this knowledge is based on peer nominations (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004) or teacher report data (e.g., Puckett, Aikins, & Cillessen, 2008; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002), which is thought to represent a general behavioral profile within the classroom or grade context.

Knowledge on influence and specific behaviors associated with group level popularity in dyadic situations cannot be extracted from peer nominations because they measure general behavioral profiles but do not reveal specific behavioral processes. Here we argue that we also need to understand how popular adolescents behave in interactions with one peer, rather than examining only general behavioral profiles, to better understand the scope of group level popularity. Observational data on dyadic behavior of adolescents varying in popularity status provide us with the opportunity to examine whether and how popularity plays a role in interactions with peers outside of the group context. The question is whether popularity, as defined in the larger peer context, is associated with influence and a unique behavioral profile in dyadic interactions.

Adolescents' popularity and their own behavior and influence in a dyadic setting

Much can be learned about youths' social relationships from observed one-on-one interactions between two peers (e.g., Gottman, 1983; Parker & Gottman, 1989; Parker & Herrera, 1996). Although observational data have been used frequently throughout the history of research on peer relationships (see, e.g., Asher & Coie, 1990; Ladd, 2005; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006), surprisingly few studies have related observational data to popularity (for exceptions, see Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005; McElhaney, Antonishak, & Allen, 2008). Cohen and Prinstein's (2006) study is closest to this type of design. However, those authors studied groups of four instead of dyads, did not observe live interactions between peers, and conceptualized high social status as either acceptance or popularity. The current study examined the association between peer-nominated popularity and observed behavior in a dyadic interaction with a peer.

Previously, Hinde (1976) and Hartup (1983) indicated that dyadic interactions differing in content and quality are the building blocks of dyadic relationships. Dyadic relationships, in turn, shape group structure, making it likely that dyadic interactions (through relationships) are related to status hierarchies at the group level. Although dyadic situations thus contribute to shaping status at the group level (Hinde, 1976), this does not necessarily mean that group level status always predicts behavior in all types of dyadic interactions.

Popular adolescents may behave differently in interactions with one peer than in the context of the classroom because both contexts pose different challenges, trigger different responses, and/or depend on different competencies. Coercive behavior may be partly motivated by the desire to be seen by the group as bold and powerful. In a dyad, however, there is no longer a group audience. In a dyad, there also is no support from peers who may assist or encourage coercive behavior in a larger group. Thus,

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