



**Doctoral School of
Sociology and
Communication
Science**

SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

Ákos Bocskor

**Informal Status among Hungarian Early
Adolescents**

**Popularity, Coolness, and Acceptance from a
Mixed Methods Perspective**

PhD Thesis

Supervisors:

Károly Takács, PhD

Lilla Vicsek, PhD

Budapest, 2021

Department of Sociology and Social Policy

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1. Introduction and research rationale

1.1. The research problem

Peer relations are one of the most central aspects of adolescents' lives. A large body of literature has demonstrated that these relationships have a huge impact on a wide variety of factors including adolescents' emotional well-being, mental health, school adjustment, academic performance, or their inclination to be engaged in different forms of risk behaviour (Parker et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 2015). In many cultural contexts, one's position in the informal status hierarchy among peers is of particular importance (see for instance Coleman, 1961), which in turn can influence their other peer relations including friendships, romantic relationships, and even the chances of becoming perpetrators or victims of bullying (e.g. de Bruyn et al., 2009). Additionally, research has also found that adolescents, in particular early adolescents, often prioritize popularity (one form of peer status) over personal relationships and academic goals (e.g. LaFontana and Cillessen, 2010).

The international literature on peer relations typically understands status as a multidimensional construct and distinguishes two dimensions of peer (or informal) status: an *affective* dimension, which is related to social preference, and a *reputation* dimension, which is related to power, prestige, and visibility within the peer group (Cillessen and Marks, 2011). The affective dimension is typically measured by *acceptance* (the extent to which someone is liked) or *preference* (the difference

between the liking and disliking nominations), while the reputational dimension is most frequently measured by *popularity* (by asking students directly to nominate those peers whom they perceive as popular). Additionally, several recent studies have measured the reputational dimension with the construct of *coolness*, which many argue grasps the characteristics that can earn the attention or approval of the peer group particularly well (e.g. Bellmore et al., 2011; Galván et al., 2011; Jamison et al., 2015; Kiefer and Wang, 2016; Wilson and Jamison, 2019).

In the empirical literature, peer status (acceptance and popularity/coolness) has been associated with a wide range of behavioural and personality correlates. Although findings sometimes diverge as consequence of the different samples and measurement techniques used, most research has found that athleticism, prosociality, physical attractiveness, and extraversion are typically positively associated with both reputational status (coolness, popularity) and acceptance, aggression is positively associated with reputational status but negatively with acceptance, while engagement in some forms of risk behaviour (e.g. substance use) is typically positively associated with reputational status but not associated with acceptance (see for instance Franken et al., 2017; LaFontana and Cillessen, 2002; Mayeux et al., 2008, 2011; Parkhurst and Hopmeyer, 1998; Vaillancourt and Hymel, 2006; Wolters et al., 2014). The relationship with academic performance (grades) and academic engagement has been more context-specific, but academic performance is typically positively

associated with acceptance, while behavioural engagement (e.g. active participation during classes) negatively with reputational status (e.g. Engels et al., 2017; LaFontana and Cillessen, 2002; Newcomb et al., 1993).

However, the vast majority of findings come from the North American and West European literature, and less is known about other cultural contexts. Research among Chinese adolescents have found a positive association between academic achievement and popularity (Li et al., 2012; Niu et al., 2016) and negative association between aggression and popularity (e.g. Tseng et al., 2013; Xi et al., 2016), which is different from the ‘Western’ results. Similarly, cross-country comparisons have found the association between prosociality and popularity to be stronger for Chinese than for American (Li et al., 2012) or Australian (Owens et al., 2014) adolescents. The authors explain these differences with the higher value Chinese society puts on academic achievement and the collectivist cultural context, which puts larger emphasis on social harmony. It seems probable that (comparable) findings from other ‘non-Western’ cultural contexts would contribute significantly to our understanding of informal status among peers. I argue in the dissertation that the formerly socialist Central and Eastern European countries could provide one such context.

Some Hungarian research related to peer status has already been conducted (e.g. Habsz and Radó, 2018; Hajdu et al., 2019; Pál et al., 2016). However, these studies measured the affective dimension of status with friendship and antipathy nominations

(Habsz and Radó, 2018; Hajdu et al., 2019) or the reputational dimension with direct status attributions (others looking up/down on someone) (Pál et al., 2016), which makes the comparison of the findings to the international literature somewhat more difficult. More importantly, these studies had very specific focus, for instance Habsz and Radó (2018) and Hajdu and colleagues (2019) tested the ‘acting white’ hypothesis on Roma students, while Pál and colleagues (2016) tested the relationship between status attribution and disliking nominations. To my knowledge, none of the prior Hungarian studies investigated a wide range of status correlates simultaneously. Additionally, all these studies conducted quantitative analyses, therefore the qualitative perspective from the Hungarian peer status literature has been so far missing.

1.2. Research goals and questions

My dissertation intends to address both gaps by investigating informal status among Hungarian early adolescents (age 11-13) using the status dimensions of acceptance, popularity, and coolness, and taking a mixed methods approach. Accordingly, I outlined two broad research goals:

RG 1: Exploring the correlates of informal status (acceptance, coolness, and popularity) among Hungarian early adolescents.

RG 2: Applying a mixed methods integration framework to the primary school data (survey and focus group interviews) to test its applicability in peer status research.

In line with these research goals, and grounded in the theoretical and empirical literature (explained in details in the dissertation), four research questions were formulated.

RQ 1: Are the correlates and their associations with the affective (acceptance) and reputational (popularity, coolness) dimensions of peer status similar to the ‘Western’ literature? In case there are differences, how can these differences be positioned relative to the ‘Western’ and Chinese findings?

RQ 2: To what extent are the correlates of peer status different for boys and girls? How does it relate to the findings of the international literature?

RQ 3: Are there differences in the correlates of informal status between Roma and non-Roma students? How do these differences (or the lack of them) relate to the findings of the international literature?

RQ 4: To what extent do the qualitative and quantitative results converge, diverge, or complement each other? Can a

mixed methods integration framework be applied to the investigation of informal status?

2. Data and research methods

2.1. Data

The analyses presented in the dissertation rely on two sets of data. The quantitative data come from the first four waves of the primary school database collected by the MTA TK “Lendület” RECENS Research Group, while the qualitative data from focus group interviews that I conducted with the help of interns and former interns of the research group in ten classes of the RECENS sample. The RECENS primary school data collection followed up a pool of students in Northern and Central Hungary from the beginning of grade five in the autumn of 2013 until the end of grade six in the spring of 2015, conducting the survey once per semester. In the dissertation, in different chapters, I used both a limited version of the wave four database for cross-sectional analysis ($N = 754$) and the panel dataset (N of observations = 4441, N of students = 1313). The focus group research was conducted in the spring and early summer of 2015, shortly after the fourth wave of the survey research, and involved 21 group interviews with altogether 144 students from the ten classes. The main goals of the RECENS survey were to explore ethnic segregation in the social relations of students and to examine the interrelated status hierarchies and social dynamics in school classes. Accordingly, the questionnaire

included several questions that required peer nominations along a great variety of categories (e.g. being good at sport, being handsome/pretty). My group interviews focused on students' perception and understanding of popularity dynamics in their class, as well as on the discursive construction of popularity and reputational peer status. Both the survey questionnaires and the interview guide are attached to the thesis.

2.2. Research methods

The dissertation contains three empirical chapters presenting a quantitative, a qualitative, and a mixed methods analysis. The quantitative parts of the thesis apply multilevel regression models, while the qualitative parts thematic and discourse analysis. More precisely, the first empirical chapter intergrates the results of a cross-sectional multilevel analysis of the wave four database with the thematic analysis of the focus group interviews. The mixed methods intergration applies the 'exploratory bidirectional' framework (Moseholm and Fetters, 2017), where the qualitative and the quantitative analyses are conducted separately, but the initial qualitative analysis informs the quantitative analysis before both results are brought together for the final interpretation. The second empirical chapter further explores early adolescent informal status by conducting a quantitative analysis on the RECENS panel database. This chapter formulates its hypotheses based on the findings of the mixed methods chapter. The panel

regression applies a relatively novel multilevel technique, the within-between random effects model (Bell et al., 2019), which includes both the individual-level averages of time-variant explanatory variables and the deviations from the individual level averages in its models. This way, the model can effectively decompose the effects of within-individual changes and between-individual differences. The last empirical chapter takes a qualitative approach and conducts a discourse analysis on the focus group data. Due to the importance of gender differences underlined by the previous chapters, and to the extensive gender segregation of students in the (self-formed) focus groups, this chapter concentrates on gender differences in popularity discourses. The analysis draws on the ideas of Foucault and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1981). In the conclusion of the dissertation, the qualitative and quantitative findings from the empirical chapters are brought together, once again, for the final interpretation.

3. A cross-sectional view: Reputational status and acceptance from a mixed methods perspective

The first empirical chapter, as mentioned above, applied a mixed methods framework, the ‘exploratory bidirectional’ framework (Moseholm and Fetters, 2017) to integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings. Based on a systematic analysis of the Hungarian and the international literature, 17 hypotheses were

formulated at the beginning of the chapter with regards to the relationship between the two dimensions of peer status (popularity/coolness and acceptance) and athleticism, physical aggression, overt verbal aggression, relational aggression, prosociality, academic achievement, academic engagement, and physical attractiveness. These hypotheses included overall associations as well as gender and ethnic differences. The regression models of the quantitative part were informed both by these hypotheses and the findings of the qualitative thematic analysis. My results show that, in line with the international literature, the reputational and affective dimensions of peer status were indeed distinct dimensions with a partly different set of correlates. Although the qualitative and the quantitative parts have used slightly different constructs to grasp the reputational dimension (popularity versus coolness), the qualitative results showed that pupils had a reasonably good understanding of the concept of popularity and how it may be distinct from being liked, while the moderate correlation (0.47) between coolness and acceptance in the quantitative data also showed that the two forms of status were distinguished in the sample even at this relatively young age (the reason for including coolness and not popularity in the RECENS survey is also discussed in the dissertation).

The integrated interpretation of the qualitative and quantitative results found that athleticism (being good at sports) was an important component of boys' reputational status; however, according to the quantitative models, there were several other

correlates (physical appearance, acceptance, verbal aggression) that were more strongly associated with this status dimension even for boys. When associations for the four sociodemographic groups (Roma boys, non-Roma boys, Roma girls, non-Roma girls) were investigated separately in these models (with the help of two-way and three-way interactions), athleticism was also found to be associated with Roma girls' reputational status, but not with non-Roma girls' status. Interestingly, acceptance was not associated with athleticism in any of the models. The results related to aggression diverge even more from the findings of the international literature. In our sample, overt verbal aggression was more strongly associated with girls' reputational status and physical aggression was only associated with coolness in the case of Roma girls. The findings with regards to verbal aggression were supported by the focus group results, while these group interviews also identified a subgroup of Roma girls in ethnically segregated classes with a strong 'oppositional culture' to school values. This latter finding could also inform the quantitative analysis, and the three-way interaction between ethnicity, GPA, and the proportion of Roma students did produce a statistically significant negative interaction term in the acceptance models, implying that in classes with a higher proportion of ethnic Roma students, the association between academic performance and acceptance was more negative for Roma than non-Roma pupils. Although many focus group interviews found strong resentment towards academically engaged students who were *also* 'too kind' to the teachers, the quantitative models

did not find any significant association between coolness and engagement (however, this difference may be due to the somewhat different measure the quantitative analysis used compared to the behaviours described by students during the interviews). Interestingly, according to the regression models, physical attractiveness was more strongly associated with boys' reputational status, while there were no gender differences in the association with acceptance. Finally, the group interviews showed that smoking was a sensitive (in fact the only sensitive) issue pupils were unwilling to talk about due to the strong sanctions their adult environment put on this activity. However, after repeated assurances of confidentiality, many admitted that it could contribute to one's popularity, as they were looking up on those peers who were 'brave enough' to try such a strongly sanctioned activity. Not surprisingly, the association with smoking was not significant in the quantitative models, probably due to the low proportion of students admitting it in the surveys, which further underlines the usefulness of taking a mixed approach to peer relations research.

4. A longitudinal view: Ethnic and gender differences in coolness and acceptance dynamics

The second empirical chapter built on the results presented in the mixed methods chapter and provided a more refined quantitative analysis applying the within-between random effects model

(REWB) (Bell et al., 2019) on the RECENS panel database. This time, the hypotheses were formulated based on the findings of the previous chapter and the goal was to test whether these associations still held in the larger, longitudinal database. The REWB model also provided the opportunity to separate the effects of within-individual changes from between-individual differences. Importantly, the larger sample size made it possible to divide the sample into a boy and a girl subsample and run the models separately on them. Additionally, some models were also run on the full sample to compare the strength of certain associations between boys and girls.

The results of the REWB models supported many of the findings outlined in the mixed methods chapter, while there were some diverging patterns in relation to athleticism and academic performance. Although the relationship between being good at sports and coolness was also significant for boys in the REWB models, this association was weaker for Roma than non-Roma boys, and was not statistically significant for either of the girl groups. Furthermore, within-individual improvements in athletic ability were negatively associated with non-Roma girls' reputational status. With regards to academic achievement (GPA), contrary to the non-significant findings of the previous chapter but more in line with the international literature, within-individual improvements in academic achievement were positively associated with girls' reputational status (coolness) but negatively with boys' coolness, without any significant ethnic differences. Interestingly,

academic engagement was only significantly associated with Roma girls' status and this association was positive, which implies that there may be two different high-status groups of Roma girls in the sample. On the other hand, acceptance was slightly negatively associated with within-individual improvements of the GPA in the case of Roma girls (while the association with between-individual differences was positive for them, similarly to the other groups). The positive interaction effect between within-individual improvements in the GPA and athletic abilities in the coolness models for boys shows that academically well-performing boys can 'balance' the negative association between improved GPA and reputational status if they excel in other areas. Finally, the associations found with regards to aggression and physical attractiveness mostly replicated the findings of the mixed methods chapter.

5. Gender differences in popularity discourses

The last empirical chapter conducted a discourse analysis of the group interviews with a focus on gender differences in popularity discourses. While this analysis was also connected to the previous empirical chapters, its focus and methodological perspective was somewhat different as, in line with the constructivist epistemology of discourse analysis, it put a larger emphasis on the discursive construction, negotiation, and representation of popularity and popularity dynamics than on the actual correlates/factors that may

contribute to status. Due to this different focus and approach, the chapter starts with the review of the qualitative empirical literature related to the gendered aspect of popularity discourses and a brief presentation of Foucault's ideas on discourse drawing on the work of Foucault and contemporary Foucauldian discourse analysts (whereas the theoretical and empirical literature related to the other empirical chapters was mostly summarized in the separate theoretical chapter of the dissertation).

Similarly to the findings of the international literature on the gendered patterns of popularity discourses, my analysis found that boys' accounts were primarily centred on sports, physical strengths, and physical and verbal dominance, while girls' accounts were centred on physical appearance, verbal aggression, 'arrogance', and kindness. The topic of 'sensitivity', mostly referring to one's lack of resilience to mocking and taunting, frequently came up during these discussions, and was considered particularly negative and 'unmanly' in the case of boys. Interestingly, while the lack of physical strength and the ability to 'protect oneself' were connected to the lack of masculinity in the case of boys, no discourses of 'unfemininity' were observable, not even in the case of occasional accounts of girls' physical aggression or other forms of 'bad behaviour' and school disengagement. Among girls, primarily 'liking boys too much' was disapproved. The chapter also briefly reflects on the intersections of gender and ethnicity. In two out of the three classes in ethnically segregated school environments, a strong rejection of pro-school

values and a strong approval of disruptive behaviour were verbalized, and this was particularly visible in the case of the dominant, 'tough' girls in these only-Roma classes.

6. Conclusion

The results of the empirical chapters show that, similarly to the findings of the 'Western' international literature, athletic abilities, some forms of aggression, physical appearance, acceptance, prosocial behaviour, and in some cases possibly smoking, all had a positive relationship with the reputational dimension of status, whereas physical aggression was generally negatively and the GPA positively associated with acceptance. However, according to the quantitative models, athletic abilities were not the most important correlates of reputational status even for boys, which underlines the less central position of athleticism in Hungarian school life compared to American schools. The argument for this less central position is further supported by the lack of association between being good at sports and acceptance. With regards to gender differences in aggression, my results are quite different from the findings of the international literature: in our sample overt verbal aggression was more strongly associated with reputational status for girls than boys, whereas physical aggression was only associated with coolness for Roma girls. Additionally, while physical aggression generally had a negative association with acceptance, verbal aggression typically did not. The results of the

focus groups suggest that that relational aggression may be associated with girls' popularity, which is more in line with the 'Western' findings. The slight negative association between the GPA and coolness for boys, and the positive association with acceptance for all groups are also in line with the 'Western' international literature. However, the effects related to the GPA and academic engagement are rather small in size, which suggests that status was less strongly associated with academic performance and engagement in my sample than in many 'Western' samples. Similarly, the trend that high-achieving boys can 'balance' the negative effects of their good academic performance on reputational status with excelling at sports is also in line with the expectations (e.g. Francis et al., 2010). Similarly, the focus groups suggested that academically 'too' engaged pupils can suffer losses in status. Although this was not supported by the quantitative analysis, this is probably due to the way engagement was measured in my quantitative models.

With regards to my first research question, these results suggest that Hungary may be a different cultural context from the 'Western' and Chinese contexts from the perspective of peer relations. Although the findings can only be related to this particular sample of early adolescents, the results showed important differences from the 'Western' findings in the role of athleticism, aggression, and to some extent the GPA, as was described in the previous paragraph. On the other hand, these results are clearly distinct from the (so far scarce) Chinese findings,

where popularity was positively associated with the GPA and often negatively with aggression (e.g. Tseng et al., 2013; Xi et al., 2016).

Concerning the second research question, my quantitative results showed some gender differences in either the direction, significance, or strength of most variables where these differences were tested. The, to some extent, surprising results with regards to the different forms of aggression has already been discussed above, while the stronger association between reputational status and physical appearance for boys also contradicted the prior expectations. On the other hand, gender differences in the relationship between reputational status and athleticism, and reputational status and the GPA were mostly in line with the expectations, while the lack of positive association between athleticism and acceptance for both sexes was not. Additionally, the discourse analysis presented in the last empirical chapter found that some gender norms were emphatic in the case of boys (e.g. being ‘tough’, ‘manly’ and ‘not sensitive’), while similar restrictions did not really apply to girls, with the exception of showing too much romantic interests (‘liking boys too much’). This latter finding also supports the assumptions of sexual double standards theory (Reiss, 1960 cited by Crawford and Popp, 2003).

With regards to the third research question, my results showed that the differences found between Black and White American students may not be the best predictors of the differences between Roma and non-Roma students. The assumption that athleticism would be more important for the reputational status of

Roma than non-Roma pupils was supported by the quantitative results in the case of Roma girls (as compared to non-Roma girls), but no similar evidence was found for the two groups of boys. In fact, the panel regression found a weaker association between coolness and athleticism for Roma than non-Roma boys. Similarly, the assumption that aggression would contribute more to the coolness/popularity of Roma students was supported in the case of Roma girls, but not in the case of Roma boys. Furthermore, the focus groups provided some evidence of an ‘oppositional culture’ in some ethnically segregated classes, while the quantitative models also found a statistically significant negative interaction between GPA, ethnicity, and ethnic proportion in the cross-sectional acceptance models, and between GPA and ethnicity in the REWB acceptance models of girls. However, the same REWB models for coolness found a positive association between ethnicity and academic engagement for Roma girls. Nevertheless, these results cannot be considered as proof for the ‘acting white’ hypothesis, since the ethnicity of the nominators was not taken into consideration; contrary to the two empirical findings which directly addressed this phenomenon with similar measures on Hungarian samples (Habsz and Radó, 2018; Hajdu et al., 2019).

Finally, with regards to the methodological research question, it seems that the ‘exploratory bidirectional’ framework (Moseholm and Fetters, 2017) provided a good scheme for the integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings, as the qualitative results could inform the quantitative analysis (ethnic

‘oppositional culture’) and the two groups of results complemented each other well in the final interpretation (e.g. when clarifying the role of smoking or physical attractiveness).

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8. The author's publications on the topic

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Bocskor Á (2021) Reputational Status Dynamics from a Mixed Methods Perspective: Coolness and Popularity in a Hungarian Primary School Sample. *Youth & Society* May 2021. DOI: 10.1177/0044118X211012815.

Bocskor Á and Havelda A (2019) Status Dynamics: Popularity and Acceptance in an Ethnically Diverse Hungarian Primary School Sample. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 5(4): 110–138. DOI: 10.17356/ieejsp.v5i4.581.

Conference papers

Bocskor Á (2020) Az osztályon belüli népszerűség és státusz vizsgálata észak-magyarországi általános iskolákban: Egy kevert módszertanú kutatás tapasztalatai. In: Bihari E, Molnár D and Szikszai-Németh K (eds.) *Tavaszi Szél/Spring Wind 2019 Tanulmánykötet. III. kötet*. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége.

International conference presentations

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