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Criteria of personal, boys', and girls' popularity as ranked by Greek adolescents

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## Summary

This study examined what Greek adolescents believe are the most important criteria of personal, boys' and girls' popularity in their age group. Participants were 364 students aged between 12 and 15 years. Seven main criteria of popularity were identified: sport competence, physical appearance, academic ability, being a good friend, being sociable, having a good sense of humor, and having the 'right circle of friends'. With regard to personal popularity, results showed that being a good friend and being sociable were the two most highly ranked criteria for both boys and girls across all ages. Boys and girls perceived differently the most important criteria of boys' and girls' popularity. Specifically, for same-gender popularity, being a good friend was the most highly ranked criterion, whereas for other-gender popularity physical attractiveness was the most highly ranked criterion. The findings imply that friendship and social affiliation are the most important criteria of popularity in Greek adolescents.

Peer acceptance is very important in adolescence, a time at which peer influence becomes more dominant than parental influence (Weiss & Duncan, 1992). Peer acceptance is normally accomplished by being good at something or possessing something that is highly valued by the peer group. Many studies over the last four decades have examined the relative importance of sport competence, as well as other factors, in determining popularity among children and adolescents. A consistent finding of these, predominantly North American, studies is that sport competence is an important criterion of popularity in young boys, but not in girls.

For example, research by Chase and Dummer (1992) with 478 U.S. students from grades 4 to 6 showed that 'being good at sports' and 'good looks' were the most highly ranked criteria of personal popularity in boys whilst in girls this order was reversed. Age differences revealed that at each grade level sport competence became more important for boys and physical appearance became more important for girls. A comparison of the mean scores of the criteria of popularity in the Chase and Dummer (1992) study with the mean scores reported by Buchanan, Blankenbaker, and Cotton (1976) showed that over the two time periods academic achievement became less important in determining personal popularity for both boys and girls. In contrast, the relative importance of sport competence and physical appearance for boys and physical appearance for girls increased. Chase and Dummer (1992) also presented the main criteria of boys' and girls' popularity. Boys rated sport competence as the most important criterion of boys' popularity, whilst girls considered physical appearance as the most important criterion of boys' popularity. For girls' popularity, physical appearance was rated by both gender groups as the most important criterion. In contrast, the comparative role of sport as a criterion of girls' popularity was found to be of little importance.

Other studies conducted in American junior and senior high schools examining peer acceptance have reported relatively similar findings. For example, Williams and White (1983) found that being an 'athletic star' was the primary criterion of personal popularity for boys from junior high school to college. This criterion was chosen by 43% of the boys' sample. Similar high percentages have been presented by Coleman (1961) and Eitzen (1975). In comparison, the girls in the Williams and White (1983) study reported 'being a leader in the activities' as the most important criterion of their popularity. 'Being a leader in the activities' as well as 'being in the leading crowd' were ranked by female adolescents as the most important criteria for girls' popularity in a study by Thirer and Wright (1985).

The aforementioned results could be attributed to the significant role that sport plays in the American society and in the school curriculum. In fact, sport is a basic part of the educational programs of different age groups (Vanderwerken, 1990). Furthermore, research evidence has shown that sport competence plays an important role in peer relations, especially among young boys (Evans & Roberts, 1987; Weiss & Duncan, 1992). Thus, it is understandable that sport competence is highly valued by young American boys. The comparatively lower importance that girls place upon sport competence has been attributed by Chase and Dummer (1992) to the relatively low place of sport within the female value system, despite the recent increase in opportunities for girls to participate in organized sport. The high importance that boys and especially girls place on physical appearance could be attributed to societal attitudes and media pressures to achieve certain 'acceptable' body physiques (Davis, 1997).

However, the research conducted in American elementary and high schools may not generalize to other cultures where sport plays a less central role in the school

curriculum. For example, in the UK most schools allocate one to two hours per week to sport and games. Therefore, it may not be surprising that in an investigation of the relative importance that 13- and 15- year- old British students place upon success in sport and school work, Whitehead, Evans, and Lee (1997) found that although sport success was more important to boys than to girls, both gender groups rated the importance of academic success over sport success. Another limitation of past research is that it included only a very small number of potential criteria of popularity. However, this might have resulted in the omission of important criteria (e.g., being friendly), a possibility acknowledged by Chase and Dummer (1992).

To date, there has been no research looking at the criteria of popularity in Greek adolescents. Similar to the UK, sport does not play an important role in the Greek school curriculum. In contrast, academic success is highly valued by both students and their parents (Gari & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1998). Furthermore, Greek adolescents place great emphasis on factors relating to friendship and social acceptance (Makri-Botsari, 2001). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine what Greek adolescents believe are the most important criteria of personal, boys' and girls' popularity in youth. Since previous research in the U.S. has examined gender and age differences in the criteria of popularity, a secondary purpose of this study was to investigate such differences in Greek adolescents. No hypotheses were formulated because the study was of an exploratory nature, but it was expected that sport competence would not be an important criterion of popularity when compared to the U.S. studies. In contrast, it was expected that, Greek students would place greater emphasis upon social factors and academic success.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 364 Greek students ( $N$  boys = 180;  $N$  girls = 183; 1 did not indicate gender) aged between 12 to 15 years ( $M = 13.6$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ), who took part in a 4-week summer camp offering sport, cultural, and educational activities. Approximately 2/3 of the students were regular participants in various sports clubs (competitive experience:  $M = 4.3$  years;  $SD = 2.3$ ). All participants were Caucasians and came from a predominantly middle-class background.

### *Instrument*

The participants were presented with a list of possible criteria of popularity in adolescence. The list was comprised of items that were used in Chase and Dummer's (1992) study (i.e., academic ability, physical attractiveness, sport competence, and wealth), as well as five additional items (being a good friend, being sociable, being trendy, having a good sense of humor, and having the 'right circle of friends') that the authors developed based on the existing literature and their experience with working with young people. The participants were encouraged to add other criteria of popularity if appropriate. Then, they were then asked to rank all the identified criteria starting with '1' for the most important criterion. Three different ranks were produced in order to ascertain the perceived importance of each criterion for a) personal popularity, b) the popularity of boys in their age group, and c) the popularity of girls in their age group.

### *Procedure*

Participation in this study was voluntary. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from the participants and their parents or guardians. The questionnaire was administered to large groups of participants in an assembly hall. The participants

were encouraged to give honest responses and were reminded that their responses would be kept confidential.

### *Data Analysis*

Similar to Chase and Dummer (1992), we calculated the number of times each criterion of popularity received the highest ranking, that is the number of times each criterion was perceived by the participants to be the most important criterion of personal, boys' and girls' popularity. These frequencies were subsequently compared using chi-square analysis.

## Results

Frequency analysis indicated that two of the items in the list (i.e., being trendy and wealthy) were rated as being the most important criteria of all three types of popularity by less than 3% of the sample. Therefore, these items were dropped from the analysis. Furthermore, none of the additional criteria of popularity obtained from the open-ended questions were mentioned by more than 2 or 3 participants, and therefore, none of these items were included in any further analysis.

### *Personal Popularity*

Chi-square analyses revealed no gender ( $\chi^2_6 = 8.75; p = ns$ ) or age differences ( $\chi^2_6 = 6.70; p = ns$ ) in the frequencies of the most highly ranked criteria of personal popularity. Therefore, a subsequent chi-square analysis was carried out using the whole sample. Results (see Table 1) showed that being a good friend and being sociable were the two most frequently chosen first criteria of personal popularity ( $\chi^2(6) = 149.81; p < .001$ ).

### *Boys' popularity*



Chi-square analyses revealed significant gender differences in the frequencies of the most highly ranked criteria of boys' popularity ( $\chi^2_6 = 29.76; p < .001$ ). Therefore, subsequent age differences were sought independently for boys and girls. A gender x age analysis was not possible due to the very small  $N$  in some cells. In both young (12-13 years old) and older (14-15 years old) boys, being a good friend was the most frequently chosen first criterion of boys' popularity (see Table 2). The importance of being sociable and good at sports increased and decreased respectively across the age groups ( $\chi^2_6 = 19.74; p < .01$ ). Young girls (12-13 years old) chose physical attractiveness and sports competence as the most important criteria of boys' popularity. In older girls (14-15 years old), being sociable, a good friend and attractive were the most frequently reported criteria of boys' popularity. Similar to boys, the importance of sport competence decreased across the age groups ( $\chi^2_6 = 13.80; p < .05$ ) (see Table 2).

### *Girls' Popularity*

Chi-square analyses revealed significant gender differences in the frequencies of the most highly ranked criteria of girls' popularity ( $\chi^2_6 = 22.47; p < .001$ ). Therefore, subsequent age differences were sought independently for boys and girls. A gender x age analysis was not possible due to the very small  $N$  in some cells. No age group differences ( $\chi^2_6 = 8.35; p = ns$ ) emerged in the boys' sample as both groups believed that physical attractiveness was by far the most important criterion of girls' popularity (see Table 3). In contrast, sport competence was rated as one of the least important criterion of girls' popularity. No age group differences ( $\chi^2_6 = 4.51; p = ns$ ) emerged in the girls' sample. However, in contrast to the boys' sample, both younger and older girls believed that physical attractiveness was the second most important criterion of girls' popularity after that of being a good friend (see Table 3).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the main criteria of personal, boys' and girls' popularity in a sample of Greek adolescents. Previous research has focused almost exclusively on American students, however, the results of these studies may not generalize to other countries. Indeed, this was the case in the present study whose findings differed from those that have been reported by previous research. Seven main criteria of popularity were identified in this study, more than those reported by previous studies (e.g., Buchanan et al., 1976; Chase & Dummer, 1992). Being a good friend and being sociable were the most highly ranked criteria of personal popularity. Among Greek children there is a strong emphasis on social affiliation and acceptance (Makri-Botsari, 2001) and this has probably been reflected by the prominence of the two criteria in the students' rankings.

Boys and girls rated different criteria as being the most important for determining boys' and girls' popularity. For same-gender popularity, as with personal popularity, being a good friend was the most highly ranked criterion. However, for other-gender popularity the most highly ranked criterion was physical attractiveness. This implies that popularity criteria are, to a certain extent, influenced by the gender similarity of the rater and those who are rated. The high emphasis on physical appearance placed by both boys and girls is consistent with previous research (e.g., Chase & Dummer, 1992). It is worth noting that adolescents rated differently the importance of physical appearance depending on whether they judged personal popularity or someone else's popularity. That is, whereas physical appearance was the least frequently cited most important criterion for personal popularity, it was very

frequently cited for both girls' and boys' popularity. Qualitative research is needed to investigate the reasons for this discrepancy.

A possible explanation might be that the participants perceived that they personally lacked this quality. Another explanation is that they implicitly discounted its importance for their own popularity focusing instead on more socially acceptable qualities such as being a good friend. In any case, this finding is important because, unlike many other criteria, physical appearance is to a large extent genetically determined. Therefore, a possible overemphasis on physical appearance as a criterion to judge popularity could be a cause for concern. There is a significant amount of evidence in the literature (e.g., see Davis, 1997) indicating the strong link between physical appearance concerns and eating disorders (especially in the population of girls). Future research should investigate whether discrepancies between the criteria of personal and same-gender popularity could have an effect on one's self-worth.

Another interesting discrepancy between personal and other popularity was with regard to academic competence. Many more adolescents regarded this variable as being the most important criterion of their own popularity rather than the popularity of boys or girls. The results as far as boys' and girls' popularity are concerned are not surprising since academic success is not highly valued by peers when forming social networks. However, the results for personal popularity are difficult to explain. A possible reason is that this study did not measure the personal value of each criterion to the student. Greek students value highly academic success (Gari & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1998) and this could have had a confounding influence on the participants' rating of the importance of academic competence for their own personal popularity.

In contrast to previous findings in the North American literature (e.g., Chase & Dummer, 1992), sport competence was not one of the most frequently chosen criteria of personal, boys' or girls' popularity. This finding emerged despite the fact that 2/3 of the adolescents were active sport participants. Sport competence was less important criterion of popularity in girls than in boys and in older than in younger adolescents. Overall, about 7% of the participants stated that sport competence was the most important criterion of their popularity. In terms of boys' popularity, sport competence was rated as the most important criterion by approximately 16% of the participants. This percentage is about three times lower than the percentages reported by Coleman (1961), Eitzen (1975), and Williams and White (1983). Cultural explanations aside, the differences in the findings between the current study and previous research might also have been due to the absence of an open-ended response format in previous studies. As argued earlier, this could have resulted in the omission of important criteria of popularity.

Some interesting age differences also emerged in the criteria used for judging boys' popularity. Specifically, the frequency of being sociable increased with age in both boys and girls. Furthermore, for both young (12-13 years old) and older (14-15 years old) boys, being a good friend was the most frequently first ranked criterion of boys' popularity. In contrast, the perceived importance of sport competence for judging boys' popularity decreased with age, especially among girls. These findings mirror the results of Whitehead et al.'s (1997) study who reported an age decrease in the importance of sport success, and an increase in the importance of social activities. No age differences were found in determining girls' popularity. Both younger and older girls believed that being a good friend was the most important criterion of girls'

popularity. In contrast, both younger and older boys rated physical attractiveness as the highest criterion for girls' popularity.

In terms of future research possibilities, it would be interesting to test an interval rating system by rating the importance of each criterion on an interval scale (e.g., 7-point scale). With ordinal data (such as those used in this study) the discrimination between the criteria of popularity could be difficult, especially when more alternatives are introduced. Furthermore, when some criteria are of relatively similar importance to the participants but need to be differentiated by rank, it might be inappropriate to limit the analysis to the highest ranked criteria only. In addition to taking into account these methodological points, future research could examine social influences in shaping adolescents' judgments of the importance of different criteria, such as parental and media influences as well as socio-economic status. Furthermore, popularity ratings should be obtained in order to examine whether adolescents with high and low popularity will differ in their judgments of the importance of different personal popularity criteria. Lastly, future research should investigate the self-worth (Harter, 1989) of those adolescents who perceive to be weak in criteria of popularity that are deemed important by their peer group.

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Table 1

*Frequencies of the most highly ranked criteria of personal popularity in the whole sample.*

| Criteria                             | <i>N</i> | $\chi^2_6$ |
|--------------------------------------|----------|------------|
| Sport competence                     | 27       | 149.81***  |
| Physical attractiveness              | 25       |            |
| Academic competence                  | 50       |            |
| Being a good friend                  | 109      |            |
| Being sociable                       | 89       |            |
| Having a good sense of humor         | 27       |            |
| Having the 'right circle of friends' | 25       |            |

*Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$*



Table 2

*Age differences in the frequencies of the most highly ranked criteria of boys' popularity.*

|               | Sport<br>competence | Physical<br>attractiveness | Academic<br>competence | Being a good<br>friend | Being<br>sociable | Having a<br>good sense of<br>humor | Having the<br>'right circle of<br>friends' | $\chi^2_6$ |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------|
| Younger boys  | 20                  | 3                          | 7                      | 28                     | 4                 | 9                                  | 10   | 19.74**    |
| Older boys    | 15                  | 8                          | 3                      | 28                     | 20                | 4                                  | 4  |            |
| Younger girls | 17                  | 22                         | 5                      | 13                     | 11                | 6                                  | 6  | 13.80*     |
| Older girls   | 4                   | 19                         | 4                      | 20                     | 22                | 7                                  | 8  |            |

*Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$*

Table 3

*Age differences in the frequencies of the most highly ranked criteria of girls' popularity.*

|               | Sport<br>competence | Physical<br>attractiveness | Academic<br>competence | Being a good<br>friend | Being<br>sociable | Having a<br>good sense of<br>humor | Having the<br>'right circle of<br>friends' | $\chi^2_6$ |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------|
| Younger boys  | 4                   | 35                         | 7                      | 22                     | 7                 | 9                                  | 3  | 8.35       |
| Older boys    | 4                   | 43                         | 7                      | 11                     | 13                | 4                                  | 4  |            |
| Younger girls | 8                   | 21                         | 6                      | 27                     | 12                | 6                                  | 5  | 4.51       |
| Older girls   | 3                   | 17                         | 9                      | 23                     | 17                | 7                                  | 4  |            |