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"They might not like you but everyone knows you": Popularity among teenage girls

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Abstract

There is a wealth of research on popularity among adolescents, mainly conducted in the United States. This study utilised a stimulus vignette and semi-structured focus group interviews to investigate teenage girls' (15 year olds, n = 40) constructions of popularity in two schools of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. An intensive thematic analysis revealed that the girls perceived popular same-sex peers to be publicly visible, prominent and prestigious, but not necessarily well liked. In both schools, popular girls were seen to be physically and fashionably attractive and from wealthier backgrounds. Popular girls projected an image of being anti-school and antisocial rule breakers, engaging in activities including smoking, drinking and taking drugs (more so in the low income school). High-status girls were seen as powerful and influential, and they used their power in intimidating and aggressive ways including verbal harassment of peers, spreading of mean rumours and manipulation of friendships.

Introduction

Concerns about peer popularity become increasingly salient during adolescence (Corsara & Eder 1990) and this is especially the case for girls (Eder 1985; Maccoby 1995; Maccoby 1998). However, researchers on peer relations do not necessarily agree on what it is that constitutes popularity. For decades, psychologists using sociometric techniques have defined popularity as being well liked (Coie & Dodge 1983; Coie, Dodge & Coppotelli 1982; Moreno 1960; Newcomb, Bukowski &

Pattee 1993). In contrast, sociological researchers (Adler & Adler 1995; Eder 1985; Merten 1997) view popularity as concerned with social visibility or public prominence rather than with likeability. Recent psychological research has adopted the sociological understanding of popularity as a perceived or consensual construct in which popular peers may or may not be well liked (Babad 2001; de Bruyn & Cillessen 2006a; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer 1998). The different conceptions of popularity have different behavioural correlates – for instance, sociometrically popular youth are pro-social, cooperative and non-aggressive (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker 1998), while perceived popular youth can be prosocial but they can also rate highly on aggression (Cillessen & Mayeux 2004; Rose, Swenson & Waller 2004). In this study, we asked groups of teenage girls in two South Australian schools to discuss their understandings of popularity. These discussions were conducted as part of a larger study involving the administration of Q sorts on the topic of popularity, the data for which are reported in a separate paper (under review).

There are two main imperatives for our interest in investigating teenage girls' popularity. Firstly, researchers have for a long time discussed the differential nature of boys and girls socialisation experiences that result in boys being more concerned with activities, interests and achievements; and girls focusing more on relational issues such as establishing close, intimate connections during social interactions (Maccoby 1995; Maccoby 1998). While status is important for boys and girls, the emphasis that girls place on close interpersonal relationships makes issues of popularity of vital importance in their lives, and increasingly so during adolescence (Eder, Evans & Parker 1995; Youniss, McLellan & Strouse 1994). Secondly, in our own previous research, we have investigated teenage girls' aggressive behaviours and particularly their indirect aggression (Duncan 1999; Duncan 2004; Owens, Daly & Slee 2005; Owens, Shute & Slee 2000a). While it was not a particular emphasis of our investigations, in these studies students had spoken about popular girls and the relationship between status and popularity. This work sparked our interest in pursuing more thoroughly teenage girls' views on popularity, including its relationship to their aggressive behaviours.

Sociometric studies have defined popularity as being well liked or preferred as a friend. Social preference has been determined by subtracting 'like least' from 'like most' nominations within school classrooms (Coie et al. 1982). Popularity determined in this way has been found to correlate with pleasant and prosocial behaviours. These sociometrically popular students are less likely to be involved in fights and be disruptive, and are more cooperative, kind, honest and trustworthy (Coie & Dodge 1983; Parkhurst & Asher 1992). In contrast, sociometrically rejected children and youth have been found to be aggressive and defiant (Coie & Dodge 1998; Rubin et al. 1998).

A number of sociological studies of youth culture have provided a very different perspective on popularity from the sociometric studies described above. The sociological studies have used ethnographic designs to study the everyday lives of children and adolescents. In these studies, the meaning of popularity was determined by observing and listening to participants in their usage of the term. In general, popular peers are the ones who are socially visible or prominent or have

high prestige, public impact and social power, and they are not necessarily well liked, pleasant or pro-social. For example, in their investigations of American middle school girls (11–14 year olds) from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, Eder (1985) and Eder, Evans and Parker (1995) found that popularity meant being visible in the school and receiving a lot of attention. Eder and colleagues described a cycle of popularity by which popular girls were initially well liked but later became resented as being 'snobby' or 'stuck up'.

In their study of middle-class preadolescent children, Adler and colleagues (Adler & Adler 1995; Adler & Adler 1996; Adler & Adler 1998; Adler, Kless & Adler 1992) defined popularity as children who are well liked, who are most influential within the group, and who have the greatest impact in deciding who is in the most exclusive group. The authors found that both popular boys and girls used mean inclusion and exclusion tactics to police the boundaries of elite group membership. Like the Adler team, Merten (1997) also found that, in their competition for popularity, middle-class girls (this time in junior high school) could be mean. Merten reported that for girls popularity meant, firstly, being widely known; and secondly, being sought after as a friend. In following the day-to-day conflicts of a popular clique nicknamed 'the dirty dozen', Merten reported the mean and nasty behaviours that the girls used to keep other peers out of the popular group and to prevent within-group members from increasing their own status at the expense of the popular girls.

These two separate conceptions of popularity (i.e. sociometric and sociological) existed concurrently until a study of middle school students (7^{th} and 8^{th} graders) by Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1998). They measured sociometric popularity as social preference (i.e. 'liked most' minus 'liked least' nominations) and perceived popularity by simply asking students to name the popular students in their classes. They found that: sociometric and perceived popularity were only moderately correlated, and in fact a number (eleven percent) of sociometrically rejected students were high on perceived popularity; perceived popularity was correlated more highly with social dominance than with sociometric popularity; and while some of the students were both sociometrically and perceived popular, a large group high on perceived popularity but low on sociometric popularity were characterised as dominant, aggressive and self-important or 'stuck up'.

Since the study by Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (1998), many researchers have confirmed the distinction between sociometric and peer-perceived popularity and the different characteristics associated with each of these measures of social status (e.g. Babad 2001; LaFontana & Cillessen 1998, 1999, 2002; Lease, Kennedy & Axelrod 2002; Rose et al. 2004). A number of studies have examined, in particular, the relationship between these different types of social status and aggressiveness, both overt and indirect (e.g. Puckett, Aikins & Cillessen 2008; Rodkin et al. 2000, 2006; Rose et al. 2004; Vaillancourt & Hymel 2006). In general, these studies have shown that aggression is negatively related to sociometric popularity but positively related to perceived popularity – more so for secondary school students, and especially for indirect aggression among girls.

In our own work (Duncan 1999, 2004; Owens, Shute & Slee 2000a, 2000b; Owens, Shute & Slee 2001) on teenage girls' aggressive behaviours, we found that girls often spoke about popular girls as being mean and 'bitchy'. We suspected that there was a relationship between girls' popularity and their indirect or socially aggressive manipulative behaviours, and the above studies have confirmed that this may be the case.

The studies on perceived popularity have generally utilised quantitative procedures involving peer nominations of popularity and unpopularity, and statistical analyses to provide scores for popularity and relationships with a range of variables (e.g. aggression, academic performance, pro- and anti-social behaviours). Most of these studies were conducted with North American participants, with a few studies being conducted in the Netherlands (de Bruyn & Cillessen 2006a; de Bruyn & van den Boom 2005) and one in Israeli classrooms (Babad 2001). The earlier sociological studies utilised participant observations and interviews to provide rich descriptions of popular children and their characteristics. Again, these studies have generally been conducted in North America.

The current paper extends the work on perceived popularity to Australian teenage girls (research led by the first author), and later we will be comparing these results with English samples (research led by the second author). While there are cultural similarities between advanced Western cultures in North America and the U.K. and Australia, there are also differences which might impact on young people's understandings of popularity. For instance, England and Australia do not have cheerleaders, which Eder and colleagues (Eder 1985; Eder et al. 1995) emphasised as playing such an important role in teenage girls' popularity in the U.S. Also, the structure of schooling differs, with England and Australia not usually having separate middle schools as in the U.S.

A further way in which our work adds to the research already undertaken is that the previous studies have generally utilised either quantitative or qualitative methods but not both – for an exception, see de Bruyn & Cillessen (2006b) – but in our work we were keen to use research designs that would exploit the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods with the same group of participants. Our view is that Q-sort methodology supported by focus group interviews provides an ideal approach to gaining insight into people's subjective understandings. Q methodology provides a rigorous quantitative means for the examination of human subjectivity (Brown 1980, 2003; McKeown & Thomas 1988): in this case, teenage girls' social constructions of popularity. The data for the Q part of this study are presented in a separate paper (under review).

We have successfully used focus groups in a number of our earlier studies, e.g. to explore teenage girls' aggression to same-sex peers, and teenage boys' aggression to girls (Owens et al. 2000a, 2001, 2005, 2007; Shute, Owens & Slee 2008). Research employing focus groups certainly has a number of well-documented advantages including efficiency (gaining a number of respondents' views at one time), and the fact that the interactive nature of the interviewing facilitates the girls in becoming relaxed and comfortable in discussing issues of

importance to them (Krueger 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani 1990). The opportunity to gain rich descriptive data is therefore enhanced through the use of focus groups.

This paper reports on the analysis of focus group discussions, which were conducted in association with the administration of Q sorts involving the participants arranging 36 items on a grid from those most associated with popularity to those most associated with unpopularity. The items had been selected by the second author from his reading of the literature on girls' friendships and from his discussions with teachers and teenage girls in his earlier studies (Duncan 1999, 2002, 2004). The Q-sort analysis revealed two factors: the dominant one, concerned with a perspective that popularity is related to physical and fashionable appearance, which the girls labelled as 'barbie doll' or 'nice' popularity; and a second factor concerned with anti-social activities or 'druggie' or 'mean' popularity, as the girls described it. In this study, we selected participants from two schools with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. While Q sorts from girls from both schools loaded onto factor 1, only some of those from the school with students from a lower socioeconomic background loaded onto factor 2. While we have reported material from transcripts of focus groups relevant to the two factors in the Q-sort paper (under review), in the present article we report in detail on the main themes that emerged from the focus group component of the study.

Method

Participants

A total of 40 public school girls participated in the study – 18 from a school in a high socioeconomic area (provided with the pseudonym 'Ardare') and 22 from a school in a low socioeconomic area (pseudonym 'Cable') in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. The participants were 14–16 year old (modal age of 15 years) girls divided into five groups (3–5 students per group) in each school. The criteria for inclusion of the girls were consistent with previous research by Duncan (1999) and Owens (2000b; Owens et al. 2001). The girls were nominated by the school student counsellors, and groups were comprised of girls who have mutually supportive relationships. In the eyes of staff and peers, these were self-confident, articulate, socially skilled students. They were 'middle of the road' students; not especially noted to be bullies or victims, but socially knowledgeable or 'street-wise' about social life amongst their peers. In essence, they were considered good social informants who could offer 'expert' commentary on the school peer culture.

Procedure

Each group of girls met for up to one hour in a quiet private room, around a communal table, but with other tables available for the performance of Q sorting (see separate paper under review). The first author and a female research assistant conducted the meetings.

> ***Introduction:*** We began each meeting by explaining the purpose of the research and its rationale. We explained that this study involved research about how peers get along and that we wanted the girls, as experts, to help us understand aspects of peer group life, and in particular their meanings of

popularity. We reminded the girls of the voluntary nature of the research and we assured them that their responses would be anonymous and confidential within the group. We audiotaped discussions for later transcription and analysis.

Orientation discussion: Each session then moved on to a general discussion about peer group life including how well students get along with each other, types and causes of conflicts and issues of popularity, social power and social influence. To facilitate discussion, a vignette and semi-structured interview questions were used (see Figure 1). These discussions set the scene in relation to popularity and social status and how it may operate in a school.

Figure 1. Vignette and sample of semi-structured discussion group questions

Partners in dance

Mrs Roberts, the Dance teacher, asks the Year 9 girls to select partners for a dance. One of the girls, Kelly, does not get chosen and, because there is an uneven number, she has to partner the teacher. Kelly is often left out like this. One of the popular girls, Abbey, arrives late and Mrs Roberts asks her to partner Kelly. Abbey looks exasperated. A buzz of talk goes around the girls' group and Abbey is very slow to join in. Mrs Roberts is beginning to wonder what is going on when Abbey protests very loudly: "Do I really have to!" The rest of the girls giggle and Kelly also pretends it is funny.

Sample discussion guide questions

The aim of the above vignette was to get the girls to talk about the issues of peer group membership, friendship, conflict, social status, popularity and social power. Below are the types of questions that we used to assist with the discussion.

What is happening in this story?

What does Mrs Roberts not understand about the girls' behaviour?

Why does it take Abbey so long to join in?

Why does Abbey behave the way that she does?

Why does Kelly also laugh?

Does this sort of thing happen at this school? Tell us what does happen?

Can you help us understand this behaviour? What is going on?

What are the characteristics of girls who are popular?

The purpose of this discussion was to sensitise the students to the issues involved and to provide clarification of terms as necessary. The students were then introduced to the Q-sort activity (details reported in a separate paper under review).

Post-Q-Sort Discussion: We discussed the Q-sort activity with the girls, inviting general questions or comments about their selection of items or characteristics associated with popularity or unpopularity. The girls were asked not to name individuals or necessarily to report on their own experiences, but typically they discussed incidents and personalities that, for the girls, constructed their concepts of popularity and social power. All of these discussions were audiotaped for later transcription.

Follow-up feedback sessions (credibility checking): Approximately four weeks after the focus group discussions, we held half-hour feedback sessions with the girls in each school. We presented our preliminary analyses of the Q-sort data and the focus group transcripts. In the case of the focus group material, the purpose of the sessions was to ensure that our representation of what the girls had told us was accurate. While in general the girls agreed that our depiction of their perspectives on popularity was accurate, they did add comments and elaborate upon certain issues, ensuring that we had a clearer understanding of their views on peer popularity. This procedure is consistent with recommendations on ensuring the rigour of qualitative research provided originally by Guba and Lincoln (1981) and Sandelowski (1986), and enacted by us (Owens et al. 2000a, 2001) in relation to checking the credibility of a study, i.e. checking that the students involved in the study recognise our representation of their human experiences as their own.

Agreement checking: In order to ensure the reliability of the material classified under the themes, approximately thirty percent of the transcripts were coded by a separate peer relationships researcher not connected to this study. This procedure is consistent with the suggestions by Miles and Huberman (1994) in relation to check-coding. The level of agreement with the first author was approximately eighty percent. The coding was discussed and differences were resolved.

Data analysis: The transcript data from the orientation, post-sort and credibility checking sessions were entered into the NVivo qualitative software programme and a thematic analysis undertaken. These themes were derived from an inductive process involving reading and re-reading the transcripts and the selection of consistent and recurring ideas, which were refined via an iterative process to ensure that the themes were grounded in the data (Patton 2002).

Results

Thematic analyses of the focus group transcript data from the two schools revealed the categories shown in figure 2 below. The categories are arranged in order, with those higher up the list having more transcript material relating to them.

Figure 2: Characteristics associated with popularity: themes derived from focus group discussions

- Physical and fashionable appearance
- Rebelliousness
- Power
- Wealth

Physical and fashionable appearance: "They're barbie dolls"

Girls from all five focus groups at Ardare discussed the importance of physical ('being pretty') and fashionable appearance in conferring popularity on girls. The appearance and clothing of popular girls meant that they stood out from the crowd, as the following transcript material from Ardare reveals. [Note: I means interviewer, S1, S2 means student 1, then 2 ... and so on in a group.]

Ardare Focus Group 1 (AFG 1):

I: What are the popular kids like?

S1: They get brand new clothes nearly every day. They dress heaps differently to other kids.

AFG 4:

S1: They stand out.

S2: They're all pretty.

Note the reference to purchasing capacity ('brand new clothes') which is a theme that we discuss further below. In addition to standing out through their physical appearance and fashion sense, the popular girls are seen to set themselves apart as a group by dressing in similar ways:

AFG 1:

I: What makes them popular?

S3: I think being pretty. Having a nice figure. What they wear. The style. They all get their hair done the same way – the same colour, the same cut.

Like at Ardare, girls from all five groups at Cable mentioned physical and fashionable appearance as a crucial aspect of being popular. In response to the question about what popular girls are like, S4 from Cable Group 3 replied: "Barbie dolls. Skinny, pretty, nothing wrong with them". The following extract is illustrative:

Cable Focus Group 4 (CFG 4):

I: What are the characteristics of girls that are popular?

S1: Being pretty matters a lot in high school.

S4: It's all about clothes.

S2: It's about what clothes you wear and how you wear it.

Notice S2's view that it was not just the clothes but the distinctive way that clothes are worn that sets the popular girls apart.

The power of physical appearance is revealed in the following Cable student's view that popular students believe that they are superior because of their appearance.

CFG 5:

S5: The popular girls here don't say "I'm better than you, I'm gonna beat you up". They say "I'm better than you coz I'm better looking".

Like the Ardare students, the Cable students made the connection between fashionable appearance and 'opportunity' to purchase clothes.

CFG 5:

I: What are the characteristics of popular kids?

S1: Good looks, good clothes.

S4: Yea. More opportunity to look better and have a better appearance and be liked by boys more and stuff like that.

Note the link made by S4 between appearance and being liked by boys. There were references throughout the discussions at both schools to the ways in which the popular girls, who were highly visible through their physical and fashionable appearances and through their loud noticeable behaviours, attracted the attention of boys.

Rebelliousness: "They mess around in class, party and take drugs"

This theme included deliberately not doing well at school work, being in trouble with teachers/school, smoking and taking drugs, being loud and being noticed.

Transcript material relating to this category was recorded in four of the focus groups at Ardare. The following extracts from Ardare reveal the anti-authority, anti-school characteristics of the popular girls:

AFG 1:

S1: They're not the best at their subjects. They think they can get away with doing anything, like, making fun of other people.

I: What about their behaviour?

S2: They muck up. I have a couple in my class.

AFG 2:

S2: Yeah like on the bus at beach volley ball, they all sat up the back of the bus and like really loud and they're not afraid to talk back at all to teachers and stuff.

S3: They don't care that much about their education. That top group that is.

AFG 4:

I: What about in school, do they do all their school work? Do they get along with their teachers?

S1: I guess it just depends on their personality. A lot of them will, like, fight with teachers.

S2: They are fairly smart. They get good grades sometimes. Sometimes they don't do so well coz if you're popular you hold your reputation and you go to parties and you wouldn't exactly do all your school work. You go to parties instead.

The report from S2 in Group 4 above reveals the view that popular girls deliberately underachieve in order to maintain their reputations as being party-goers who do not treat school seriously. The next extract illustrates the way in which girls need to be loud and try alcohol and drugs and not be boring to be in the popular group:

AFG 2:

I: So what is the way to get popular?

S3: Probably to be really loud and like …

S2: Being not afraid to try alcohol and drugs. If you're like "No I don't want to do that" then popular people already doing that might think well she's boring if you don't try something.

At Cable, all five groups talked about rebelliousness as a marker of popularity. Similar to the Ardare girls, the Cable girls were of the view that popular girls achieve and maintain their popularity through publicly visible anti-school and anti-authority behaviours including being in trouble in school and using drugs and alcohol. The first extract below demonstrates that unpopular girls are the ones who study and get along with teachers, whereas the popular girls are anti-school and draw attention to themselves through a variety of activities including drinking, smoking, not wearing school uniform and truanting from school.

CFG 1:

S4: They're rebels. Always get in trouble, like smoke and stuff like that.

S4: The outsiders are ones who like studying and stuff like that and get along with the teachers and do what they're supposed to and everything and when the other popular people don't and they just wag and …

I: What makes people popular?

S3: What they do.

I: What do they do S3?

S2: They smoke just to get people's attention.

S5: They drink.

S1: They wear non-school clothes to school.

S4: Putting on foundation during class.

The next two extracts reveal the peer pressure to party and take drugs to be seen as 'cool', and the power that knowledge of the drug scene confers upon popular girls:

CFG 3:

I: What about the items like takes drugs, drinks alcohol? Do these make you popular?

S4: The whole drug thing. Someone will say "Do you know where I can score a hit?" And someone will be like, "Yes". So having drugs makes you popular.

CFG 5:

I: Taking drugs, having alcohol at parties?

S1: With us, it is your own choice. But for some people there is so much peer pressure and you're not cool if you don't take drugs and if you don't go out on weekends and party.

Some of the girls spoke about parental freedom and privileges as a factor in relation to popularity. The extract below from Cable Group 5 reveals the link between parent licence in allowing their daughters to go out to parties (and the popularity that emanates from participation in these social events) and, conversely, the way in which girls who are restricted by parents are considered to be boring and unpopular:

CFG 5:

S4: Also your parents' restrictions on you – what you're allowed to do and not allowed to do. Often if your parents are strict and won't let you go out anywhere, "Oh you're a nerd". It's like, "You're boring. I don't want to be your friend".

S3: When they can go party with other people who actually will.

S5: A lot of time it is peer pressure that makes people go against what their parents want them to do.

The perceived anti-social nature of popularity at Cable appears to have a harder edge to it than at Ardare. The transcript material demonstrates that, whereas at Ardare the reports are more to do with anti-school characteristics, popularity at Cable is perceived at least by some of the girls to have more to do with use of alcohol and drugs.

Like the popular girls at Ardare who were under pressure to maintain their reputations as being cool, the popular girls at Cable, too, felt considerable pressure to maintain their status. As the extract below demonstrates, being popular brings with it responsibilities or costs in maintaining a certain false front or persona involving being social, going shopping, smoking, drinking, spreading rumours and breaking school rules:

CFG 1:

S4: I think maybe the people who aren't so popular have more time on their hands to do what they want, where the popular people are trying to be with their friends and go shopping and stuff like that and trying to be somebody else that they're not.

I: What makes people popular?

S3: What they do.

I: What do they do S3?

S2: They smoke just to get people's attention.

S5: They drink.

S1: Make up stories. They …They wear non-school clothes to school.

S4: They're fake to their inner selves.

Power: "They over-rule people"

This theme represents a view by students that popular girls have power over others, which manifests itself in mean behaviours including verbal harassment, spreading rumours and social manipulation.

There was transcript material relating to this theme in four of the focus groups at Ardare and all five groups at Cable. The first extract below reveals the power that comes with high status. It seems that you need to be in the popular group to have the legitimacy to be outspoken:

AFG 1:

S1: They think they can get away with doing anything, like, making fun of other people.

I: What are they like in class?

S3: They think they can just yell out and make comments whenever they feel like it and then someone else who is not as popular will say something and they'll tell them to shut up.

The next extract reveals the importance of group support for popular girls and the manipulative nature of popular girls, i.e. they will be friendly at a personal level especially to gain social advantage:

AFG 2:

S1: It depends on how high you are up.

S2: How many people are with her. If she's with her cool friends she might look down on you but if she's by herself she'll be nice to you coz it will get her where she wants to go.

Popular girls engage in spreading rumours, but note the view below that you already have to be of high status to be able to start or spread a rumour – and then the act of spreading it actually enhances the status of popular girls:

AFG 2:

S1: The ones that spread the rumours. But spreading the rumours doesn't make them cool. They are able to do that because they are just such a high status that if they spread rumours they make themselves look better. And they put other people down.

S2: It's not a way to get popular.

The following extracts from Ardare girls in Group 4 reveals the power that popular girls have and the way in which they intimidate or scare peers so that no-one stands up to them and, in fact, they gain support:

AFG 4:

L: What does popularity mean to you people?

S1: Having power.

I: What does that actually mean? Tease out having power.

S1: People are scared of you. You over-rule people.

S4: Their confidence. They don't care what they do – their confidence.

S3: If they get into a fight with someone, everyone agrees with them.

S4: And they'll go on their side.

S2: It's like they're afraid to go on the other person's side.

S1: There is a powerful popular and there's a nice popular. Some people are popular just because some people are scared of them.

I: Tease out this idea of power. How do they use it?

S1: They use it to get their own way, to make other people feel bad. They use it to get what they want.

I: Give us an example of that

S1: By using their power if they don't like someone, they can turn everyone against them.

A high status girl has the power to influence public opinion about her. This is revealed in the following extracts illustrating that sexual activity is judged differently depending on social status. In the discussion below with Ardare Group 2,

the interviewer was asking about what other characteristics are important for popularity. The girls were generally discussing the issue of whether being a virgin (which was one of the items on the Q sort) makes a difference to popularity. S2 concluded that being a virgin does not really matter one way or the other and S1 made the point that rather than virgin status, "Sleeping around", especially with older boys, is the issue that will damage a reputation. She then qualified this by making the case that the way your sexual activity is judged depends on the status of the people involved. The implication is that a high-status girl sleeping with a high status boy will not necessarily lower a girl's reputation.

AFG 2:

I: What else?

S2: Instead of virgin, sleeping around or something.

S1: Is a virgin is just the general ….

S2: It does not really count for much.

S1: Is not a virgin. If you say sleeps around. If sleep around with older boys it tends to be worse. It depends on whether the person and the boy have high status beforehand.

In the next extract, the girls in Ardare Group 4 reinforce the point that promiscuous behavior generally makes one unpopular, but it depends on one's existing social status. Popular girls can behave sexually and preserve their reputation, but unpopular girls will receive criticism from peers.

AFG 4:

I: What other items could be added?

S1: Confidence.

S2: The way they act around the opposite sex.

S1: Being slutty and flirt a lot.

I: Being slutty makes you unpopular.

S2: If popular already, they can get away with it. If unpopular they get criticized and called names if being slutty.

S1: Some people might be unpopular if they're not a virgin. Like, they call you a slut and stuff. That's happened with a couple of girls. But if a popular kid did, they would say "Oh that's a bit dirty", and then just move on from there.

I: They can get away with it.

I: If girls are with older boys would anybody mind then?

S1: It depends if you're popular again.

I: The popular thing comes first.

S1: It all depends on where you are (in social status).

S3: It does not matter with our group. You could go out with a Year 11.

S1: But if you're a loser, it will matter.

Issues related to the power theme were reported in all five groups at Cable. The following extract from Cable Group 1 reveals the perceived power, intimidation and general meanness of popular girls.

CFG 1:

I: What does popularity mean?

S2: Top girls.

S5: Girls that run the school. Run the year 9's

I: How do they do it?

S3: They just overpower everyone.

S1: Be intimidating and …

I: How do they do it S1?

S1: They put you down in any way like your clothing or …

S5: They think they're so good.

S1: Yeah and mostly that and the way they speak to you in a not very nice way.

S2: Basically people that think they're the best in the school and everyone should do what they want.

The next extract from Cable Group 4 shows the power that popular girls have in being able to decide and control friendship groups:

CFG 4:

S3: I was friends with them. If you were friends with them you could talk to who they said you could talk to. You'd be friends with who they said you could be friends with. Or else you were gonna be a geek.

S4: The popular group overrules. Everyone looks up to them.

S3: And if you don't, you're in trouble.

In the next extract, the girls from Cable Group 5 reported the verbal harassment and even physical aggression to which unpopular girls can be exposed:

CFG 5:

I: What might happen to the less popular kids?

S1: Harassment.

S4: Paid out by their looks.

S1: Bashed.

I: By other girls?

S1: Yeah.

S3: I don't reckon that happens much.

S5: It happens among girls but not much.

As for the girls at Ardare, the girls at Cable believe that high status preserves one's reputation in relation to sexual activity. Below is an example of the girls from Cable Group 1 discussing this issue:

CFG 1:

I: Wouldn't there be a point at which some kids would say if you've been having sex with boys that you're slack or a slut?

Girls: Yeah.

I: How does that work then?

S4: I reckon if you're high up on the rank not many people are going to question you.

Wealth: "They have money, clothes and friends"

This theme overlaps with the first one about physical and fashionable appearance. The theme encapsulates the view that girls who have wealthy parents are able to purchase brand-name clothes and expensive make-up in order to stand out and make themselves look more attractive. Transcript material relating to this theme is present in two of the Ardare focus groups and three of the Cable groups. The following extracts from Ardare Groups 2 and 3 represent the wealth-popularity connection well:

AFG 2:

S2: If wealthier they might get brand-name clothing.

S1: Tend to mean they are more cool.

S2: Generally people at the top end, it appears they have more money coz they wear brand name clothing.

S1: And their hair and make-up and everything is perfect. Even if they're bigger and not as pretty.

S2: It generally requires a lot of money to look like that.

AFG 3:

S2: And all the popular girls are pretty and skinny and have all the right clothes.

S1: So-called rich. Have money. Can do what they want. Stuff like that.

The girls at Cable responded in a similar way to those at Ardare:

CFG 1:

I: What does popularity mean?

S4: People that have money to spend on whatever they want.

I: Did somebody say before that they're the richer kids?

S4: Yeah. Well they seem richer, they just. The normal kids spend it on the normal things they need but the other kids just beg their parents for money and have a

> good time and buy clothes and stuff that they don't need. The popular kids just get it off their parents.

S4 makes a point raised earlier about parental freedom as a factor relating to popularity. She reports that the popular girls "seem richer". They are actually able to get money from their parents.

In response to a question about unpopular girls, one of the girls from Cable Group 3 made a connection with lack of purchasing power:

> *CFG 3:*
>
> I: Is it about the way they look?
>
> S4: Yes maybe. It might be their parents don't have money and the way they have to dress or something.

One of the girls from Cable Group 5 below reveals the connection between having money and having friends:

> *CFG 5:*
>
> S1: Have a lot of money. Everyone wants to be your friend.

We also refer the reader back to the first theme where the connection was made in Cable Group 5 between purchasing power, appearance and attraction of boys.

Discussion

This paper presents our analysis of focus group discussions on the topic of popularity with teenage girls in two schools from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. A very clear conclusion from this work is that the girls see popularity as being concerned with public visibility, prominence, social power and influence rather than likeability. Our results, therefore, support the accounts by the sociologists (Adler & Adler 1995, 1998; Eder 1985; Eder et al. 1995; Merten 1997) and the developmental psychologists who operationalise popularity as a perceived or consensual construct (Babad 2001; Cillessen & Borch 2006; Cillessen & Mayeux 2004; de Bruyn & Cillessen 2006a, 2006b; Parkhurst & Asher 1992) rather than the work of traditional sociometricians who define popularity as being well liked (Coie & Dodge 1983; Coie et al. 1982; Newcomb et al. 1993). In fact, there was very little transcript material in the present study which was positive about popular girls – generally, our reporters appeared to be envious of and to dislike popular girls. Our study revealed that the girls from both the high and low socioeconomic backgrounds generally view popularity in the same way, with the exception that some of the girls from a low-income background see popularity as having a more anti-authority, anti-social character than do the girls from the middle class school. In our discussion below, we combine overlapping themes and relate our findings to previous research.

Good looks, money and boys

The girls were unanimous in their view that popular girls stood out from their peers through being pretty and fashionable. There was a view that popular girls had greater opportunity to be fashionable through the wealthy background of parents, or at least through their capacity to get parents to provide money for fashionable clothes. As a group, the popular girls appeared to be uniform in what they wore and the ways in which they presented themselves. This uniformity of dress and appearance would enable popular girls to be viewed more distinctly as a group. As far as our reporters were concerned, popular girls appeared to believe that being better looking legitimised their superiority. Prettiness and fashionable appearance also afforded girls the opportunity to be liked by boys.

Our findings are consistent with earlier research linking popularity with physical attractiveness (Boyatzis, Baloff & Durieux 1998; LaFontana & Cillessen 2002; Lease et al. 2002), fashionable clothing and spending power (Adler & Adler 1995, 1998; de Bruyn & Cillessen 2006b; Eder 1985; Eder et al. 1995; Lease et al. 2002). For instance, Eder (1985) reported in her ethnographic study of 6th graders that the high-status girls were from middle-class backgrounds and they could be identified because they wore brand name clothing, and sat as a group on one side of the cafeteria away from the girls who could be recognised by their dress as of lower and working class background.

Adler et al. (1992) also highlighted the importance of physical and fashionable attractiveness and parents' socioeconomic status for girls' popularity. The authors even recorded a conversation among kindergarten girls who were speaking about the link between being pretty, having money and being popular with other girls and boys. They reported that appearance and grooming dominated girls' conversations, and that make-up in the higher middle grades was a status symbol. However, the clothing, dress style and make-up had to be of a particular type on which the popular girls had a monopoly.

In relation to the link between popularity and being liked by boys, Duncan (1999; 2004) in his work on sexual bullying concluded that popularity among teenage girls was linked to heterosexual attractiveness. Among the most common characteristics of popularity in the Q-sort selections of his participants were being fashionable and being liked by boys. Duncan argued that the girls' desires to be pretty and to be fashionable were part of a heteronormative competition for social status. In support of Duncan's thesis, the Q-sort items selected by girls in his studies as most related to unpopularity were being a lesbian, being quiet and having special needs – all of which are "strikingly non-boy centred" (Duncan 2004). Merten (1997) too, in his ethnographic account of 'mean' girls, found that one of the main ways that girls would gain recognition by peers was to attract the attention of high-status boys.

Rebelliousness

The girls in our study reported that popular girls stood out by being anti-school, anti-authority and somewhat anti-social, and engaging in rule-breaking behaviour

including smoking, taking alcohol and drugs. The reports of anti-social behaviour were more evident among some of the girls at the lower socioeconomic school. Several of the girls commented that some of this 'cool' behaviour was false, serving to create an image for the popular girls, i.e. the popular girls engaged in rule-breaking, risk-taking behaviour in order to locate themselves at the centre of people's attention, and maintain their social position.

Why is it that teenage girls who display rebellious behaviour are regarded as popular by peers? There is broad agreement that adolescence is recognised as a period of exploration and discovery when self-reliance, self-control and independent decision-making increase (e.g. Feldman & Elliott 1990). In their quest for maturity, teenagers tend to question authority and adult rules including academic norms (de Bruyn & Cillessen 2006b). It seems then that the teenage girls in our study who openly exhibit their classroom non-compliance and risk-taking activities are displaying behaviours that are exciting and admired by their peers. As de Bruyn and Cillessen (2006b) argued, the anti-school, rule-breaking behaviours provide a quick route to the public visibility that constructs the girls' understandings of popularity. The popular girls found it 'cool' to back-chat teachers, get low grades and 'mess around' in class.

In our larger Q-sort study (under review), we found that several of the girls from the lower socioeconomic school described a 'druggy' or 'mean' popularity, and our transcript material provided evidence that some of the students from the low-income area did describe a type of popularity that was characterised by a greater degree of rule-breaking, risky behaviours. There are a number of theories that help us to understand why it is that status in the lower socioeconomic area may have a more rebellious flavour. Psychosocial control theory (Hirschi 1969) suggests that individuals that are detached or not bonded to institutions such as schools develop delinquent behaviours. Then, after becoming delinquent, individuals turn to similar others for support in their anti-authority activities, and this leads to further detachment from societal institutions such as school and family (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990).

It is likely that adolescents from the lower socioeconomic area in the present study do not see the benefits of school for them, such that they have a "nothing to lose" (Harris, Duncan & Boisjoly 2002) attitude toward risky behaviour. Similarly, although he was referring mainly to males, Kreager (2007), relying on subculture of violence theories, concluded that "for rebellious youth, the payoffs of schooling are believed to hold little weight compared with the immediate status benefits gained from disruptive and daring behaviours".

Our findings are consistent with the qualitative component of the study by de Bruyn and Cillessen (2006b) in the Netherlands. In focus group discussions with 13–14 year olds, the authors found two types of popularity: 'pro-social populars', who are akin to the sociometric well-liked popularity (see our Introduction); and 'populistic populars' who are similar to the perceived or consensually popular youth described in the literature, including the students in our study. de Bruyn and Cillessen found evidence of the falseness of their 'populistic' teens, similar to the

reports by girls in our study. For example, the students in the Dutch study spoke of 'populistic' students dressing in an exaggerated way and tending to act popular. Similar to our study, they also found 'populistic' students back-chat teachers and do poorly in class. They found the 'populistic' youth behave in anti-social ways that include displaying teacher defiance, showing off, acting overly confident and being disrespectful.

Power

The girls in our study believed that popular girls have power over other students. They use this power in a variety of ways, including threats, verbal harassment, spreading rumours and manipulating friendships. Generally, students are intimidated by and are afraid to face up to the popular girls. High status provides the legitimacy to be disruptive and make critical comments in class and to behave in a variety of ways, including being sexually active, without incurring the peer disapproval that lower-status girls would receive for similar behaviour.

Our data adds to the research which suggests that popular youth can be aggressive (Duncan 1999; Eder 1985; Merten 1997; Puckett et al. 2008; Rodkin et al. 2000, 2006; Rose et al. 2004; Vaillancourt & Hymel 2006). de Bruyn and Cillessen (2006b) found that 'populistic' girls had more power and leadership and took advantage of others more than 'pro-social' popular girls. Like in our study, 'populistic' girls were found to ostracise peers and bully and threaten classmates. Our data are also consistent with the findings of the sociologists (Adler & Adler 1995, 1998; Eder 1985; Eder et al. 1995; Merten 1997) mentioned in the introduction, all of whom found that popular girls can be quite aggressive toward their peers.

Duncan (1999; 2004) described the nasty bullying behaviours of popular girls as often having a sexualised element, whereby victims were described either as sluts or lesbians – in other words, the victims were positioned in a way that made them undesirable for relationships with boys. Vaillancourt and Hymel (2006), in their study of aggression and social status, found that perceptions of power were strongly related to perceived popularity. They found that aggressive (both physical and indirect) adolescents were generally disliked but were perceived as popular and powerful.

In earlier studies, we (e.g. Owens et al. 2000a, 2000b, 2001) found that one of the key explanations for indirect aggression among teenage girls was a range of friendship and group processes concerned with being part of the group, particularly membership of the right or high status group. The girls in our earlier studies spoke of continuing the spread of rumours or participating in the exclusion of peers in order to cement one's place in the group at the expense of the victim of this behaviour. The sharing of malicious gossip, for instance, seemed to strengthen the relational bonds amongst group members, so that it was important for individuals to participate in these sorts of behaviours in order to be included within the desired group. It seemed that popular girls could, by virtue of their high status, be socially aggressive to others without fear of reprisal. In addition, those who wished to curry the favour of popular girls would participate in socially aggressive behaviours,

thereby showing their allegiance to the popular girls. This current study confirms these suspected links between perceived popularity and aggressive behaviour among teenage girls.

Conclusion

Our study confirms recent research that peers perceive popular teenage girls to be publicly visible, prominent and prestigious. Popular girls are distinguished by being attractive, fashionable, wealthy, liked by boys and nonchalantly cool toward school authority and school rules. Popular girls are seen as loud, anti-social risk takers and they tend to use their power in aggressive ways toward their peers. Rather than being well liked, popular girls appear to be envied by their peers. Our study adds to the literature by revealing that these characteristics of perceived popularity apply also in an Australian setting and across two social classes, except that in the lower income school there was evidence of a harder edge to the anti-social behaviour of the popular girls. Our study is different too in that we have undertaken an intensive analysis of focus group discussions with girls about the topic of popularity. This process resulted in a wealth of descriptive material which clearly reveals the teenage girls' social constructions of popularity.

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