

Expectations and perceptions at school transitions: The role of peer status and aggression[☆]

Antonius H.N. Cillessen^{a,*}, Lara Mayeux^b

^a *Department of Psychology, University of Connecticut, 406 Babbidge Rd, Unit 1020,
Storrs, CT 06269-1020, United States*

^b *Department of Psychology, University of Oklahoma, United States*

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Abstract

This study integrated research on aggression, peer status, and social and academic functioning across the middle- and high-school transitions. We examined how peer status and aggression are related to adolescents' expectations about their academic and social functioning in a new school system before the transition into that system, and their perceived academic and social functioning after the transition. Social preference, perceived popularity, overt and relational aggression, and social and academic expectations were assessed in Grades 5 and 8; identical peer status and aggression constructs and perceived social and academic functioning were assessed in Grades 6 and 9. Results indicated moderate correlations between adolescents' social and academic expectations and perceived functioning across both school transitions. Girls reported higher social and academic functioning than boys did in most cases. Perceived popularity was consistently positively associated with academic and social expectations for middle and high school, whereas social preference was associated with perceived social functioning in both middle school and high school. The link between aggression and outcome variables varied by age and was moderated by gender and peer status.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: antonius.cillessen@uconn.edu (A.H.N. Cillessen).

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Introduction

The current study investigates peer status and aggression around two school transitions — the transition from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school. In previous research, the relationship between status and aggression at these same school transitions has been examined (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). In the current paper, we extend these findings by examining how status and aggression are related to adolescents' expectations regarding their academic and social functioning in a new school system, and their perceptions of their academic and social functioning after the transition into that new system.

School transitions

The transition to a new school system is a developmental milestone (Brown, 1990). Navigating a new building, new teachers, new class subjects, higher academic expectations, a new peer group, and perhaps even a different busing system are just a few of the challenges adolescents face, often co-occurring with rapid individual change. From a contextual perspective on peer relations (Sheridan, Buhs, & Warnes, 2003), the new social context and types of relationships in particular of a new school pose a challenging adaptive task for children and adolescents. Thus, school transitions may be difficult because of the stress of losing old peer groups and friendships, and the anxiety about forming new ones (Brown, 1990). Due to the nature of neighborhood districting practices in many larger school systems, children who attend all six years of primary school together are often separated at the transition to middle school. They may advance to middle school with some of their social networks intact, but it is common for new middle schoolers to face a sea of unfamiliar faces, and relatively few familiar ones. Challenges to social and academic functioning also occur at the transition to high school when the social system is even larger and opportunities for individual attention and support from teachers are fewer (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992).

Given these strains and stressors, it is not surprising that problem behaviors often occur at school transitions. Fulk (2003) discussed the way in which school transitions may exacerbate previously existing academic problems. In the social domain, Pellegrini et al. demonstrated increased in physical aggression after school transitions, especially for boys (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). These short-term responses compound long-term risk as they may decrease coping skills, thereby making students vulnerable to further social and academic problems in a downward moving spiral.

The observed increases in student aggression following school transitions (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002) are particularly noteworthy. Why do school transitions lead adolescents to act more aggressively? Research (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1990) has suggested that the characteristics of the school setting often create a mismatch with the adolescent's developing skills and needs. For instance, while the school context becomes more controlling, adolescents are seeking higher levels of autonomy. The need to establish a sense of self-determination may explain why some adolescents choose aggressive or disruptive behaviors to assert themselves in the early months following the transition to middle or high school.

However, the increase in aggression at school transitions may not only occur as an inappropriate response to the stress of the new school environment. It may also have to do with concerns about peer status and the goal of reestablishing one's status in the new peer system. As Pellegrini et al. suggested, the increase of aggression at school transitions may be explained by adolescents' insecurities about their position in the new social hierarchy (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). They hypothesized that an initial increase in aggression at the beginning of middle school serves to reestablish dominance over peers in the new school context, and that the subsequent decline allows boys to maintain affiliative ties with peers once dominance has been established. In addition to physical aggression, relational aggression may serve similar functions at school transitions. Given the strong link between relational aggression and perceived popularity, especially for girls, it can be expected that adolescents would also use this behavior to obtain prominence in a new social context. Perhaps adolescent girls increase their levels of relationally aggressive behaviors as a means of reasserting their dominance in the new school.

Thus, aggression at school transitions (whether physical or relational) may occur more strategically in response to adolescents' transitions into a new peer context, rather than as a response to the stress of the transition. While physically or relationally behaviors may serve to maintain or improve social standing among peers following school transitions, evidence also suggests that being either perpetrator or victim of such behavior is associated with poorer academic and social adjustment (e.g., Schwartz, 2000; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006). Schwartz et al. (2006) found particularly problematic academic adjustment among aggressive adolescents who were also perceived popular, suggesting that the combination of status and aggression is a significant risk factor. Understanding the interplay of aggression and status in adolescents' school adjustment is important not only for research purposes but also for practical ones. Identifying youth at risk for social and academic problems in school and helping them to improve their outcomes are important goals for educators and school administrators alike. In light of these concerns, it is critical to examine the dynamics of peer status and aggression in schools. These concerns apply to both physical aggression (Farmer, 2000) and relational aggression (Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006).

Peer status and aggression

Previous research has indicated a complex relationship between peer status and aggression among children and adolescents. Although a robust positive association between overt and relational aggression and peer rejection has been found in many studies (see Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006), there is mounting evidence that the association of aggression with measures of peer status is complex. Contemporary researchers are finding that both overt and relational forms of aggression are sometimes associated with high status among peers (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Hawley, 2003; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004) in addition to their association with rejection (e.g., Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Underwood, 2003).

Why the discrepant findings? One explanation has to do with the meaning of "peer status." An important recent discovery in the literature is that the link between aggression and peer status varies according to how the researcher conceptualizes and measures peer status in the first place. Well into the 1990s, most research on the aggression-status link focused on

sociometric popularity, or being well-accepted and liked by the peer group (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Studies consistently showed that aggressive children were generally not well-liked by their peers (e.g., Newcomb et al., 1993).

More recently, a different conceptualization of peer status has been identified that correlates very differently with aggression among youth. Unlike sociometric popularity, which is an index of liking among the peer group, *perceived popularity* is more an index of social impact, visibility, and reputation. Youth who are perceived popular are nominated by peers as the “most popular” members of the classroom or grade, and typically enjoy high levels of reputational status among their peers (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Rodkin et al., 2000). Perceived popular boys are often described as athletic, cool, and as good leaders, but not as particularly kind or trustworthy (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Rodkin et al., 2000). Perhaps most importantly, perceived popularity is positively associated with both overt and relational aggression (Cillessen & Rose, 2005).

Thus, overt and relational aggression are associated with both sociometric and perceived popularity among youth, but in different directions: being well-liked is associated with low levels of both forms of aggression, and being perceived as popular is associated with high levels of aggression. These specific associations are further moderated by gender. The positive link between relational aggression and perceived popularity is stronger for girls than for boys, just as the association between overt aggression and perceived popularity is stronger for boys than for girls (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

The association between aggression and peer status is also partly dependent on the developmental period under investigation. The strength of the negative association between relational aggression and social preference becomes stronger across adolescence, while the negative association between overt aggression and social preference becomes weaker (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). The relationship between status and aggression has also been found to vary depending on whether the study focuses on a school transition, such as from elementary school to middle school. For example, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) found that perceived popularity predicted an increase in overt aggression for both boys and girls across the transition from elementary to middle school, and again from middle to high school. This trend was surprising given the generally low association between overt aggression and perceived popularity for girls.

Academic and social functioning

Previous research has demonstrated a link between positive peer relationships and academic engagement (e.g., Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997), as well as between peer status and academic achievement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Rodkin et al., 2000; Zettergren, 2003). Overall, the outlook is positive for children with high academic achievement and higher academic self-concept: they are at decreased risk for externalizing behaviors such as overt aggression, and typically enjoy positive relationships with peers. However, these studies have conceptualized high peer status as social preference or likeability, without considering more dominance-based forms of status such as perceived popularity. They have also not included other forms of aggression, such as relational aggression, that may also be associated with academic competence or self-concept.

In addition to academic functioning, social functioning is also strongly associated with aggression and peer status. There is abundant evidence (reviewed above) that overt and relational aggression and peer status are related in important ways. Further, research has shown that status and aggression are also associated with other indicators of social functioning, such as friendships. For example, both overtly and relationally aggressive children and adolescents have been shown to have mutual friendships (Grotjeter & Crick, 1996; Poulin & Boivin, 2000; Rys & Bear, 1997), although the quality of those friendships may be compromised compared to the friendships of non-aggressive youth (Rose, Swenson, & Carlson, 2004). High levels of peer status can be a buffer against the potential problems with social functioning that often accompany aggression. Rose and colleagues found that relationally aggressive perceived-popular adolescents were less likely to have high-conflict friendships than their low-status (but still relationally aggressive) peers (Rose, Swenson, & Carlson, 2004; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004).

In sum, overt and relational aggression are consistently associated with peer status throughout the literature on peer relationships, with the direction of the association depending on the type of high status (social preference, perceived popularity) under investigation. Further, aggression and peer status together are associated with academic functioning and other aspects of social functioning in childhood and adolescence, with well-accepted and non-aggressive peers having higher academic and social adjustment (e.g., higher academic achievement and self-concept, higher quality friendships). In the current study, we were interested in examining the dynamics of these associations around school transitions.

The current study

In the current study, we examined two forms of peer status (social preference and perceived popularity) and two forms of aggression (overt and relational), before and after two school transitions: from elementary to middle school (Grades 5 to 6) and from middle to high school (Grades 8 to 9). Our goal was to extend our understanding of these transitions by investigating how peer status and aggression are related to two general measures of adjustment, social and academic functioning. Because we were interested in how aggression and status are linked to adolescents' assessments of their own functioning across the transitions, we focused on adolescents' pre-transition *expectations* of their future adjustment to the new school setting, and their post-transition *perceptions* of their functioning in the new school. Specifically, we assessed aggression, peer status, and expectations of post-transition academic and social functioning in Grades 5 and 8. We then assessed peer status, aggression, and perceptions of concurrent academic and social functioning in Grades 6 and 9.

This study has three primary research questions. For each question, gender was also examined as a moderator variable. First, we were interested in the associations between adolescents' expectations for their academic and social functioning before the transitions into middle and high school and their perceptions of their functioning in middle and high school. We expected a moderate correlation between pre-transition expectations and post-transition perceptions. Gender differences were explored; although they might vary in strength, we expected these associations to hold for both genders.

Second, we investigated the associations between the two forms of peer status and aggression in Grades 5 and 8 and concurrent expectations for academic and social

expectations functioning the next year (after the school transition). Thus, we examined whether peer status and aggression before a school transition were associated with adolescents' expectations for social and academic success in the new school. Because high-status adolescents are used to positive treatment and high regard by many of their peers, we hypothesized that both social preference and perceived popularity would be positively associated with social expectations. We expected this to be true for girls and boys alike. We also expected both forms of high status to be positively associated with academic expectations, although we expected this association to be stronger for social preference. Previous research has found a positive association between academic adjustment and social preference (e.g., Zettergren, 2003). The limited evidence available suggests that perceived popular youth (boys in particular) may not be as academically inclined as their well-liked counterparts (Rodkin et al., 2000). Thus, for this association, we anticipated significant moderation by gender, such that perceived popular girls would be more likely than perceived popular boys to expect high future academic achievement.

We expected both overt and relational aggression to be positively associated with social expectations. Previous research has shown that aggressive children tend to underestimate how low their status is among their peers (e.g., Zakriski & Coie, 1996). Further, during adolescence, overt aggression is less strongly associated with rejection than in childhood (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Thus, overtly aggressive adolescents may either not have social functioning problems in the first place, or they may not accurately perceive their social difficulties if they do have them. Gender was not expected to moderate the relationship between overt aggression and social expectations. Relational aggression was expected to be positively associated with social expectations because of its strong link to perceived popularity, especially among girls. Relational aggression has also been linked to having more exclusive and intimate friendships (Grotzinger & Crick, 1996). Thus, the association between relational aggression and social expectations was expected to be stronger for girls than for boys.

In line with previous findings of a link between overt aggression and low academic engagement (e.g., Ladd et al., 1997), we anticipated a negative relationship between overt aggression and academic expectations. We expected this relationship to be stronger for boys than for girls. The links between relational aggression and academic expectations were exploratory, so no specific predictions were made.

Our third and final research question regarded the concurrent associations between pre-transition peer status and aggression (in Grades 5 and 8) and post-transition perceptions of academic and social functioning after the transitions to middle school and high school (in Grades 6 and 9, respectively). This set of analyses focused on adolescents' assessments of their own functioning in the new school context. We anticipated that the role of peer status and aggression in adolescents' school transitions would be further demonstrated by similar associations with post-transition perceptions as were found for pre-transition expectations.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through the public school system of a medium-sized city as part of a larger longitudinal study. According to the guidelines of the school administration

(who wished to maximize participation), passive consent procedures were used. In each year of the study, parents were sent a letter detailing the study procedures and purposes. They were asked to sign and return a written form to the school if they did not wish for their child to participate. Less than 1% of the potential sample was eliminated in this way in each year. The sample sizes for the current study were: 643 in Grade 5 (48% girls), 598 in Grade 6 (49% girls), 607 in Grade 8 (49% girls), and 586 in Grade 9 (52% girls). The majority of participants were European-American in each year. The percentage of children who identified themselves as non-White (e.g., African-American, Latino, or Asian) ranged from 24–32% across the four study years.

The school system in this city included 10 elementary schools (Grades K-5) that fed into two middle schools (Grades 6–8), and then into one high school (Grades 9–12). All schools in the district participated in the project. The neighborhoods served by the school district varied in socioeconomic status, but consisted primarily of lower- and lower middle-class families.

Measures and procedures

All participants completed two sets of measures in the spring of each school year: a sociometric (peer-report) assessment and a set of self-report questionnaires. The procedures used to administer these measures were highly similar across study years; differences from year to year are described below. The sociometric assessment included items for social preference, perceived popularity, and overt and relational aggression; the self-report questionnaires included items measuring pre-transition expectations and post-transition perceptions of academic and social functioning. These measures are described below.

Sociometric instrument

Students completed sociometric measures in their classrooms, under the guidance of trained research assistants. Confidentiality was explained and assured at all times. Each participant received a set of rosters containing the names of all members of their grade preceded by a code number. In Grade 5, the rosters contained 50 to 90 names, separated by classrooms into columns headed by the name of the classroom teacher. Names were alphabetized by first name within each classroom column to allow easy identification of nominees' code numbers. In Grades 6 and 8, the rosters contained the names of the 300 peers in their grade printed in multiple columns on one side of legal-sized paper, alphabetized by first name. In Grade 9, 587 names were printed in multiple columns, alphabetized by first name, with girls on one side of the page and boys on the other. In Grades 5, 6, and 8, each sociometric question was printed on top of a new roster; questions were answered by circling code numbers directly on the roster. In Grade 9, students received only one roster and a separate booklet in which they recorded the code numbers of their nominees for each question. Students reported no difficulty using rosters of this type and size; most students were in the study for several years and were familiar with these procedures.

Participants were informed that only code numbers would be kept during data processing and computations. Participants were instructed to read each sociometric question, consider the peers in their grade who fit the description, and then circle or record the code numbers of those peers. Unlimited nominations same- and cross-sex nominations

were used. The sociometric instrument was designed to take approximately 30 min to complete.

Peer status constructs

Four sociometric questions were used to measure status: *liked most* (“the people in your grade you like the most”), *liked least* (“the people in your grade you like the least”), *most popular* (“the people in your grade who are the most popular”), and *least popular* (“the people in your grade who are the least popular”). The wording of these items was identical in all years of the study. Nominations received were counted for each question and standardized within the reference group (the entire grade level of each school) in each year of the study. A continuous measure of *sociometric popularity* (social preference) was computed by subtracting the standardized number of *liked least* nominations received from the standardized number of *liked most* nominations. The resulting difference score was again standardized to a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 within the reference group for ease of interpretation. A continuous measure of *perceived popularity* was computed by subtracting the standardized number of *least popular* votes from the standardized number of *most popular* votes. To create a metric identical to the one for sociometric popularity, the resulting difference score was again standardized within grade.

Aggression constructs

Overt aggression was measured with one sociometric item that was identical in all grades (“start fights, say mean things, and/or tease others”). Relational aggression was measured with two items in Grade 5 (“keep others from being in the group during activities or games,” “ignore or stop talking to other kids when they are mad at them”), one in Grade 6 (“ignore others or spread rumors about them when they are mad at them”), and two in Grades 8 and 9 (“ignore others or spread rumors about others when they are mad at them,” “try to keep others who they don’t like from being in their group”). Because the size of the reference group increased greatly from Grades 5 to 6, fewer items were included in the Grade 6 instrument to ensure that students could still complete the measure on time. Therefore, only one relational aggression item was available in Grade 6. Students had no trouble completing the instrument with larger rosters, so in Grades 8 and 9, the second relational aggression item was returned to the instrument. As before, nominations received were counted for each participant and standardized within grade. A continuous measure of *overt aggression* was the standardized number of overt aggression nominations received in each grade. A continuous measure of *relational aggression* was computed for Grades 5, 8, and 9 by averaging the standardized numbers of nominations received for the two relational aggression items. The correlations between the two relational aggression items in these years ranged from .51 to .76 for boys, and from .58 to .78 for girls. In Grade 6, the relational aggression score was the standardized number of nominations received for the one relational aggression item that was used in this grade.

Pre-transition expectations

In Grades 5 and 8, students rated their expectations of own social and academic functioning after the transition to middle school or high school — that is, they were asked to predict their level of future functioning. To measure academic expectations, two items were

used in Grade 5: “I think I will get good grades in middle school” and “I think I will be able to do my school work well in middle school” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$). The wording of the items was changed in Grade 8 to reflect the transition to high school instead of middle school. In Grade 8, a third item was added: “I think I will be able to complete my homework on time in high school” ($\alpha = .87$ across the three items). In both grades, participants rated their academic expectations on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = very true).

To measure social expectations, two items were used in Grade 5: “I think I will have friends in middle school” and “I think other kids will be nice to me or like me in middle school” ($\alpha = .64$). The wording of the items was again adjusted in Grade 8 to reflect the transition to high school, and a third item was added — “I think I will have other kids to hang out with in high school” ($\alpha = .86$). Participants again rated their expectations on the same 7-point scale.

Post-transition perceptions

In addition to assessing expectations, we also measured participants’ perceptions of their concurrent academic and social functioning after both school transitions. Three items were used to assess academic functioning: “I am getting good grades in school,” “I am doing my school work well,” and “I usually complete my homework on time” ($\alpha = .86$ and $.85$ in Grades 6 and 9, respectively). Three items were also used to measure social functioning: “I have friends in middle/high school,” “Other kids are nice to me in middle/high school,” and “I have others to hang out with in middle/high school” ($\alpha = .78$ and $.89$ in Grades 6 and 9, respectively). Participants used the same 7-point rating scale to indicate how well each item described them (1 = not at all true, 7 = very true).

Results

To investigate our main study questions, we ran three sets of analyses. First, we computed correlations between pre-transition academic/social expectations and post-transition academic/social perceptions. Second, to measure the associations between status and aggression and academic and social expectations and perceptions, correlations between these main study variables were examined. Third, regression analysis was used to examine the predictive effects of status and aggression constructs on perceived social and academic functioning.

Associations between pre-transition expectations and post-transition perceptions

Table 1 presents the associations between academic and social expectations in Grades 5 and 8 with perceptions of current academic and social functioning in Grades 6 and 9. All pre–post associations were statistically reliable and moderately positive for both genders. The associations for academic expectations and perceptions were stronger than those for social expectations and perceptions.

Associations between status, aggression, and academic/social expectations and perceptions

Table 2 presents the intercorrelations among these variables. As can be seen, academic and social expectations and perceptions were reliably associated with the status and

Table 1

Correlations between pre-transition expectations and post-transition perceptions of academic and social functioning

School transition	Boys	Girls
Grade 5–Grade 6		
Academic	.46**	.37**
Social	.31**	.30**
Grade 8–Grade 9		
Academic	.39**	.46**
Social	.31**	.39**

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

aggression constructs in several cases, and generally in the expected direction. Social preference was positively associated with academic/social expectations and perceptions for boys and girls in all years, and these associations were significant in almost all cases. Perceived popularity was significantly and positively related to academic and social expectations in Grade 5 for both boys and girls, to academic expectations in Grade 8 for boys, and to social expectations in Grade 8 for boys. Significant associations between overt or relational aggression and academic/social expectations or perceptions were generally negative. For boys, however, there were significant and positive relationships between overt and relational aggression in Grade 8 and concurrent expectations of social functioning the next year in high school.

Predicting pre-transition expectations and post-transition perceptions from status and aggression

To investigate the primary research question of this study, a series of eight hierarchical regressions were conducted. Academic and social expectations in Grades 5 and 8 and

Table 2

Correlations of expectations and perceptions of academic and social functioning with popularity and aggression

	Social preference		Perceived popularity		Overt aggression		Relational aggression	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 5 expectations								
Academic	.23**	.20**	.26**	.16**	-.09	-.21**	.04	-.09
Social	.26**	.20**	.27**	.22**	-.02	-.07	.05	.04
Grade 6 functioning								
Academic	.25**	.24**	.23**	.08	-.17*	-.31**	-.08	-.27**
Social	.30**	.28**	.29**	.21**	.00	-.16*	.06	-.06
Grade 8 expectations								
Academic	.12*	.06	.25**	.07	.12	-.14*	.17*	-.07
Social	.12*	.13*	.28**	.20**	.22**	-.02	.21**	.05
Grade 9 functioning								
Academic	.12	.26**	.07	.12	.02	-.16*	.02	-.01
Social	.15*	.12	.15*	.12	.11	.04	.08	.06

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

academic and social perceptions in Grades 6 and 9 were the eight dependent variables. In each analysis, gender was entered in Step 1 (dummy coded; girls = 1, boys = 0). In Step 2, social preference, perceived popularity, overt aggression, and relational aggression were entered. The four two-way interactions of social preference and perceived popularity with overt and relational aggression were entered in Step 3. The three-way interactions of these four terms with gender were entered in Step 4. Following the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), all continuous main effect variables were centered, and all interaction terms were computed from the centered variables. Significant interactions were plotted according to Aiken and West (1991) for interpretation. Table 3 presents the significant predictors of each dependent variable.

Grade 5 academic expectations for middle school were positively predicted by perceived popularity, and negatively predicted by overt aggression. Fifth-graders who were high in perceived popularity had higher expectations about their middle school academic functioning than did students who were low on perceived popularity. Students who were

Table 3
Summary of predictors of expectations and perceptions of academic and social functioning

Outcome	Predictors	Model R^2	β
Grade 5 Expectations Academic		.10	
	Perceived popularity		.23
	Overt aggression		-.21
Social	Perceived popularity	.08	.18
Grade 6 Functioning Academic		.18	
	Gender		.59
	Perceived popularity		.17
	Overt aggression		-.20
	Perceived popularity \times overt aggression		.20
Social		.13	
	Gender		.29
	Social preference		.21
Grade 8 expectations Academic		.05	
	Gender		.22
	Perceived popularity		.20
Social	Perceived popularity	.08	.26
	Overt aggression		.15
Grade 9 functioning Academic		.09	
	Gender		.30
	Social preference		.22
	Gender \times perceived popularity \times relational aggression		-1.50
Social		.08	
	Gender		.32
	Social preference		.14
	Gender \times perceived popularity \times relational aggression		-1.30

Note. Only predictors that were significant at $p < .05$ level are listed.

low on overt aggression were more likely to report high academic expectations for middle school.

The only significant predictor of Grade 5 social expectations was perceived popularity. Again, fifth-graders who were high in perceived popularity reported higher social expectations for middle school than did students who were low in perceived popularity.

Gender was a strong predictor of Grade 6 perceived academic functioning, with girls reporting higher academic functioning than boys. Perceived popularity was a reliable positive predictor, whereas overt aggression was negatively associated with academic perceptions in Grade 6. The interaction of perceived popularity and overt aggression was also significant, and is presented in Fig. 1. As can be seen, at high levels of perceived popularity, overt aggression is hardly related to academic functioning. Students who were low on perceived popularity and overt aggression reported the highest academic functioning. However, at low levels of perceived popularity, overt aggression predicted a decrease in academic perceptions. Students low on perceived popularity and high on overt aggression reported the lowest academic functioning.

Gender was a significant predictor of Grade 6 social functioning. Girls reported higher social functioning than boys. Social preference was also a significant and positive predictor of Grade 6 social functioning.

Grade 8 academic expectations for high school were predicted by gender, with girls having higher academic expectations than boys. Perceived popularity was a positive predictor of both academic and social expectations for high school. Overt aggression was also a significant and positive predictor of social expectations; students who were high in overt aggression in Grade 8 had higher expectations for their social functioning in high school.

Self-reported academic and social functioning in Grade 9 were predicted by gender, social preference, and the three-way interaction of gender, perceived popularity, and relational aggression. Girls reported higher academic and social functioning in Grade 9 than did boys, and social preference positively predicted perceived academic and social functioning.

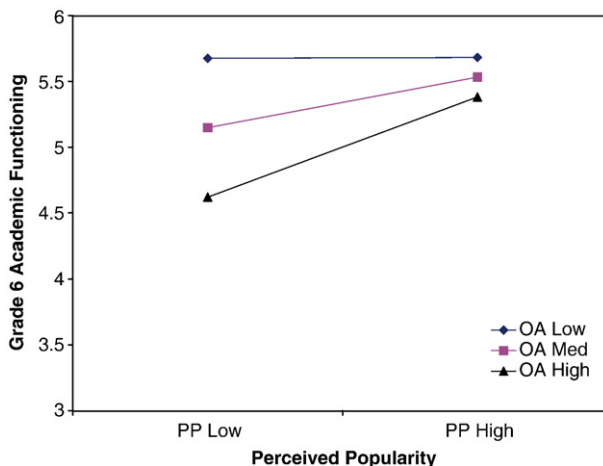


Fig. 1. Interaction of perceived popularity (PP) and overt aggression (OA) for the prediction of Grade 6 perceptions of academic functioning.

The three-way interaction for academic functioning is explained by a strong two-way interaction between perceived popularity and relational aggression for girls, but not for boys. As can be seen in Fig. 2, perceived popularity predicted a modest reduction of reported academic functioning for boys. This negative effect was somewhat more pronounced at lower levels of relational aggression. For girls, perceived popularity predicted a decrease in perceived academic functioning at high levels of relational aggression, but an increase in perceived academic functioning at low levels of relational aggression. Viewed differently, the effect of relational aggression on perceived academic functioning was weak at high-perceived popularity, but strong at low perceived popularity. Unpopular girls who were relationally aggressive reported higher academic functioning than unpopular girls who were not relationally aggressive.

The three-way interaction for social functioning is shown in Fig. 3, and was similar to the interaction for academic functioning. For boys, perceived popularity predicted a modest increase in reported social functioning, irrespective of the level of relational aggression. For

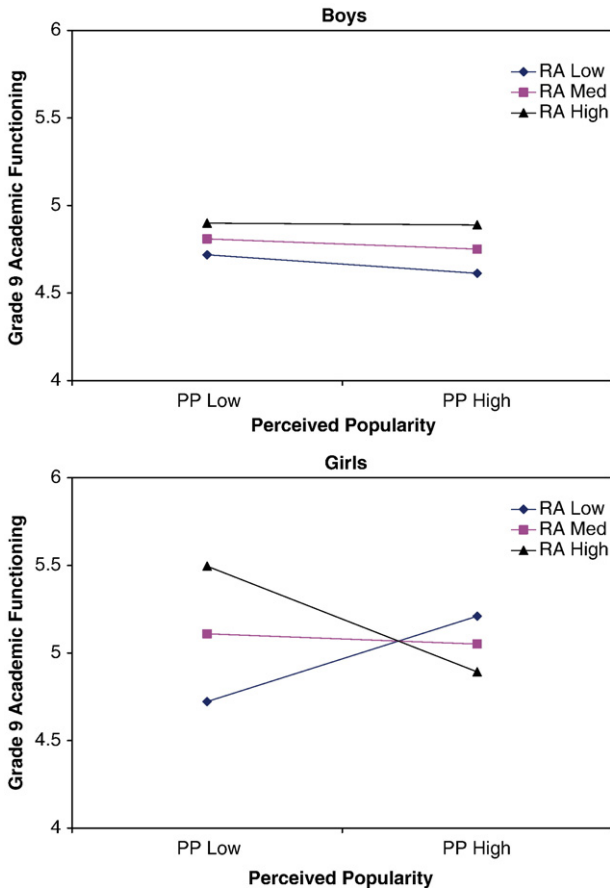


Fig. 2. Interaction of perceived popularity (PP) and relational aggression (RA) for the prediction of Grade 9 perceptions of academic functioning by gender.

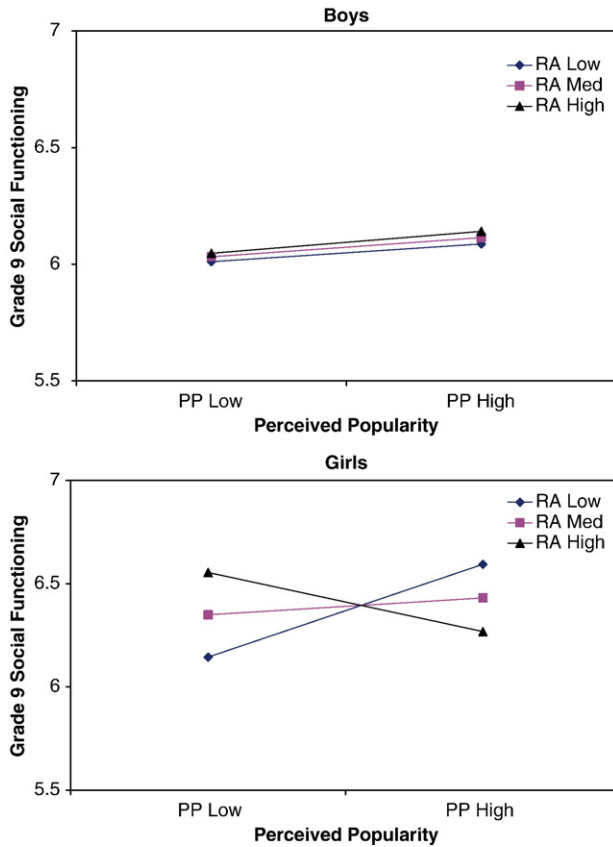


Fig. 3. Interaction of perceived popularity (PP) and relational aggression (RA) for the prediction of Grade 9 perceptions of social functioning by gender.

girls, perceived popularity again predicted a decrease in social functioning at high levels of relational aggression, but an increase in social functioning when relational aggression was low. Viewed differently, there were strong effects of relational aggression on social functioning at both high and low levels of perceived popularity. The highest levels of social functioning were reported by girls who were either relationally aggressive or perceived popular. The lowest levels of social functioning were reported by girls who were neither or both.

Discussion

The dynamics of peer status and aggression remains an important issue in developmental and educational psychology today. We began this paper by reviewing existing evidence on the association between social status and aggression, and particularly the conditions under which aggression is related to indicators of high status (such as perceived popularity or dominance) rather than peer rejection. One of these conditions is the change of peer group composition that occurs during school transitions. At those times in particular, adolescents

seem motivated to use overt or relational aggression to assert themselves and recreate a position in the peer group they occupied in a previous school system. It is also possible that adolescents see school transitions as an opportunity to “move up” in the social world through the use of aggression. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that the dynamics of peer status and aggression is particularly salient at school transitions. In the current study, we aimed to further examine this dynamic by examining adolescents’ expectations and perceptions of their school functioning (academically and socially) before and after a school transition in association with measures of peer status and aggression. The overarching goal behind these analyses was to lend further credence to the importance of issues of peer status and antisocial behavior at school transitions, by establishing their implications for more direct measures of school functioning.

Specifically, we first examined some of the qualities of our measures of school transition expectations and school functioning. Simply asking adolescents directly what their expectations were of their new school yielded scores that demonstrated valid correlations with other constructs. Importantly, adolescents’ expectations correlated reliably and positively with their perceptions of their academic and social functioning one year later. These correlations were modest in size (range .31–.46), indicating that factors other than expectations also influence post-transition assessments. Our next analysis addressed that question.

Adolescents who were more popular on either measure of peer status had more positive expectations of the transition to middle school and also rated themselves as doing better in middle school, both socially and academically. There was no marked difference in the correlates of either measure of popularity at this developmental time. Three years later, however, at the transition from middle school into high school, the picture was quite different. All correlations were lower, and there was a difference between both measures of popularity. There were also gender differences and differences by domain. For both genders, perceived popularity at the end of middle school correlated with positive social expectations for high school. For boys, perceived popularity also predicted positive academic expectations for high school, but it was not correlated with perceived academic achievements. Boys and girls who are considered popular at the end of middle school seem to have a rosy view of social and academic life in high school, but their actual lives at that time seem to be less exciting. It was also noteworthy that for girls, social preference was not correlated with positive academic expectations, but was correlated with reported academic functioning. These well-liked girls may be overshadowed by perceived popular girls in middle school, but find their way in high school, where they may have more opportunity to associate with other girls who are similar to themselves.

Overt aggression had only one negative correlate for boys (low reported academic functioning in Grade 6). For girls, it correlated consistently and negatively with each of the four measures of academic functioning and with one of the measures of social functioning. Not surprisingly, the consequences of being overtly aggressive are larger for females than for males. Relational aggression had only one negative correlate for girls (low reported academic functioning in Grade 6), and no negative correlates for boys. Notice that for boys, overt aggression correlated with *positive* expectations for high school social functioning, and relational aggression correlated with *positive* expectations for both social and academic functioning in high school. Notice finally that there are more negative repercussions of aggression at the earlier school transition than at the later transition, consistent with research

suggesting that the reward value of aggression changes over developmental time (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

The results from our regression analyses confirmed these various findings: perceived popularity (and to a lesser extent social preference) had positive effects on social and academic expectations; overt aggression had negative effects at the first school transition, but positive effects at the later school transition. Notice the absence of significant main effects for relational aggression in the regressions, consistent with the scarcity of significant effects in the correlations. It would be misleading, however, to conclude that relational aggression is not important. The effects of relational aggression are evident when gender is also in the prediction as a moderator. We then see a more classical pattern of findings — that relational aggression plays a more important role for girls than for boys. We noticed that girls who were either relationally aggressive or perceived popular had high social and academic scores in Grade 9, but girls who were both did not. Perhaps girls who are perceived popular use relational aggression in qualitatively different ways than girls who are not perceived popular. Developing and implementing ways of measuring how adolescents use relationally aggressive behaviors will help to address this issue. For example, researchers may combine different methods (e.g., self-reports, observational methods, interviews) to tease apart behavioral differences in this arena (see Merrell et al., 2006, for an excellent discussion of this issue). Our findings confirm the importance of examining relational aggression and perceived popularity in the social and academic lives of students shortly after the transition to middle school, especially for girls.

Our findings also highlight the need to consider peer status and gender as factors when designing and implementing intervention programs aimed at improving self-perceptions and outcomes for aggressive youth. For example, the fact that the combination of popularity and relational aggression is associated with poor self-perceptions of adjustment for girls, but not for boys, and the fact that overt aggression is a stronger correlate of negative self-perceptions for girls than for boys, suggests that interventions focusing on physical aggression or aggressive boys alone are missing the mark. Interventions that address the specific needs and concerns of adolescent girls are needed as well. Further, although identifying and intervening in relational aggression is comparatively difficult, in-service training for teachers and school staff and training workshops for parents would help to bring these behaviors to light, instead of allowing them to remain covert.

An important caveat regarding the results of the current study is the self-report nature of the assessments of social and academic functioning. It makes sense to assess pre-transition expectations with self-reports. Expectations by definition are subjective views of the participant — hence, they should be assessed with self-report methods. An advantage of our post-transition measures is that they matched the exact wording of the pre-transition measures. The only difference in the pre- and post-measures was in the stem where adolescents were asked to look forward (pre) or at their current situation (post). Because the post-transition assessment took place one year after the pre-transition assessment, we were not concerned about memory effects. However, the post measures cannot be seen as objective measures of social and academic functioning only. While we have reason to believe that they do reflect actual functioning (based on correlations with external measures), they are also influenced by inaccuracies and biases. For example, the fact that relationally aggressive girls see themselves as high in social and academic functioning may

be influenced by some of the social perception biases that are known correlates of aggression (e.g., Zakriski & Coie, 1996; see also Hughes, Cavell, & Prasad-Gaur, 2001).

The current study contributes to understanding the distinction between sociometric and perceived popularity. Both are correlated differently with measures of social and academic expectations and self-perceptions. Some researchers have questioned the utility of the distinction between the two measures of high status. The current results corroborate the empirical findings showing that the distinction is important, especially in adolescence, and has implications for adolescents' social and school functioning across school transitions. Notice in this regard that perceived popularity was a better predictor generally of social and academic functioning than social preference. This highlights the importance of assessing perceived popularity in addition to traditional measures of sociometric popularity or social preference, as well as the necessity of considering peer status issues when developing intervention policies for youth.

The results from the current study also highlight the importance of the distinction between overt and relational aggression, although this distinction is commonly accepted. Notice that relational aggression, under some circumstances, was associated with better outcomes for boys. For example, boys who were more relationally aggressive tended to have higher self-ratings of social and academic functioning. This is interesting, because relational aggression is often seen as a risk factor. It may be that among adolescent boys relational aggression is a marker of assertiveness of social savvy, rather than a marker of pathological behavior. We can only know this when we have a more objective assessment of the actual amounts and qualities of the relational aggression displayed by boys, obtained with observational methods.

Limitations and future research needs

While this study had important strengths, such as the inclusion of multiple school transitions and consistent measurement of expectations and perceptions of outcomes across years, we also acknowledge certain limitations. First, as noted above, all of our outcome measures were derived from brief self-report scales. Although these scales tap into important elements of broader social and academic functioning as experienced by the adolescents themselves, as for any self-report measure there is the possibility of bias in these self-report data. In addition, because these ratings were general in nature they did not yield information about a variety of specific social and academic issues adolescents face. Future research on the links between peer status, aggression, and school adjustment would benefit from adding objective measures of social and academic outcomes to the self-report ratings, such as number of reciprocated friendships, social network centrality, actual academic grades, grade point average, or results from academic achievement tests.

Second, while we were interested in assessing links between status, aggression, and social and academic adjustment following school transitions, the data used in our analyses were collected in the Spring of each school year — well after the transitions were completed. This is not an ideal test of post-transition perceptions of outcomes, because several months have passed since the transition occurred, and students have had ample time to experience changes in their social and academic situation since the change to a new school. Further studies of issues pertaining to school transitions would be strengthened by

including measurement of all relevant constructs at the beginning of the post-transition year, or at several different time points during the post-transition year.

Finally, our research was informed primarily by previous studies of the elementary–middle school transition. This is likely a more difficult transition for adolescents, as it involves a much greater change in the school environment (e.g., the move from one teacher to several; interactions with many more peers, and thus more social comparison cues) than does the move from middle school to high school. However, the high-school transition is probably quite difficult for students for other reasons, such as an even larger peer group to navigate, more difficult classes with higher stakes (college admission), and concerns about romantic relationships. The literature on school transitions would benefit from studies that focus explicitly on the high-school transition and the issues that incoming students face in high school.

An added benefit of this expansion of research efforts would be to shed further light on the differences between the middle school and high-school transitions, and to further understand their unique roles in the social and academic development of children and youth. Previous studies have already made important contributions in this direction that can serve as the basis for these efforts. [Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff \(1998, 2000\)](#) provided detailed overviews of the social and academic lives of adolescents in middle school. They discuss both the development of social and academic outcomes and the role of social perceptions in this process. The conceptual framework of Roeser et al. could form the anchor from which to understand students' transitions into middle school (from elementary school) and out of middle school (into high school). [Kinney \(1993\)](#) demonstrated that the transition from middle to high school is not always negative, but also provides opportunities for adolescents to change and improve their social identity. In a further extension of this point, [Cadwallader, Farmer, and Cairns \(2003\)](#) empirically distinguished four types of adolescents across the middle to high-school transition that varied in their risk status for the development of negative outcomes. A collective strength of these research examples is that they combined both person-centered and variable-centered approaches, as well as both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. This combination of research methods, from the conceptual frameworks sketched by these authors, provide promising avenues for future research on the role of school transitions in adolescents' social and academic development.

Conclusion

Together, the results from this study confirm the importance of examining the role of aggression and status in the peer group at school transitions. Previous research focused on the degree to which adolescents try to reestablish status or dominance in the peer group when they move to a new school system. The current study demonstrated further implications for adolescents' social and academic functioning. The current study also demonstrated important developmental differences between the transitions to middle school versus high school. An important agenda for future research is to further investigate the reasons for these differences. In either case, the dynamics of peer status and aggression remains important for understanding school success. The current paper demonstrates how this dynamic is not limited to the current school environment, but extends itself across the boundaries of grades and schools.

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