

Popularity an unconscious deterrent

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Although popular boys and girls get more attention from their classmates than less popular peers, they are often unconsciously avoided by those same classmates. These were the conclusions drawn by psychologist Tessa Lansu from Radboud University Nijmegen.

In five separate studies, Tessa Lansu investigated the reactions of youngsters between the ages of 10 and 12 to their [classmates](#). She looked in particular at popularity and aggression. The most important questions were: what is the role of implicit processes in [peer relationships](#)? And how do the characteristics of the perceiver and the perceived influence this process?

Joystick and eye-tracker

Lansu investigated implicit processes using an approach-avoidance task in which children react to the classmates' names by moving a joystick. If they think a classmate is nice at an implicit level, they quickly pull the joystick towards themselves; if they think the other child is not so nice or unpleasant, they quickly push the stick away. In addition, she used eye-tracking to determine how long someone looked at the photo of a classmate.

Boys and girls react differently

The things that boys say about their classmates often do not correspond to their unconscious opinion. Although popular boys and girls are considered nice at a conscious level, they trigger a more negative

reaction at an unconscious level. Also, unpopular youngsters react more negatively to popular girls than popular youngsters do. Popular girls show sensitive leadership.

Popularity also has an effect on the behaviour of anyone working together with a popular youngster: those who do an assignment with a popular classmate behave less dominantly and negatively than those who work with an unpopular classmate.

Girls who work with a popular classmate behave more submissively and have less influence on the outcome of the task than girls who work with an unpopular partner. Popular girls, in addition, are more likely to take a leading role and to notice their team mates' wishes and signals. Popular boys show this sensitive leadership less. Lansu: 'Popularity is therefore of more significance in girls than in boys when working with others.'

Bullied girls victim anew

Girls who are known to be the victims of aggression in the class also have to put up with more [aggression](#) in a computer game than others. Lansu: 'If the class believes a girl is a victim, there's more chance she'll be bullied or picked on in a computer game. That's not the case with boys.' Lansu believes this happens because bullied girls are - according to their classmates - themselves aggressive.

This does not apply to boys as much. 'Perhaps classmates interpreted the behaviour of bullied girls as more hostile, which is why they were "nasty in turn" to these [girls](#).' Further research is needed to determine to what extent implicit reactions can predict behaviour. Lansu: 'If I can demonstrate predictability, there may be potential for developing interesting new interventions to deal with, for example, bullying at school'.

More information: Paper: "Implicit processes in peer relations: Effects of popularity and aggression" (PhD conferred on 21 December 2012)

Provided by Radboud University Nijmegen

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