



2-2010

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## Recommended Citation

LaFontana, Kathryn and Antonius H. N. Cillessen. "Developmental Changes in the Priority of Perceived Status in Childhood and Adolescence." *Social Development* 19.1 (2010): 130-147.

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# Developmental Changes in the Priority of Perceived Status in Childhood and Adolescence

Kathryn M. LaFontana, *Sacred Heart University*, Antonius H. N. Cillessen, *Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen and University of Connecticut*

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## Abstract

*This study examined the degree to which children and adolescents prioritize popularity in the peer group over other relational domains. Participants were 1013 children and adolescents from grade 1 through senior year of college (ages 6–22 years) who were presented with a series of social dilemmas in which attaining popularity was opposed to five other priorities: friendship, personal achievement, following rules, prosocial behavior, and romantic interests. A curvilinear trend was found for the priority of popularity that peaked in early adolescence. At this age especially, participants prioritized status enhancement over other domains. Across the age range of this study, males and majority students were more preoccupied with reputational status than females and minority students. The discussion focused on the developmental functions of reputational status in early adolescence.*

*Keywords:* popularity; peers/peer relations; social behavior

## Introduction

The goal of this study was to understand the degree to which children and adolescents prioritize reputational status over other important areas of their social and academic lives, and how this phenomenon varies across development. To determine the priority of popularity, participants were presented with vignettes in which they made a choice between gaining peer status or pursuing a conflicting priority. The validity of using hypothetical vignettes with children and adolescents is well-established (e.g., Chung & Asher, 1996; Erdley & Asher, 1999; Hopmeyer & Asher, 1997; Rose & Asher, 1999). In this study, two vignettes contrasted reputation-enhancing behaviors with behaviors enhancing personal achievement (academic or athletic). Two others contrasted the pursuit of status with rule-abiding conduct (obeying authority or reporting a transgression). The remaining vignettes contrasted achieving greater status with the pursuit of friendship, romance, or empathy for a distressed peer.

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In his interpersonal theory of psychiatry, H. S. Sullivan (1953; see also Buhrmester & Furman, 1986) described the shifting priorities in peer relations that take place in childhood and adolescence. Sullivan's model defines developmental stages in terms of psychosocial events that fulfill interpersonal needs. In what he calls the juvenile period (about the ages of 6–9 years), peers start to become important in fulfilling a child's needs. At this age, peers fulfill the need for acceptance, enable social comparisons, and provide a context for the development and practice of co-operation, compromise, and competition. Peer harassment and rejection are considered developmental arrests in this period, and children at this stage are most concerned with ostracism, social pride, and self-esteem. In the next stage (preadolescence, the ages of 9–12 years), the need for intimacy from peers emerges, and preadolescents develop the competencies that enable collaboration, perspective-taking, empathy, and altruism. Loneliness and isolation are developmental arrests, and loneliness and acceptance are the biggest concerns. Finally, in early adolescence (the ages of 12–16 years), the need for sexuality develops, and adolescents learn to balance intimacy, anxiety, and sexuality. Confused sexuality is the developmental arrest, and the focal emotions are sexual frustration and lust. Sullivan also mentioned the stage of late adolescence but did not describe any key features or new social needs for this age group.

Given this progression of interpersonal needs, the type of peer relations that children and adolescents prioritize must also change. Sullivan's (1953) theory predicts a shift in priorities from one or more accepting friendships, to being popular or dominant in the peer group at-large, to establishing a close intimate relationship. Previous studies have addressed such changes empirically. For example, Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) found that eighth and ninth graders are more susceptible to peer influence than younger children. Gavin and Furman (1989) found that early and middle adolescents value being part of the popular group more and conform more to peer behavior than pre- or late adolescents. These findings suggest that in adolescence, youth become increasingly concerned about their position in the peer group.

Thus, both Sullivan's theory and these empirical findings suggest that the importance of peer group status peaks in early and middle adolescence, and is less important at earlier and later ages. Therefore, a curvilinear change may be expected in the priority attached to peer status across childhood and adolescence. Consistently, in this study, curvilinear developmental trends were expected in the relative emphasis placed on peer group reputation over other priorities, such as friendship and romance, prosocial and antisocial behavior, and personal achievements.

Although peer status is important relative to friendship in young adolescents (Merten, 2004), late adolescents value friendships more than membership to cliques or crowds (Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986; Buhrmester & Furman, 1986). Romantic relationships also move to the forefront as adolescents become older (see also Furman, 2002; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). In early adolescence, having a boyfriend or girlfriend may be part of being popular, but for later adolescence, romantic interests become a valuable priority on their own. Thus, individual peer status is expected to become more important than dyadic relationships from childhood to early adolescence (in particular relative to friendships), but less important from early adolescence to late adolescence (relative to friendships and romantic relationships).

Some engagement in antisocial behavior or delinquency is often seen as the trademark of early adolescence. Young children are socialized to respect authority and follow the rules in school and outside of school. In early adolescence, the peer norms

for behavior are often aimed at exploring the boundaries of these rules. Early adolescents are often willing to engage in, or tolerate, rule transgressions when they are sponsored by their peers (Bixenstine, DeCorte, & Bixenstine, 1976). Moffitt (1993, 2003) defined adolescence-limited delinquency and also argued that some mild forms of rule-breaking are developmentally expected in early adolescence. Thus, early adolescents are willing to defy rules, especially in favor of bonding with peers or gaining their regard. This trend decreases later, as older adolescents can gain authority in legitimate ways and no longer need to behave delinquently to achieve peer regard.

Prosocial behavior, defined as being kind, helpful, co-operative, and considerate toward others, is correlated with peer acceptance (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). There is, however, a complex relationship between perceived status and prosocial behavior in early adolescence (LaFontana & Cillessen, 1998, 2002; Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Merten, 1997; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). In early adolescence, behaviors that are not prosocial, such as manipulation or bullying aggression, are used to increase and maintain popularity. Young adolescents seem willing to forgo prosocial actions and treat others negatively, for example, through relational aggression, if this can help them maintain or increase their own status (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Finally, Anderman and Anderman (1999) reviewed evidence that motivation to do well in school and in school-related activities declines in middle school. In early adolescence, there is an increased willingness to trade achievement for reputational status (Gorman, Kim, & Schimmelbusch, 2002; Juvonen & Murdock, 1993, 1995). At younger and older grades, this conflict is less apparent. Therefore, a curvilinear change over time in the relative priorities of peer status and achievement concerns was expected as well.

Thus, it was expected that the priority of social prominence over all five domains would peak in early to middle adolescence (junior high and the beginning of high school). It was expected that younger children do not make perceived status a high priority and that older adolescents have learned to balance their desire for status with other desires.

In addition to developmental differences, gender differences were expected. Girls tend to develop interpersonal skills earlier than boys (Benenson, Apostoleris, & Parnass, 1998; Cillessen & Bellmore, 1999; Kurdek & Krile, 1982; LaFontana & Cillessen, 1999). It is therefore possible that the prioritizing of peer group status occurs earlier for girls than for boys. Other research has shown that girls, even at young ages, are better able than boys to balance multiple conflicting goals (Sheldon, 1992). Thus, an increase in the importance of status enhancement was expected for early adolescent boys and girls, but, based on Sheldon's findings, smaller discrepancies with the other domains may be expected for girls than for boys. This may be especially true for the balance between popularity and dyadic relationships (friendships, romance) because girls generally place a higher priority than do boys on maintaining dyadic relationships (Strough & Berg, 2000).

The balance of priorities might also vary by ethnicity. Previous results have been mixed. Kennedy (1995) found that Latino and White students associated popularity with academic achievement and misbehavior, but African-American students associate popularity with athletic achievement. LaFontana and Cillessen (2002) found that Latino children associated popularity with academic achievement more than White and African-American children did. Given such mixed findings, effects of ethnicity were explored as well.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 1013 children and adolescents ranging in age from 6 to 21 years, representing each level of school from grade 1 through senior year of college ( $M$  age = 14.8 years,  $SD = 4.3$ ). Participants were divided into four groups representing four social contexts/developmental age periods: grades 1–4 (early elementary school/childhood,  $N = 181$ ), grades 5–8 (late elementary and middle school/early adolescence,  $N = 220$ ), grades 9–12 (high school/adolescence,  $N = 332$ ), and grades 13–16 (post-secondary education/late adolescence,  $N = 280$ ). About 50 percent of each age group was female. The sample was 74 percent White, 11 percent African-American, 8 percent Latino, and 7 percent from other ethnic groups. The proportion of minority students was slightly higher in the younger than in the older age groups. The schools from which the sample was drawn were located in one suburban, lower middle- to middle-class area in Connecticut. In the four elementary and middle schools (two public, two private, grades 1–8), 36 percent of the students received free or reduced-fee lunches. In each of the two high schools (grades 9–12), approximately 95 percent of the graduates went on to post-secondary education. The college sample (grades 13–16) was from a moderately competitive, suburban, primarily residential university.

All participants under the age of 18 years received permission slips to bring home to their parents. Participants in grades 1 through 8 were required to bring in a signed permission slip before participating. The high schools used passive permission procedures (parents signed if they did not want their children to participate). Few parents of high school students refused to allow their children to participate. In the younger grades, approximately 80 percent of the students that were contacted received parental permission to participate. The college students were recruited from the residence hall population. For each of the four age groups listed above, the participants represented about one-fifth of the total number of students in their cohorts in their schools at that time. Thus, the four age groups were about equally representative; one age group was not sampled more or less completely than another. The study was approved in advance by the school districts involved and by the Institutional Review Boards of the universities of both authors.

### *Measures*

Ten vignettes were created that presented participants with dilemmas. In each vignette, participants were asked how they would respond when given a choice between two actions that demonstrated different priorities. One option was always a behavior that increased or maintained the participants' perceived status whereas the second option benefited one of five other domains of their social lives: maintaining a friendship, pursuing a romantic relationship, showing compassion for a rejected peer, conforming to norms for behavior, and achieving personal athletic or academic success. There were two vignettes for each of these five themes.

The vignettes were adjusted between the four age groups. Great care was taken to keep the vignettes substantively identical while only adjusting the theme and wording to make them age-appropriate. The Appendix illustrates this for one vignette and also presents the content of the other nine vignettes. For each vignette, participants rated how likely they would be to choose each option on a six-point scale (1 = definitely not;

6 = definitely). For the youngest participants (grades 1–3), smiling and frowning faces were used in place of numbers on the scale. The order of the options (status vs. other priority) was counterbalanced within each grade.

### *Procedure*

Children in grades 1–6 were interviewed individually in a quiet room at school. Participants in grade 7 and up completed the questionnaires in pencil-and-paper format in a classroom setting. Interviewers and questionnaire administrators were trained research assistants. For each of the 10 vignettes for their age group, all participants rated (using the six-point scales) how likely they would be to engage in each of the two options presented. If participants rated both options as equally likely, a follow-up question was asked regarding which option they would be more likely to choose. The number of ties was small (<2 percent across all questions).

### *Computation of Dichotomous Choice Scores*

Firstly, participants' responses were coded as either more in favor of the option that maximized perceived status or more in favor of the alternate priority. This enabled a preliminary examination of the data to determine whether participants chose the status option to a meaningful degree and did not simply answer what would be condoned by adults (e.g., being compassionate or abiding by rules). The vignettes were written such that the status option was generally less socially desirable than the alternate option. If the two answer options were rated equally, the follow-up question was used to dichotomize the answer. Answers in favor of increased reputational status were coded 1; the alternate answers were coded 0. Five domain scores were computed by averaging across the two vignettes for each theme, and one overall priority score was computed by averaging across all 10 vignettes. Mean scores represent the proportion of answers that prioritized status over each other domain or over all five domains combined.

### *Computation of Continuous Priority Scores*

Each question was recoded so that higher numbers indicated greater priority of perceived status. For example, the two questions for the first vignette contrasting status with athletic achievement were 'How likely are you to choose the person who is popular but not a good player?' and 'How likely are you to choose the person who is unpopular but a good player?' Answers to the first question were left as they were; answers to the second question were reverse scored. Both scores were then averaged to a single vignette score. These scores were correlated between the 10 vignettes. All correlations were different from zero (all  $ps < .005$ ). Correlations between the two vignettes measuring the same domain (range .33–.59, average .43) were higher than correlations between domains (range .10–.46, average .23). Therefore, the scores for the two vignettes measuring the same domain were averaged together, creating five domain scores. These indicate the degree to which the participant prioritized perceived status over each other priority. A sixth score was computed by averaging the five domain scores. This score indicated the degree to which the participant prioritized perceived status in general over the other five priorities combined. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  across the five domain scores ranged from .70 to .85. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  across all 10 vignettes was .85.

**Table 1. Proportion of Participants Choosing Status Enhancement over Other Priorities by Age Group**

Domain	Grade	Grade	Grade	Grade	$F(3, 967)$	Effect Size (Partial $\eta^2$ )
	1–4 N = 180	5–8 N = 218	9–12 N = 327	13–16 N = 275		
Friendship	.08 <sub>a</sub>	.27 <sub>b</sub>	.34 <sub>b</sub>	.28 <sub>b</sub>	23.22**	.07
Romance	.12 <sub>a</sub>	.15 <sub>a</sub>	.48 <sub>b</sub>	.46 <sub>b</sub>	135.09**	.30
Compassion	.11 <sub>a</sub>	.24 <sub>b</sub>	.30 <sub>b</sub>	.24 <sub>b</sub>	12.00**	.04
Achievement	.12 <sub>a</sub>	.20 <sub>b</sub>	.14 <sub>a,b</sub>	.15 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.96*	.01
Rule adherence	.07 <sub>a</sub>	.25 <sub>b</sub>	.74 <sub>c</sub>	.79 <sub>c</sub>	272.24**	.46
Priority overall	.10 <sub>a</sub>	.22 <sub>b</sub>	.41 <sub>c</sub>	.38 <sub>c</sub>	120.65**	.27

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Note: Means that do not share subscripts were significantly different in a Scheffé *post hoc* comparison test.

## Results

### *Analysis of Dichotomous Choice Scores*

Table 1 presents the means of the choice scores. These means indicate the proportion of participants in each age group that prioritized popularity over each other priority and overall. All means in Table 1 were significantly different from zero, as indicated by *t*-tests for proportions. As evidenced in the table, children chose to enhance perceived status only around 10 percent of the time whereas as many as 70 percent of adolescents chose this option.

A 4 (age group) analysis of variance on the overall choice score yielded a significant effect of age group,  $F(3, 1004) = 120.65, p < .001$ . *Post hoc* comparisons showed that the priority of popularity increased significantly from childhood to early adolescence to the two oldest groups. The largest average was in high school, where 41 percent of the students chose the popularity option.

A 4 (age group) multivariate analysis of variance was then conducted on the five domain scores. The multivariate effect of age group was significant,  $F(15, 2658) = 65.08, p < .001$ , as was each univariate effect (Table 1). *Post hoc* comparisons showed that for each domain, the priority of peer status increased over the first three age groups and then stayed the same or leveled off. Prioritizing status over achievement peaked in middle school, then declined slightly, although not significantly, in high school and college. The strongest increase occurred for rule adherence. The willingness to break rules in order to gain status increased from 7 percent to over 70 percent.

### *Analysis of Continuous Priority Scores*

To assess the developmental progression of prioritizing status and the moderating effects of gender and ethnicity, one hierarchical regression was performed for each of the five domain-specific continuous priority scores and for the overall priority score. In these analyses, development was also a continuous variable (operationalized by grade),



instead of the four age groups. Ethnicity was coded as majority for White participants and minority for all other groups. In Step 1 of each regression, gender (dummy coded; girls = 0, boys = 1), ethnicity (dummy coded; majority = 1, minority = 0), and grade (coded as 0–15) were entered. Because non-linear change was predicted, grade squared was added at Step 2, and grade cubed in Step 3. The remaining steps included the interactions of grade, grade squared, and grade cubed with gender and ethnicity, as well as the interaction between gender and ethnicity.

The total model for each regression was significant overall and at each step (all  $ps < .001$ ). The results focus on the incremental model statistics. The proportion of variance explained by all predictors together in the last step of each model was .28 for priority overall, .11 for friendship, .06 for romance, .18 for compassion, .06 for achievement, and .50 for rule adherence. Next, non-significant terms were trimmed from each model, retaining only the significant predictors and their implied effects. Trimming did not substantially change the  $R^2$  or parameter estimates. The proportions of variance explained were now .26 for priority overall, .10 for friendship, .05 for romance, .18 for compassion, .05 for achievement, and .50 for rule adherence.

Table 2 presents the predictors in each step of the trimmed models along with the  $R^2$  change and  $\beta$  weights at each step. Note that all models contained a significant grade squared term, and two models (romance and rule adherence) a significant grade cubed term, indicating non-linear trends across grades in each domain.

To understand the developmental trends, effects of gender and ethnicity, and their interactions, prototypical plots were created following the guidelines of Aiken and West (1991). For all terms that were part of a trimmed model, but that were not part of the effect under consideration, the mean was inserted in creating the graph. Below, the effects of grade are first reviewed, followed by the interactions with gender and ethnicity.

*Grade Effects.* To display the significant effects of grade, Figure 1 presents the fitted lines based on the trimmed models for the highest order grade effect (grade, grade squared, or grade cubed) in each domain and for priority overall. Figure 1 shows curvilinear relationships between grade and priority of perceived status, peaking in junior high or early high school. Romance and rule adherence were the two exceptions, as they had significant grade cubed terms. Participants prioritized perceived status at the expense of romance at a fairly consistent rate across high school, but this tendency was much stronger in college. There was a steady increase in prioritizing status at the expense of rule adherence across grades 2 through 15.

*Gender Effects.* As can be seen in Table 2, there was a significant main effect of gender for all domains except achievement. In each case, males placed a higher priority on perceived status than did females, regardless of age. Figure 2 shows the means for each domain by gender.

*Interactions of Grade and Gender.* Significant interactions between gender and grade were found for prioritizing status over friendship, rule adherence, and overall. For priority of status overall, the curve shown in Figure 1 for the entire sample was higher for males than for females when split by gender, and the difference increased over time. Boys and girls in the younger grades prioritized status to the same degree, but adolescent males gave perceived status a much higher priority than adolescent females in the upper grades.



**Table 2. Regression Results for the Prediction of Priority of Popularity over Five Domains and Overall from Grade, Gender, and Ethnicity**

Outcome	$\Delta R^2$	Predictor added	$\beta$	Predictor added	$\beta$	Predictor added	$\beta$
<b>Friendship</b>							
Step 1	.06***	Grade	.11***	Gender	.21***		
Step 2	.03***	Grade <sup>2</sup>	-.75***				
Step 3	.00	Grade × gender	.09				
Step 4	.01*	Grade <sup>2</sup> × gender	-.54*				
<b>Romance</b>							
Step 1	.03***	Grade	.14***	Gender	.12***		
Step 2	.01*	Grade <sup>2</sup>	-.30*				
Step 3	.01***	Grade <sup>3</sup>	1.54***				
<b>Compassion</b>							
Step 1	.12***	Grade	.23***	Gender	.26***	Ethnicity	-.01
Step 2	.03***	Grade <sup>2</sup>	-.68***				
Step 3	.00	Grade <sup>3</sup>	.20				
Step 4	.01**	Grade × ethnicity	.03	Grade × gender	.21**	Gender × ethnicity	.08
Step 5	.01	Grade <sup>2</sup> × gender	-.51**	Grade <sup>2</sup> × ethnicity	.04		
Step 6	.01*	Grade <sup>3</sup> × gender	-1.41*	Grade <sup>3</sup> × ethnicity	2.57*		
Step 7	.00	Grade × gender × ethnicity	.21				
Step 8	.00*	Grade <sup>2</sup> × gender × ethnicity	1.13*				
<b>Achievement</b>							
Step 1	.02***	Grade	.07*	Gender	.04	Ethnicity	.09**
Step 2	.02***	Grade <sup>2</sup>	-.54***				
Step 3	.02***	Grade × gender	.30***				
<b>Rule adherence</b>							
Step 1	.47***	Grade	.68***	Gender	.05*		
Step 2	.01***	Grade <sup>2</sup>	-.45***				
Step 3	.02***	Grade <sup>3</sup>	-1.94***				
<b>Priority overall</b>							
Step 1	.22***	Grade	.43***	Gender	.19***		
Step 2	.04***	Grade <sup>2</sup>	-.79***				
Step 3	.01**	Grade × gender	.20**				

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .  
 Note: Grade<sup>2</sup> and Grade<sup>3</sup> indicate non-linear trends across grades in each domain.

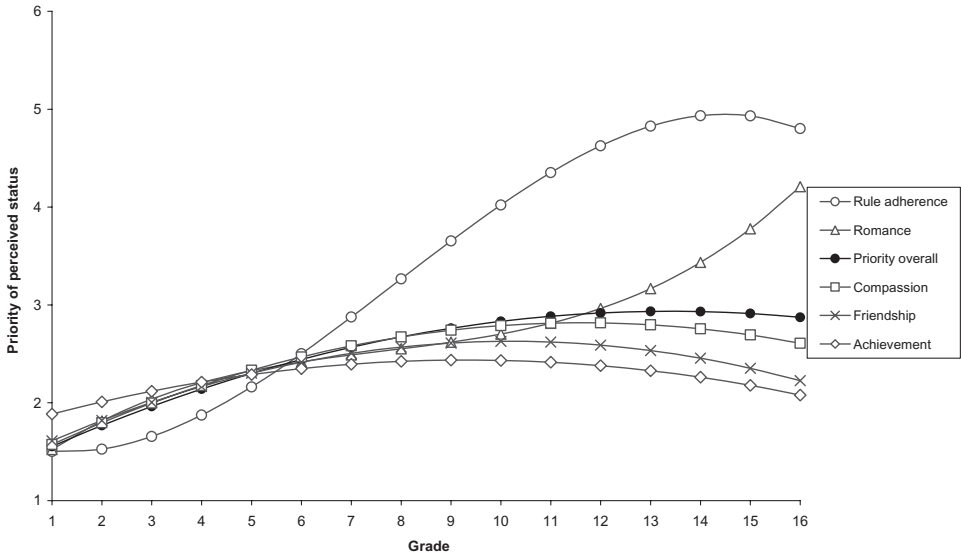


Figure 1. Priority of Perceived Status over Other Domains by Grade.

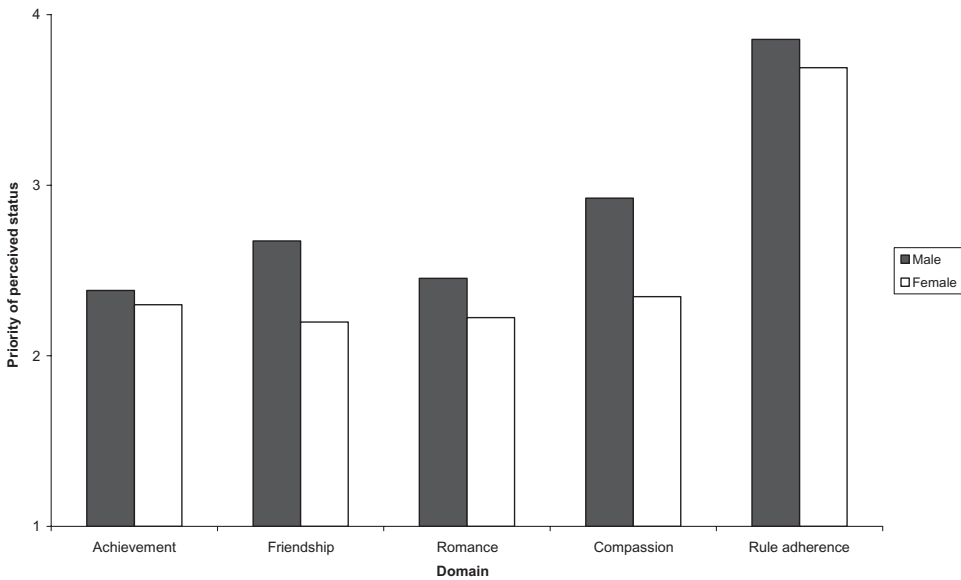


Figure 2. Priority of Perceived Status over Other Domains by Gender.

A similar trend was found for the priority of peer reputation over friendship. Males showed a higher and more pronounced inverted U-shaped curve over development than did females. There was no gender difference in the priority of status over friendship in the youngest grades, but a clear difference had emerged by grade 5 that increased until grade 10, and then gradually leveled off. The gender difference in the priority of status over friendship was larger in high school than either before or after.

For the priority of status over achievement, the separate lines by gender crossed over. The two genders had the same score in grade 8. Before grade 8, girls prioritized status over achievement more than boys did. This trend was reversed after grade 8, when males prioritized status over achievement more than females did.

*Ethnicity Effects.* For achievement only, there was a significant main effect of ethnicity. Majority (White) students had a mean of 2.38 whereas minority (African-American and Latino) students had a mean of 2.18. Thus, majority students prioritized status over achievement more than African-American or Latino youth did. Because the achievement vignettes included both athletic and academic themes, and previous studies have shown ethnic differences in these areas, the regression analyses were repeated separately for each theme. There was a significant effect of ethnicity for academic achievement, but not for athletic achievement. All groups were equally likely to forfeit athletic achievement, but White students were more likely to prioritize popularity over academic achievement than other groups were.

*Interactions of Grade, Gender, and Ethnicity.* For compassion, there were significant interactions of grade cubed with gender and ethnicity, further qualified by a significant three-way interaction among all three. This interaction is shown in Figure 3. Notice that female minority and male majority members showed a steadily increasing curvilinear relationship between grade and prioritizing status that became constant in college. Female majority students prioritized status more than their minority counterparts in certain grades but less in other grades. Male minority members showed the most pronounced curvilinear relationship between the priority of popularity, and that peaked in grade 12.

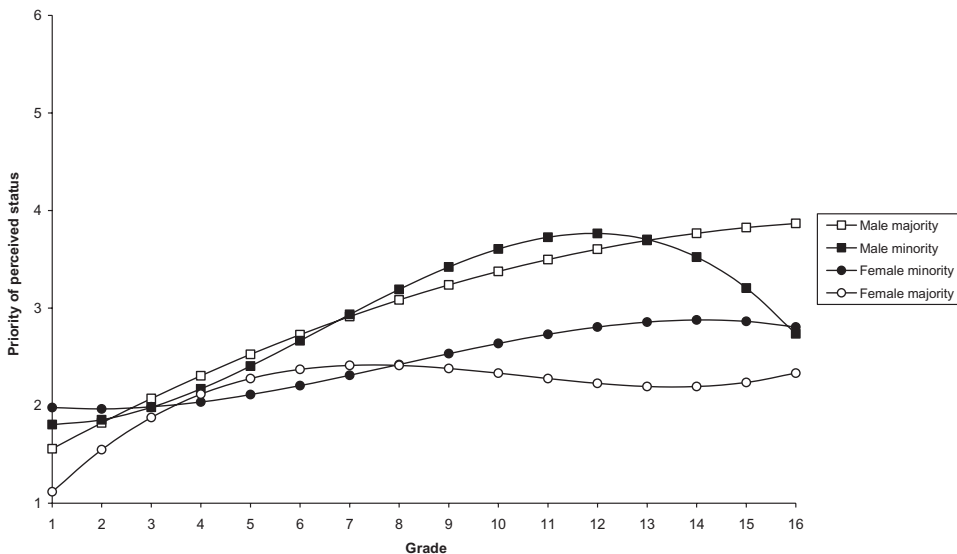


Figure 3. Priority of Perceived Status over Compassion by Grade, Gender, and Ethnicity.

### *Summary*

There were significant effects of grade in each domain and overall, of ethnicity for achievement, and of gender for all domains except achievement. Prioritizing perceived status, measured as the willingness to compromise other priorities in favor of status, increased across the elementary school years into middle school and early high school, and leveled off during late high school and college. Majority students were more willing to compromise academic achievement in favor of perceived status than were minority students. Males were more likely to pursue perceived status at the expense of other priorities than females.

## **Discussion**

### *Developmental Changes*

This study examined the extent to which children and adolescents prioritize peer status over other social and relational domains, and the developmental changes in this phenomenon. In general, and as expected, the priority of peer reputation increased from childhood into adolescence, peaked in the late middle school and early high school years, and then leveled off. The overall trend applied to both genders but was more pronounced for males than females. The general trend can be understood in terms of the functions that the peer group serves across development. As children become adolescents, they increasingly rely on peers for social comparison and emotional support (e.g., Hay & Ashman, 2003). The fact that peer status is increasingly more important during this time fits with this developmental trend.

The general curvilinear developmental trend was replicated when the priority of popularity over each of five domains was considered separately, with interesting nuances. It is remarkable that early adolescents distinctly prioritized popularity over friendships or empathy for a less fortunate peer. This shows the power of the peer group, or the strength of the desire to be popular, at this developmental stage.

Adolescents also often prioritized status over romantic interests. Serious romantic interests do not emerge until later in adolescence, which could explain the delayed trajectory. Furthermore, although vignettes about romantic relationships were included for all age groups for consistency of measurement, this topic may not have been of great meaning to the youngest participants. None of the younger participants expressed surprise or confusion about these vignettes, however, and previous research (e.g., Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999) has shown, that children as young as 9 years old understand the difference between romantic interest and cross-sex friendship.

Regarding the priority of peer status over personal achievement, there was a greater conflict when the achievement goals were academic than when they were athletic. This fits with previous research (e.g., Juvonen & Murdock, 1993, 1995) that shows that academic success becomes more negatively associated with status especially in middle school. Athletic success, on the other hand, has a consistently positive relationship with status (e.g., Kennedy, 1995).

The findings regarding the priority of perceived status over socially acceptable behaviors were the most dramatic. There was a clear positive association between age and willingness to violate accepted rules for good behavior in favor of increasing one's status. The college students in the sample were residential students, away from home and having much freedom without many responsibilities. The results may have been

different if the sample had included participants who were supporting themselves financially and living in a more 'adult' culture. In other words, the antisocial norms that develop in junior high and high school (e.g., Bixenstine et al., 1976) and that are presumed to be limited to adolescence (e.g., Moffitt, 2003) may continue into the college years because the social circumstances (living in a dorm at parents' expense, with limited adult responsibilities) promote those norms.

What are the implications of these findings? Across development, children and adolescents gain an increasingly nuanced understanding of how the social world functions. The peer group is a practice ground for adult social relationships in larger groups and contexts. In early adolescence, youth begin to develop an understanding of the hierarchy of the peer group and the dynamics of status and influence. They learn that being smart, obedient, or nice is not always sufficient to flourish, and in fact, may sometimes lead to victimization. To function effectively in the peer group, the developing person must learn to be 'politically savvy' and behave in ways that protect their status, even if it means that they sometimes must act negatively toward others or sacrifice other social or relational priorities. It is important to note that none of the participants expressed surprise or confusion about the vignettes, suggesting that the choice between reputation and other priorities is something they do in fact experience.

If prioritizing peer status at a certain point is part of the normal growth of social competence, this indicates that the development of social competence may not always be universally positive (see also Waters & Sroufe, 1983). Pursuing popularity may be seen as negative, but it may also serve important developmental functions that in the short term are mastered at the cost of other priorities, such as a friendship or concern for a less fortunate peer. This viewpoint is supported by recent research on the role of aggression and dominance in social development. Sutton, Smith, and Swettenham (1999a, 1999b, 2001) debated with other researchers (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Crick & Dodge, 1999) the issue of whether some forms of aggression or self-asserting and/or dominant behaviors can be seen as a socially competent strategy to practice functioning in larger groups and gaining a position for oneself in which one can flourish. If social competence is indeed defined as being successful in achieving one's goals, whatever they may be, then it is possible, according to Sutton et al. (2001), that the pursuit of status, and the desire to pursue status, are part of normative social growth (see also Topping, Bremner, & Holmes, 2000). An important question then remains: What degree of expense in other domains is acceptable to achieve this priority?

### *Effects of Gender and Ethnicity*

Males were generally more willing to compromise friendship, romance, and compassion in favor of reputational status. This was not surprising given earlier evidence that females are better at balancing affiliation and perceived status (Sheldon, 1992) and are more concerned about how their behavior influences their relationships (Gilligan, 1993) than males are. Males were also more willing than females to pursue increased status when it required behaving in a socially undesirable manner. This can perhaps be interpreted as evidence that females are less willing than males to choose behaviors that will alienate them from parents or authority figures. In other words, antisocial behavior is damaging to the affiliative relationships between parents and children, and females may be more concerned about these relationships than males. However, given evidence from past studies (e.g., Zern, 1991) that girls generally do not differ from boys in disobedience, it could also be that girls are just better at balancing these

priorities, perhaps finding other strategies that allow them to violate rules without suffering negative effects. Finally, males overall were not more willing than females to compromise achievement in favor of status. This is not surprising, given research on gender differences in achievement (see, for a review, Swim, Borgida, Maruyama, & Myers, 1989) that indicates that females do not suffer more negative consequences regarding their social standing than do males for their achievement.

Regarding ethnicity, the conflict between perceived status and academic achievement was experienced more acutely by Whites than by other ethnic groups. This finding contrasts with other studies (Kennedy, 1995; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002) in which African-American students experienced this conflict the most. In contrast to these other studies, the minority group in the present study was a true minority, with African-Americans composing only 11 percent of the total sample, and Latinos only 8 percent. Research on racial dissonance (imbalance in the racial composition of the peer group) has shown that when African-American students are in a peer group that is primarily White, their performance improves (Gray-Little & Carels, 1997). Thus, the link between prioritizing peer status and academic achievement may be strongest in a peer group that is primarily White. Conclusions regarding ethnicity are limited because of the demographic characteristics of the sample. The participants in this sample were overall more likely to attend college than the general public, and the expectation of further education could significantly influence the conflict between status and academic achievement.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Further Research*

There were several limitations to this study. A first issue regards the association between what children or adolescents say they will do in a hypothetical situation and how they will actually behave in a real situation. On the one hand, hypothetical vignettes have shown their value in social development research to investigate important topics (e.g., Rose & Asher, 1999). This research has shown associations between answers to hypothetical situations and actual behavior, for example, aggression. On the other hand, the construct of this study (individual differences in the priority of peer status) is sufficiently new, and the association with actual behavior in situations similar to those depicted in the vignettes is unknown. Thus, the measures of this study should be taken for what they are: measures of social-cognitive representations of response tendencies. As such they are valuable, but the associations with actual behavior need to be demonstrated as well.

The second issue regards the possible universality of the findings of this study. Just as researchers have suggested that there are universal shifts in children and adolescents' influence from parents vs. peers (Andersson, 1979), it is tempting to conclude that the curvilinear trends of this study, especially the peak priority of status in early adolescence, are a basic process of adolescent development that are common across cultures. However, the conclusions from this study are limited by the demographics of the sample. Whether similar trends can be found in other cultures and subcultures is a fascinating question worthy of investigation.

A third limitation is that there were no measures of actual peer status. Thus, it was not possible to determine the associations between participants' actual status in the peer group and the degree to which they prioritize peer status. An important direction for future research is to examine this association. On the one hand, there may be relatively straightforward associations between peer status and the priority of status. Perhaps

unpopular students prioritize reputational status less than popular students. Children or adolescents who are popular may also be those who value popularity the most. Cause and effect can be reciprocal in these associations. Students who do not care about status may not strive to become popular. Conversely, students who become rejected may subsequently discount status as something that is not important to them. Students who value status to a great degree may strive to become popular, and conversely, students who experience the benefits of popularity may subsequently value it more (and desire to maintain it). Thus, actual status and the priority attached to status may reciprocally strengthen each other over time in an upward- or downward-going spiral.

On the other hand, the associations between actual peer status and the priority of peer status may be more complex. For example, there may be two types of high status (popular) peers: those who value status enormously and may go to great lengths (including the use of aggression) to maintain it, and those who may less forcefully cling to their reputation but maintain their status reputation in a more natural way based on the merits of their empathic abilities, social skills, or natural leadership (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Similarly, there may be low status peers who are not central in the peer group but place a high value on status and will desperately attempt to increase their status. These students may be at great risk if engaging in antisocial behavior is used as a condition by higher status peers to become members of their clique (e.g., Gest, Sesma, Masten, & Tellegen, 2006).

Whether the associations between actual peer status and the priority of peer status follow the simpler or more complex pattern suggested above may also vary developmentally. It is possible, for example, that the simpler association applies to elementary school-age children whereas the more complex association applies to one or more of the adolescent age groups distinguished in this study. This article focused on age changes in the degree to which children or adolescents prioritized popularity. Age changes in the impact of individual differences in the priority attached to peer status are a separate topic for further study.

Generally, examining the priority of popularity as an individual difference variable is an important next step in this research, one that can be taken in several directions. One possibility is to consider the priority of peer status as a moderator of the association between actual status and later outcomes. Popular and unpopular students with high and low priorities of reputational status may form distinct types with different trajectories of peer relations and outcomes across childhood and adolescence. For example, students who define their self-worth primarily in terms of their peer status may be at risk for internalizing problems if things are not going well in the peer group. Another direction is to consider further how individual differences in status priorities are related to processes of peer influence. Students who prioritize status may be particularly susceptible to peer pressure to engage in antisocial behavior in order to become part of a group. Students who prioritize status less may be more resilient in both ways. They may be less likely to go along with peer pressures that lead to externalizing behaviors, and they may be less at risk for internalizing problems if they are not on the top of the peer group hierarchy.

## **Conclusion**

This study measured the priority of peer status across a wide age range. Prioritizing peer status over other issues appears to vary with development, gender, and majority or



minority status. Adolescents' interactions with their peers, and their competence development in other domains, may be especially influenced by this priority. Although absolute levels of reputation-enhancing behaviors were not assessed (perhaps participants would have made a different behavioral choice if given other options), this study does indicate developmental changes in the priority of perceived status, peaking in early adolescence.

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## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a University Faculty Grant from Sacred Heart University awarded to the first author. The authors wish to acknowledge the undergraduates at Sacred Heart University and the University of Connecticut for their invaluable assistance in collecting and entering the data. Parts of this research were presented at the 13th Annual Meeting of the Association for Psychological Science in Toronto in June 2001.

## Appendix: Examples and Descriptions of Vignette Content for Different Age Groups

### *Examples of One of the Friendship Vignettes for Different Age Groups*

*Grades 1 to 4.* Imagine that you are invited to a birthday party. All the popular girls will be there. You ask if you can bring your best friend, but you are told that your friend can't come.

- Would you stay home from the party and play with your best friend instead?
- Would you go to the party anyway without your friend?

*Grades 5 to 8.* Imagine that you are invited to a party. All the popular girls will be there. You ask if you can bring your best friend, but you are told that your friend is not welcome to come. You really want to go, but you know your friend wants to go too.

- How likely are you to tell them that you can't go because your friend can't come?
- How likely are you to go to the party anyway without your friend?

*Grades 9 to 12.* Imagine that you are invited to a party. Everyone who is anyone is going to be there. You ask if you can bring your best friend, but you are told that your friend is not welcome to come. You really want to go, but you know your friend wants to go too.

- How likely are you to tell them that you can't go because your friend can't come?
- How likely are you to go to the party anyway without your friend?

*Grades 13 to 16.* Imagine that you are invited to an off-campus party. Everyone who is anyone is going to be there. You ask if you can bring your best friend along, but you are told that your friend is not welcome to come. You really want to go, but you know your friend wants to go too.

How likely are you to tell them that you can't go because your friend can't come?  
 How likely are you to go to the party anyway without your friend?

*Descriptions of the Content of the Other Nine Vignettes*

*Friendship.* The child arranges to get together with his or her best friend, then a popular same-sex peer invites the child to get together with him or her instead. Will the child change his or her plans to go out with the popular peer or go out with his or her best friend instead?

*Romance.* There is an opposite sex peer that the child likes, but who has been rejected by the child's own popular same-sex peers. At recess (or a school dance), the opposite sex peer comes up to talk to (or dance with) the child. Will the child associate with this peer or refuse to associate with the peer because of the peer's low perceived status?

*Romance.* There is an opposite sex peer that the child likes, but who has been rejected by the child's own popular same-sex peers. The opposite sex peer asks the child to go somewhere (e.g., a birthday party or a movie). Will the child accept the invitation or refuse it due to the peer's low perceived status?

*Compassion.* The child is in the school cafeteria sitting with a group of popular same-sex peers. An unpopular same-sex peer walks by the table and trips and drops his or her tray of food all over the floor. The popular peers laugh at the unpopular peer. Will the child join in the laughter or help the unpopular peer clean up what he or she dropped?

*Compassion.* On a bus trip (or the school bus), the child is invited to sit with a group of popular same-sex peers at the back of the bus. An unpopular same-sex peer gets on the bus and asks to sit in the empty seat beside the child. Will the child say yes or refuse to let the unpopular peer sit there because of his or her low perceived status?

*Rule Adherence.* The child is at a store and a group of popular same-sex peers are also there. The child witnesses one of the popular peers steal something. Will the child ignore the incident or tell someone about it?

*Rule Adherence.* The child is asked by a couple of popular same-sex peers to do something that the child has been expressly forbidden to do by his or her parents (or the residence hall director for college students). Will the child break the rules and do what the popular peers ask?

*Achievement.* At a casual game (in gym class or an intramural event), the child has been chosen to be a team captain and must choose players for his or her team. The last two people to be chosen from include a popular peer who is not athletically skilled, and an unpopular peer who is athletically skilled. Which one will the child choose?

*Achievement.* In the classroom, students are pairing up to work on a project. The child has the choice between working with someone who is popular but not a good student, and another peer who is not popular but is a good student. Which one will the child choose?