Socialization to Gender Roles: Popularity among Elementary School Boys and Girls

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This article draws on data gathered through participant observation with preadolescent children in and outside elementary schools to focus on the role of popularity in gender socialization. Within their gendered peer subcultures, boys and girls constructed idealized images of masculinity and femininity on which they modeled their behavior. These images were reflected in the composite of factors affecting children’s popularity among their peers. Boys achieved high status on the basis of their athletic ability, coolness, toughness, social skills, and success in cross-gender relationships. Girls gained popularity because of their parents’ socioeconomic status and their own physical appearance, social skills, and academic success. Although boys’ gender images embody more active and achieved features than girls’, which are comparatively passive and ascribed, these roles embody complex integrations of oppositional elements that expand and androgenize them. The research illustrates subtle changes in children’s, especially girls’, gender roles, resulting from historical changes in society.

Considerable effort has been invested in the past two decades toward understanding the nature of gender differences in society. Critical to this effort is knowledge about where gender differences begin, where they are particularly supported, and how they become entrenched. Elementary schools are powerful sites for the construction of culturally patterned gender relations. In what has been called the “second curriculum” (Best 1983) or the “unofficial school” (Kessler et al. 1985), children create their own norms, values, and styles within the school setting that constitute their peer culture, what Glassner (1976) called “kid society.” It is within this peer culture that they do their “identity work” (Wexler 1988), learning and evaluating roles and values for their future adult behavior, of which their “gender regimes” (Kessler et al. 1985) are an important component.

Children’s peer cultures may be further stratified by gender, with boys and girls producing differential “symbolic identity systems” (Wexler 1988). Segregated sexual cultures have been observed as early as preschool (Berentzen 1984; Gunnarsson 1978), as boys and girls separate and begin to evolve their own interests and activities. By elementary school, boys’ and girls’ distinct and autonomous peer cultures are clearly established (Best 1983; Lever 1976, 1978; Thorne and Luria 1986; Whiting and Edwards 1973), although in situations and patterns of social organization, boys and girls cross gender lines to interact in both organized and casual manners (Goodwin 1990; Thorne 1986). These peer cultures contribute significantly to the creation of gender differences because they constitute enclaves in which
boys and girls can escape the well-intentioned efforts of their schools and parents to shape or individualize them, freeing them to cleave instead to their own normative molds.

Studies of preadolescent and adolescent gendered peer cultures have examined the influence of several factors on the social construction of gender roles. For example, in analyzing the differences between boys' and girls' play, Lever (1976, 1978) and Best (1983) noted that boys' games were highly complex, competitive, rule infused, large in size, and goal directed, whereas girls played in small, intimate groups; engaged in similar, independent activities; and focused on enjoying themselves more than on winning. Borman and Frankel (1984) argued that boys' play more closely approximates the structure, dynamics, and complexity inherent in the managerial world of work and thus prepares boys for success in this organizational realm.

Eder and Hallinan (1978) compared the structure of boys' and girls' friendship patterns and found that girls have more exclusive and dyadic relationships than do boys, which leads to their greater social skills, emotional intimacy, and ease of self-disclosure. Boys' and girls' extracurricular involvements also differ (Eder 1985; Eder and Parker 1987), with boys' activities (e.g., sports) emphasizing such masculine values as achievement, toughness, endurance, competitiveness, and aggression and girls' activities (e.g., cheerleading) fostering emotional management, glamour, and a concern with appearance. Studies of differences in cross-gender orientations (Eisenhart and Holland 1983; Goodwin 1980a, 1980b; Thorne 1986) have shown that girls become interested in bridging the separate gender worlds earlier than do boys for both platonic and romantic relationships, but that their attention is perceived by boys as sexually infused and, hence, threatening. Finally, studies of conversational patterns and rules (Gilligan 1982; Maltz and Borker 1983) have suggested that girls speak "in a different voice" from boys—one that emphasizes equality and solidarity while avoiding disagreement and contains "supportive" forms of collaboration that diminish girls' power relative to boys.

Yet these studies have not examined one of the most important dimensions of elementary school children's lives: the role of popularity in gender socialization. Boys and girls arrange themselves into cliques and into strata within cliques according to their perceptions of each other as relatively popular or unpopular. The determinants of popularity vary greatly between boys and girls, with gender-appropriate models relevant to each. Embedded within these idealized models of masculinity and femininity are the gender images that children actively synthesize from the larger culture and apply to themselves and to each other. As they learn and direct themselves to fit within these perceived parameters of popularity, they socialize themselves to gender roles. In this article, we examine the factors that constitute the determinants of popularity for elementary school boys and girls and in so doing, assemble the cultural norms of appropriate gender identity constructed by these children.

Studies of children's gender roles have suggested that boys have traditionally displayed an active posture and girls, a passive one (Coleman 1961; Eder and Parker 1987; Lever 1976). The role of boys has encompassed rough play, the command of space, competition with peers, and a certain toughness designed to show independence and masculinity (Eder and Parker 1987; Lever 1976; Willis 1977). Girls' behavior has historically included a focus on relational and intimacy work, nurturance and emotional supportiveness, and a concern with developing feminine allure (Eder and Parker 1987; Eisenhart and Holland 1983; Gilligan 1982; Lever 1976; Thorne 1986; Valli 1988).

Yet changes in society, influenced by the women's movement and the vast entry of women into the work force, have profoundly affected adult women's gender roles, expanding and androgenizing them. Much concern has focused on whether these changes have filtered down to children, narrowing the differences in boys' and girls' child-rearing experiences within the home. Noting
these societal trends, Hoffman (1977) and Best (1983) investigated whether children are being raised in ways that differ significantly from past generations; both found that shifts in the traditional gender roles were slight, at best, with children displaying fairly conservative gender orientations. In this article, we directly address the question of children’s gender roles and their historical change. We synthesize the contemporary gender images and behavior displayed by the boys and girls we studied, examining the degree to which these images and behavior manifest aspects of the passive-active split and where they have become expanded. We also consider how alternative bases of status (ascription versus achievement) characterize these gender roles. We then assess the ways in which these roles have both changed and remained constant over time.

We begin by discussing our participant observation with elementary school children. We then present the elements that foster boys’ and girls’ popularity, describing and illustrating how they are applied and how they develop over the course of the elementary school years. We conclude by analyzing the relation between these popularity characteristics, the gender-role system underlying them, and the historical evolution of these roles in relation to social change.

METHODS

This article draws on data gathered by all three authors from 1987 to 1991 through participant observation with elementary-school students, who we observed and interacted with inside and outside their schools. The children attended two public schools drawing predominantly on middle- and upper-middle class neighborhoods (with a smattering of children from lower socioeconomic areas) in a large, mostly White university community. During the research, we played several roles: parent, friend, school aide, student teacher, counselor, coach, volunteer, and carpooler. We undertook these diverse roles both as they naturally presented themselves and as deliberate research strategies, sometimes combining the two as opportunities for interacting with children arose through familial obligations or work-school requirements. As a research team (Douglas 1976), we were diverse in both age and gender, spanning a 15-year age stretch and comprising both genders. This diversity enabled us to interact well with both boys and girls and to utilize a range of diverse roles and perspectives.

In interacting with children, we varied our behavior. At times, we acted naturally, expressing ourselves fully as responsible adults, and at other times, we cast these attitudes and demeanors aside and tried to hang out with the children, getting into their gossip and adventures (or misadventures). We imagined ourselves as peers in their situations, drawing on our own childhood experiences, and avoided taking responsibility, giving help, or making decisions, thereby taking on what Mandell (1988) called the “least-adult” role. Through these varied approaches, and through the often-irrepressible candor of children, we were able to gain an insider’s view of their thoughts, beliefs, and assessments.

The second author did all his data gathering in one of the schools—a predominantly White, middle-class elementary school with a small minority and working-class population—for three years. He offered workshops on mediation and conflict management, worked as a teacher’s aide for two years, and then served as a student teacher in kindergarten and first-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classes. Through these activities, he was able to interact informally with children in the classrooms, in the lunchroom, and at recess. Although his abdication of authority sometimes irked teachers, he tried to minimize his “supervisory” role and act as a “friend” whenever possible (Fine and Sandstrom 1988).

In contrast, the first and third authors did more of their research outside the schools. They tried to develop the parameters of the “parental” research role by observing, casually conversing with, and interviewing their own children, their children’s friends, other parents, and teachers. They followed their daughter, son, and the children’s neighbors and
friends through the elementary school experience, gathering data on them as they developed. The children they befriended relished the role of research subjects because it raised their status in the eyes of adults to "experts," whose lives were important and who were seriously consulted about matters ranging from "chasing and kissing" games to the characteristics of "nerds." They knew they could always go with their latest gossip to "Peter and Patti," who would listen with avid interest and ask informed questions. This role involved a delicate balance between the caring of parents and the acceptance of friends.

**STRATIFICATION AND SOCIALIZATION**

In educational institutions, children develop a stratified social order that is determined by their interactions with peers, parents, and others (Passuth 1987). According to Corsaro (1979), children's knowledge of social position is influenced by their conception of status, which may be defined as popularity, prestige, or "social honor" (Weber 1946). This article focuses primarily on the concept of popularity, which can be defined operationally as the children who are liked by the greatest number of their peers, who are the most influential in setting group opinions, and who have the greatest impact on determining the boundaries of membership in the most exclusive social group. In the school environment, boys and girls have divergent attitudes and behavioral patterns in their gender-role expectations and the methods they use to attain status, or popularity, among peers.

**BOYS' POPULARITY FACTORS**

Boys' popularity, or rank in the status hierarchy, was influenced by several factors. Although the boys' popularity ordering was not as clearly defined as was the girls', there was a rationale underlying the stratification in their daily interactions and group relations.

**Athletic Ability**

The major factor that affected the boys' popularity was athletic ability (cf. Coleman 1961, Eder and Parker 1987, Eitzen 1975, Fine 1987, Schofield 1981). Athletic ability was so critical that those who were proficient in sports attained both peer recognition and upward social mobility. In both schools we observed, the best athlete was also the most popular boy in the grade. Two third- and fourth-grade boys considered the question of what makes kids popular:

Nick: Craig is sort of mean, but he's really good at sports, so he's popular.
Ben: Everybody wants to be friends with Gabe, even though he makes fun of most of them all the time. But they still all want to pick him on their team and have him be friends with them because he's a good athlete, even though he brags a lot about it. He's popular.

In the upper grades, the most popular boys all had a keen interest in sports even if they were not adept in athletics. Those with moderate ability and interest in athletic endeavors fell primarily into lower status groups. Those who were least proficient athletically were potential pariahs.

Because of the boys' physicality, contact sports occasionally degenerated into conflicts between participants. Fighting, whether formal fights or informal pushing, shoving, or roughhousing, was a means of establishing a social order. The more popular boys often dispensed these physical actions of superiority, while the less popular boys were often the recipients. The victors, although negatively sanctioned by the adults in the school, attained more status than did the defeated, who lost considerable status. The less popular boys were the ones who were most frequently hurt and least frequently assisted during games in the playground. For example, Mikey, an unpopular boy with asthma who was fairly uncoordinated and weak, was often the victim of rough playground tackles in football or checks in soccer. Boys knew they could take the ball away from him at will. When he was hurt and fell down crying, he was blamed for the incident and mocked.

**Coolness**

Athletics was a major determinant of the boys' social hierarchy, but being
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good in sports was not the sole variable that affected their popularity. For boys, being “cool” generated a great deal of peer status. As Lyman and Scott (1989, p. 93) noted, “a display of coolness is often a prerequisite to entrance into or maintenance of membership in certain social circles.” Cool was a social construction whose definition was in constant flux. Being cool involved individuals’ self-presentation skills, their accessibility to expressive equipment, and their impression-management techniques (Fine 1981). Various social forces were involved in the continual negotiation of cool and how the students came to agree on its meaning. As a sixth-grade teacher commented:

The popular group is what society might term “cool.” You know they’re skaters, they skateboard, they wear more cool clothes, you know the “in” things you’d see in ads right now in magazines. If you look at our media and advertising right now on TV, like the Levi commercials, they’re kinda loose, they skate and they’re doing those things. The identity they created for themselves, I think, has a lot to do with the messages the kids are getting from the media and advertising as to what’s cool and what’s not cool.

There was a shared agreement among the boys as to what type of expressive equipment, such as clothing, was socially defined as cool. Although this type of apparel was worn mostly by the popular boys, boys in the other groups also tried to emulate this style. Aspects of this style included (1) high-top tennis shoes, such as Nike Air Jordans or Reeboks, which were often unlaced at the top eyelets or left untied; (2) baggy designer jeans that were rolled up at the cuff; (3) loose-fitting button-down shirts, which were not tucked into their pants (or were tucked in only in front) so that the shirttails hung out, or T-shirts with surfing and skateboarding logos, such as Maui Town and Country, Bugle Boy, Vision, and Quicksilver; (4) hairstyles, in which the back and sides were cut short so that the ears were exposed, with the top left longer and moussed to give the hair a “wet look” or to make it stand up straight; (5) denim jackets; (6) Sony Walkmen or other brands of portable stereo receivers–cassette players; and (7) in the sixth grade especially, roller-blades.

**Toughness**

In the schools we studied, the popular boys, especially in the upper grades, were defiant of adult authority, challenged existing rules, and received more disciplinary actions than did boys in the other groups. They attained a great deal of peer status from this type of acting out. This defiance is related to what Miller (1958) referred to as the “focal concerns” of lower-class culture, specifically “trouble” and “toughness.” Trouble involves rule-breaking behavior, and, as Miller (1958, p. 176) noted, “in certain situations, ‘getting into trouble’ is overtly recognized as prestige conferring.” Boys who exhibited an air of nonchalance in the face of teacher authority or disciplinary measures enhanced their status among their peers. Two fourth-grade boys described how members of the popular group in their grade acted:

**Mark:** They’re always getting into trouble by talking back to the teacher.

**Tom:** Yeah, they always have to show off to each other that they aren’t afraid to say anything they want to the teacher, that they aren’t teachers’ pets. Whatever they’re doing, they make it look like it’s better than what the teacher is doing, ‘cause they think what she’s doing is stupid.

**Mark:** And one day Josh and Allen got in trouble in music ‘cause they told the teacher the Disney movie she wanted to show sucked. They got pink [disciplinary] slips.

**Tom:** Yeah, and that’s the third pink slip Josh’s got already this year, and it’s only Thanksgiving.

Toughness involved displays of physical prowess, athletic skill, and belligerency, especially in repartee with peers and adults. In the status hierarchy, boys who exhibited “macho” behavioral patterns gained recognition from their peers for being tough. Often, boys in the high-status crowd were the “class clowns” or “troublemakers” in the school, thereby becoming the center of attention.
In contrast, boys who demonstrated “effeminate” behavior were referred to by pejorative terms, such as “fag,” “sissy,” and “homo,” and consequently lost status (cf. Thorne and Luria 1986). One boy was constantly derided behind his back because he got flustered easily, had a “spaz” (lost his temper, slammed things down on his desk, stomped around the classroom), and then would start to cry. Two fifth-grade boys described a classmate they considered the prototypical “fag”:

**Travis:** Wren is such a nerd. He’s short and his ears stick out.

**Nikko:** And when he sits in his chair, he crosses one leg over the other and curls the toe around under his calf, so it’s double-crossed, like this [shows]. It looks so faggy with his “girlly” shoes. And he always sits up erect with perfect posture, like this [shows].

**Travis:** And he’s always raising his hand to get the teacher to call on him.

**Nikko:** Yeah, Wren is the kind of kid, when the teacher has to go out for a minute, she says, “I’m leaving Wren in charge while I’m gone.”

**Savoir-faire**

Savoir-faire refers to children’s sophistication in social and interpersonal skills. These behaviors included such interpersonal communication skills as being able to initiate sequences of play and other joint lines of action, affirmation of friendships, role-taking and role-playing abilities, social knowledge and cognition, providing constructive criticism and support to one’s peers, and expressing feelings in a positive manner. Boys used their social skills to establish friendships with peers and adults both within and outside the school, thereby enhancing their popularity.

Many of the behaviors composing savoir-faire depended on children’s maturity, adroitness, and awareness of what was going on in the social world around them. Boys who had a higher degree of social awareness knew how to use their social skills more effectively. This use of social skills manifested itself in a greater degree of sophistication in communicating with peers and adults. One teacher commented on some of the characteristics she noted in the group leaders:

Interpersonal skills, there’s a big difference there. It seems like I get a more steady gaze, more eye contact, and more of an adult response with some of the kids in the popular group, one on one with them. The ones who aren’t [in the popular group] kind of avert their gaze or are kind of more fidgety; they fidget a little more and are a little more uneasy on one.

A parent also remarked on this difference between popular leaders and less popular followers in discussing a burglary attempt that had been inadvertently foiled by a group of third-grade boys who returned home early one day and surprised some thieves in the house:

They all got a good look at the pair, but when the police came, only Andy and Devin were able to tell the police what went on. The rest of the boys were all standing around, pretty excited and nervous, and they couldn’t really explain what had happened or understand what had happened. . . . And when the police took them down to the station to give a description and to look through the mug books, Andy and Devin did all of the talking. I know my kid could not have done what they did. He’s a little more in outer space somewhere. Andy, especially, has always been more mature than the rest.

Many boys further used their savoir-faire to their social advantage. In their desire to be popular, they were often manipulative, domineering, and controlling. They set potential friends against each other, vying for their favors. They goaded others into acting out in class and getting into trouble. They set the attitudes for all to follow and then changed the rules by not following them themselves. One mother sighed about her son’s friendship with a leader of the popular group:

I’m glad they’re not in the same class together this year. Every year he [her son] has chased after Michael, trying to be his best friend. He has gotten into a lot of trouble and put himself into a lot of competition with other kids over Michael. And then he’s been left high and dry when Michael decided he wanted to be best friends with someone else.
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Group leaders with savoir-faire often defined and enforced the boundaries of an exclusive social group. Although nearly everyone liked them and wanted to be in their group, they included only the children they wanted. They communicated to other peers, especially unpopular boys, that they were not their friends or that play sessions were temporary. This exclusion maintained social boundaries by keeping others on the periphery and at a marginal status.

These kinds of social skills did not seem to emerge along a developmental continuum, with some children further along than the rest. Rather, certain individuals seemed to possess a more proficient social and interactional acumen and to sustain it from year to year, grade to grade.

In contrast, those with extremely poor savoir-faire had difficult social lives and low popularity (cf. Asher and Renshaw 1981). Their interpersonal skills were awkward or poor, and they rarely engaged in highly valued interaction with their peers. Some of them were either withdrawn or aggressively antisocial. Others exhibited dysfunctional behavior and were referred to as being “bossy” or mean. These boys did not receive a great deal of peer recognition, yet often wanted to be accepted into the more prestigious groups. A group of second-grade boys discussed these behaviors in regard to their classmate Larry:

**STEVE:** Larry, he’s the worst bugger in the whole school. He always bugs people a lot.

**ROB:** And he always pushes all of us around and he calls us all names.

**[Is Larry popular?]**

**ALL:** NO.

**NICK:** Because he calls everybody names and kicks everybody and pushes us.

**STEVE:** You know what he’s best at? [No, what?] Annoying people.

Many of the boys who lacked savoir-faire to an extreme were thus disagreeable in conversations with their peers. Not only did they lack the social skills necessary to make it in the popular group, they could not maintain relationships with other less popular individuals.

**Cross-Gender Relations**

Although cross-gender friendships were common in the preschool years, play and games became mostly sex segregated in elementary school, and there was a general lack of cross-sex interaction in the classroom (cf. Hallinan 1979). After kindergarten and first grade, boys and girls were reluctant to engage in intergender activities. Social-control mechanisms, such as “rituals of pollution” and “borderwork” (Thorne 1986),1 reinforced intragender activities as the socially acceptable norm. Also, intergender activities were often viewed as romances by the children’s peers, which made them highly stigmatized and therefore difficult to maintain. The elementary school boys often picked out one girl that they secretly “liked,” but they were reluctant to spend much time talking with her or to reveal their feelings to anyone for fear of being teased. When these secrets did get out, children were made the butt of friends’ jokes. Most boys, whatever their popularity, were interested only in the select girls from the popular group.

Sometime during the fourth or fifth grade, both boys and girls began to renegotiate the social definition of intergender interactions because of pubertal changes and the emulation of older children’s behavior2 (cf. Thorne 1986). Eder and Parker (1987, p. 201) commented that preadolescence is the stage during which “cross sex interactions become more salient.” During the later elementary years, it generally became more socially acceptable for the members of male and female groups to engage in intergender interactions, which took

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1 Rituals of pollution refer to intergender activities in which each gender accuses the other of having “germs” or “cooties.” Thorne (1986, pp. 174–75) noted that girls are perceived as being more polluting than boys, and this perception anticipates and influences cross-cultural patterns of feminine subordination. Borderwork refers to boundary maintenances.

2 Children with older siblings were often more precocious than were others, overcoming their reluctance to approach girls and initiating rites of flirtation and dating.
the form of boys talking with girls in the protected enclave of their social group. The boys would tease girls or ask them silly or awkward questions. They sometimes wrote anonymous prank letters with their friends to girls they secretly liked, asking or challenging these girls about “mysterious” features of puberty.

By the sixth grade, the boys began to display a stronger interest in girls, and several of the more popular boys initiated cross-gender relations. As one teacher remarked: “The big thing I think is that they are with the girls. They’ve got some relationships going with the girls in the class, whereas the less popular group does not have that at all.”

As Fine (1987) pointed out, sexual interest is a sign of maturity in preadolescent boys, yet it is difficult for inexperienced boys who are not fully cognizant of the norms involved. For safety, boys often went through intermediaries (cf. Eder and Sanford 1986) in approaching girls to find out if their interests were reciprocated. They rarely made such dangerous forays face to face. Rather, they gathered with a friend after school to telephone girls for each other or passed notes or messages from friends to the girls in question. When the friends confirmed that the interest was mutual, the interested boy would then ask the girl to “go” with him. One sixth-grade boy described the Saturday he spent with a friend:

We were over at Bob’s house and we started calling girls we liked on the phone, one at a time. We’d each call the girl the other one liked and ask if she wanted to go with the other one. Then we’d hang up. If she didn’t say yes, we’d call her back and ask why. Usually they wouldn’t say too much. So sometimes we’d call her best friend to see if she could tell us anything. Then they would call each other and call us back. If we got the feeling after a few calls that she really was serious about no, then we might go on to our next choice, if we had one.

Getting a confirmation from a girl that she accepted the commitment affected the interaction between them in school only to a certain degree. Boy-girl relations posed considerable risks by representing “innovative situations” (Lyman and Scott 1989) that called for displays of coolness. Yet the boy was now free to call the girl on the phone at home and to invite her to a boy-girl party, to a movie, or to the mall with another couple or two.

Once the connection was established, boys pressured each other to “score” with girls. Boys who were successful in “making out” with girls (or who claimed that they were) received higher status from their friends. Boys’ need for status in the male subculture put considerable pressure on their relationships with girls, as one sixth-grade boy explained:

I liked Amy, and we had been going together for a few months, nothing much, mostly going to the mall or bowling on weekends with some other kids, but some of the other guys were going with girls who made out [kissed]. One couple would even make out right at school, right in front of everybody. So the guys put a lot of pressure on me to get to first base with Amy. I knew she didn’t want to because she had told me, but at one party it just got so intense, and the guys were on me so much, that I told her she had to. So she got all mad and started to cry and then her friends came over and got all ‘round her and then they all left the party, and so I guess we’re sort of broken up.

A boy who was successful in getting a girl to go with him developed the reputation of being a “ladies’ man” and gained status among his peers.

**Academic Performance**

The impact of academic performance on boys’ popularity was negative for cases of extreme deviation from the norm, but changed over the course of their elementary years for the majority of boys from a positive influence to a potentially degrading stigma.

At all ages, boys who were skewed toward either end of the academic continuum suffered socially. Thus, those who struggled scholastically, who had low self-confidence in accomplishing educational tasks, or who had to be placed in remedial classrooms lost peer recognition. For example, one third-grade boy who went to an afterschool tutoring institute shielded this informa-
tion from his peers, for fear of ridicule. Boys with serious academic problems were liable to the pejorative label "dum-mies." At the other end of the continuum, boys who were exceedingly smart but lacked other status-enhancing traits, such as coolness, toughness, or athletic ability, were often stigmatized as "brainy" or "nerdy." The following discussion by two fifth-grade boys highlighted the negative status that could accrue to boys with excessive academic inclinations and performance:

**Mark:** One of the reasons they're so mean to Seth is because he's got glasses and he's really smart. They think he's a brainy-brain and a nerd.

**Seth:** You're smart, too, Mark.

**Mark:** Yeah, but I don't wear glasses, and I play football.

**Seth:** So you're not a nerd.

[What makes Seth a nerd?]

**Mark:** Glasses, and he's a brainy-brain. He's really not a nerd, but everybody always makes fun of him 'cause he wears glasses.

In the early elementary years, academic performance in between these extremes was positively correlated with social status. Younger boys took pride in their work, loved school, and loved their teachers. Many teachers routinely hugged their students at day's end as they sent them out the door. Yet sometime during the middle elementary years, by around third grade, boys began to change their collective attitudes about academics. This change in attitude coincided with a change in their orientation, away from surrounding adults and toward the peer group.

The boys' shift in attitude involved the introduction of a potential stigma associated with doing too well in school. The macho attitudes embodied in the coolness and toughness orientations led them to lean more toward group identities as renegades or rowdies and affected their exertion in academics, creating a ceiling level of effort beyond which it was potentially dangerous to reach. Boys who persisted in their pursuit of academics while lacking other social skills were subject to ridicule as "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel 1967). Those who had high scholastic aptitude, even with other culturally redeeming traits, became reluctant to work up to their full potential for fear of exhibiting low-value behavior. By diminishing their effort in academics, they avoided the disdain of other boys. One fifth-grade boy explained why he put little more than the minimal work into his assignments:

I can't do more than this. If I do, then they'll [his friends] make fun of me and call me a nerd. Jack is always late with his homework, and Chuck usually doesn't even do it at all [two popular boys]. I can't be the only one.

Not only did this withdrawal of exertion from academics preclude boys' ostracism from popular groups, but it demonstrated support and solidarity for others who were less able than they. Thus, it functioned as a collective facesaving technique. The group identity was managed so that "low achievers" were able to occupy positions of high status. Discussing the dynamics of boys' groups, one teacher stated:

It was like they all had that identity and they all hung together like none of us do it, none of us are gonna do it. If we do it, it's gonna be half, and if we do any better than half the job, then we're gonna give it to you on the slide.

Some boys who were scholastically adept tried to hide their academic efforts or to manage good performance in school with other status-enhancing factors to avoid becoming stigmatized. They gave their friends answers when the friends were called on by the teacher and were disruptive and off-task during instructional periods, socializing with their friends and occasionally playing the "class clowns." These behaviors nullified the label of being a "goody-goody" or a "teacher's pet" by demonstrating a rebellious attitude to adult authority. Thus, by the second half of elementary school, the environment provided more of a social than an educational function for them, and this function had a negative affect on their desire for academic success (cf. Coleman 1961).

**GIRLS' POPULARITY FACTORS**

The major distinction between the boys' and girls' status hierarchies lay in
the factors that conferred popularity. Although some factors were similar, the girls used them in a different manner to organize their social environment. Consequently, the factors had different effects on the girls’ and boys’ status hierarchies.

**Family Background**

Similar to the middle-school girls studied by Eder (1985), the elementary school girls’ family background was a powerful force that affected their attainment of popularity in multiple ways. Their parents’ socioeconomic status (SES) and degree of permissiveness were two of the most influential factors.

**SES.** Maccoby (1980) suggested that among the most powerful and least understood influences on a child are the parents’ income, education, and occupation (SES). In general, many popular girls came from upper-class and upper-middle-class families and were able to afford expensive clothing that was socially defined as “stylish” and “fashionable.” These “rich” girls had a broader range of material possessions, such as expensive computers or games, a television in their room, and a designer phone with a separate line (some girls even had a custom acronym for the number). They also participated in select extracurricular activities, such as horseback riding and skiing and vacationed with their families at elite locations. Some girls’ families owned second houses in resort areas to which they could invite their friends for the weekend. Their SES gave these girls greater access to highly regarded symbols of prestige. Although less privileged girls often referred to them as “spoiled,” they secretly envied these girls’ life-styles and possessions. As two fourth-grade girls in the unpopular group stated:

**Alissa:** If your Mom has a good job, you’re popular, but if your Mom has a bad job, then you’re unpopular.

**Betty:** And, if, like, you’re on welfare, then you’re unpopular because it shows that you don’t have a lot of money.

**Alissa:** They think money means that you’re great—you can go to Sophia’s [a neighborhood “little store”] where popular people hang out and get whatever you want and stuff like that. You can buy things for people.

**Betty:** I have a TV, but if you don’t have cable [TV] then you’re unpopular because everybody that’s popular has cable.

Family background also influenced the girls’ popularity indirectly, through the factor of residential location. Neighborhoods varied within school districts, and girls from similar economic strata usually lived near each other. Not only did this geographic proximity increase the likelihood of their playing together, and not with girls from other class backgrounds, but the social activities in which they engaged after school were more likely to be similar, and their parents were more apt to be friends. In addition, the differences in their houses could be considerable, intimidating some and embarrassing others. One girl, who lived in one of the poorer areas in the district, often referred to the houses of her classmates as “mansions.” When she invited these girls to her house, she felt uncomfortable bringing them into her room because her clothes were kept in cardboard Pampers boxes, out of which her mother had fashioned a dresser. As her mother remarked:

I think sometimes it’s a lot easier for Angela to just play with the neighborhood girls here than to try to make friends with some of the other girls in her class. They’re popular, and they do all the fun things that Angela wants to get involved with, but it’s hard for her when they come over here and stare. . . . And she knows she can’t afford to do all the things they do, too.

Thus, although some popular girls were not affluent, most of the popular girls came from families with high SES. The girls believed that having money influenced their location in the social hierarchy.

**Laissez-faire.** Laissez-faire refers to the degree to which parents closely supervised their children or were permissive, allowing them to engage in a wide range of activities. Girls whose parents let them stay up late on sleepover dates, go out with their friends to all kinds of social activities, and gave them a lot of freedom while playing in the house were
more likely to be popular. Girls who had to stay home (especially on weekend nights) and "get their sleep," were not allowed to go to boy-girl parties, had strict curfews, or whose parents called ahead to parties to ensure that they would be adult "supervised" were more likely to be left out of the wildest capers and the most exclusive social crowd.

Whether for business, social, or simply personal reasons, permissive or absentee parents oversaw the daily nuances of their children’s lives less closely. They had a less tightly integrated family life and were less aware of their children’s responsibilities, activities, and place in the social order. Their daughters thus had a valuable resource, freedom, that they could both use and offer others. These girls were also the most likely to socialize away from their houses or to organize activities with their friends that others perceived as fun and appealing. Their freedom and parental permissiveness often tempted them to try out taboo activities, which was a source of popularity among their peers. Their activities sometimes led their group to become a wild or fast crowd, which further enhanced their status.

In some instances, girls who received less support or supervision in their home lives developed an "external locus of control" (Good and Brophy 1987) and became major figureheads in the popular crowd. Using the peer group as a support mechanism, they manipulated others in the group to establish their central position and to dominate the definition of the group’s boundaries. These ringleaders could make life difficult for members of their own clique, as one member of the popular group lamented:

I’ve really been trying to break away from Laura this year because she can be so mean, and I don’t know when I go in to school every day if she’s been calling up other girls talking about me behind my back and getting everybody against me or not. Like, if I don’t call everyone in my clique every night, I might find myself dropped from it the next day. Or she might decide at school that I’ve done something she doesn’t like and turn everyone against me. That’s why I’d like to break away from her, but I’m afraid, because she controls everybody, and I wouldn’t have any friends.

**Physical Appearance**

Another powerful determinant of girls’ location in the stratification system was their physical attractiveness. Others (Coleman 1961; Eder and Parker 1987; Eder and Sanford, 1986; Schofield 1981) have noted that appearance and grooming behavior are not only a major topic of girls’ conversation, but a source of popularity. The norms of popular appearance included designer clothing, such as Calvin Klein, Gitano, Forenza, and Esprit. In the upper grades, makeup was used as a status symbol, but as Eder and Sanford (1986) observed, too much makeup was highly criticized by other members of the group, thereby inhibiting social mobility. Finally, girls who were deemed pretty by society’s socially constructed standards were attractive to boys and had a much greater probability of being popular.

Girls were socialized into these norms of appearance at an early age. A group of five kindergarten girls voiced their feelings of upset about another girl in their class because they felt that she was popular and they were not:

**JEN:** It’s just that she has a lot of money but we don’t, so it’s like that’s why she has the prettiest clothes and you know, the prettiest makeup.

**LIZ:** And she thinks like she’s the prettiest girl in the whole school. Just because she’s blond and all the boys like her.

**ANITA:** And she thinks only she can have Erin [a well-liked girl] as her friend and not even us, she doesn’t even play with us, and that’s not very nice.

The perception that popularity was determined by physical traits was fully evidenced by these kindergartners. These aspects of appearance, such as clothing, hairstyles, and attractiveness to boys, were even more salient, with the girls in the upper grades. As an excerpt from one of our field notes indicated:

I walked into the fifth-grade coat closet and saw Diane applying hairspray and mousse to Paula’s and Mary’s hair. Someone passed by and said, "Oh, Mary I like your hair," and she responded, "I didn’t
do it; Diane did it." It seemed that Diane, who was the most popular girl in the class, was socializing them to use the proper beauty supplies that were socially accepted by the popular clique. I asked what made girls unpopular, and Diane said, "They're not rich and not pretty enough. Some people don't use the same kind of mousse or wear the same style of clothing."

As girls learn these norms of appearance and associate them with social status, they form the values that will guide their future attitudes and behavior, especially in cross-gender relationships (cf. Eder and Sanford 1986). This finding correlates with other research (Hatfield and Sprecher 1986) that suggested that physical appearance is closely related to attaining a mate, that people who perceive themselves as being unattractive have difficulty establishing relationships with others, and that there is a correlation between opportunities for occupational success and physical attractiveness.

Social Development

Social factors were also salient to girls' popularity. Like the boys, the most precocious girls achieved dominant positions, but they were also more sensitive to issues of inclusion and exclusion. Precocity and exclusivity were thus crucial influences on girls' formation of friendships and their location on the popularity hierarchy.

Precocity. Precocity refers to girls' early attainment of adult social characteristics, such as the ability to express themselves verbally, to understand the dynamics of intra- and intergroup relationships, to convince others of their point, and to manipulate others into doing what they wanted, as well as interest in more mature social concerns (such as makeup and boys). As with the boys, these social skills were only partly developmental; some girls just seemed more precocious from their arrival in kindergarten. One teacher discussed differences in girls' social development and its affects on their interactions:

Communication skills, I can see a definite difference. There is not that kind of sophistication in the social skills of the girls in the unpopular group. The popular kids are taking on junior high school characteristics pretty fast just in terms of the kinds of rivalries they have. They are very active after school, gymnastics especially. Their conflicts aren't over play as much as jealousy. Like who asked who over to their house and who is friends. There is some kind of a deep-running, oh, nastiness, as opposed to what I said before. The popular group—they seem to be maturing, I wouldn't call them mature, but their behavior is sophisticated. The unpopular girls seem to be pretty simple in their ways of communicating and their interests.

The most precocious girls showed an interest in boys from the earliest elementary years. They talked about boys and tried to get boys to pay attention to them. This group of girls was usually the popular crowd, with the clothes and appearance that boys (if they were interested in girls) would like. These girls told secrets and giggled about boys and passed boys notes in class and in the halls that embarrassed but excited the boys. They also called boys on the phone, giggling at them, asking them mundane or silly questions, pretending they were the teacher, singing radio jingles to them, or blurtng out "sexy" remarks. One second-grade boy described the kinds of things a group of popular girls said to him when they called him on the phone:

Well, usually they just call up and say, like "This is radio station KNUB and we're here to call you," but sometimes they say things like, "Babe will you go out with me tonight," or one time Jim [his brother] answered the phone and they said, "Get your sexy brother on the phone right now." And one time last year when we were out to dinner, they called and filled

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3 In the second grade, a group of popular girls, centered on an extremely precocious ringleader, regularly called boys. They asked the boys silly questions, giggled, and left long messages on their telephone answering machines. At one school outing, the dominant girl bribed a boy she liked with money and candy to kiss her, but when he balked at the task (after having eaten the candy and spent the money), she had to pretend to her friends that he had done so, to avoid losing face.
up our whole phone machine with messages, around 20 of them, and my mom had to call their moms and tell them to stop it.

Other girls who did not participate in these kinds of interactions often looked down on these girls as boy crazy, but these girls’ behavior sharpened the boys’ interest. Although boys could not let their peers know they liked it, they appreciated the attention. The notice they repaid to the girls then enhanced these girls’ popularity (cf. Schofield 1981).

By around the fourth to sixth grade, it became more socially acceptable for girls to engage in cross-gender interactions without being rebuked by their peers. The more precocious girls began to experiment further by flirting with boys: calling them on the telephone; “going” with them; going to parties; and, ultimately, dating. Although some girls were adventurous enough to ask a boy out, most followed traditional patterns and waited for boys to commit themselves first. One fourth-grade girl described what it meant to “go” with a boy: “You talk. You hold hands at school. You pass notes in class. You go out with them, and go to movies, and go swimming... We usually double date.”

In the upper grades, if a girl went with a popular boy, she was able to achieve a share of his prestige and social status. Several girls dreamed of this possibility and even spoke with longing or anticipation to their friends about it.4 When popular girls went with popular boys, it reinforced and strengthened the status of both. This was the most common practice, as a fifth-grade girl noted: “It seems that most of the popular girls go out with the popular boys; I don’t know why.” One fourth-grade girl referred to such a union as a “Wowee” (a highly prestigious couple), because people would be saying “Wow!” at the magnitude of their stardom. Yet, to go out with a lower-status boy would diminish a girl’s prestige. Several fourth-grade girls responded to the question, “What if a popular girl went with an unpopular boy?” this way:

**ALISSA:** Down! The girl would move down, way down.

**BETTY:** They would not do it. No girl would go out with an unpopular boy.

**LISA:** If it did happen, the girl would move down, and no one would play with her either.

A high-status girl would thus be performing a form of social suicide if she interacted with a low-status boy in any type of relationship. Although the girls acknowledged that they were sensitive to this issue, they were doubtful whether a popular boy’s rank in the social hierarchy would be affected by going with a girl from a lower stratum. They thought that boys would not place as much weight on such issues.

**Exclusivity.** Exclusivity refers to individuals’ desire, need, and ability to form elite social groups using such negative tactics as gossiping, the proliferation of rumors, bossiness, and meanness. One or two elite groups of girls at each grade level jointly participated in exclusionary playground games and extracurricular activities, which created clearly defined social boundaries because these girls granted limited access to their friendship circles. In one fourth-grade class, a clique of girls had such a strong group identity that they gave themselves a name and a secret language. As they stated:

**ANNE:** We do fun things together, the “Swisters” here, ‘um we go roller skating a lot, we walk home together and have birthday parties together.

**CARRIE:** We’ve got a secret alphabet.

**ANNE:** Like an A is a different letter.

**DEBBIE:** We have a symbol and stuff.

**ANNE:** But we don’t sit there and go like mad and walk around and go, “We’re the Swisters and you’re not and you can’t be in and anything.”

**CARRIE:** We don’t try to act cool; we just stick together, and we don’t sit there and brag about it.

This group of girls restricted entrée to their play and friendship activities, although they did not want to be perceived as pretentious and condescend-

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4 One girl even lied to her friends about it, pretending to them that she was going with a popular boy. When they found out that she had fabricated the story, they dropped her, and she lost both her status and her friends.
ing. Many girls in the less popular groups did not like the girls in the highest-status crowd, even though they acknowledged that these girls were popular (cf. Eder 1985). One sixth-grade girl who was in an unpopular group remarked:

Like, I mean with a few exceptions, most of the girls in the fifth grade are snobby, and with the sixth grade most of them are snobby, too, especially Carol, but they’re popular. That might be what makes them popular.

Two lower-status fourth-grade girls commented further on the girls’ social hierarchy:

**BETTY:** The popular girls don’t like the unpopular girls.

[Why not?]

**LAUREN:** Because they don’t think they look good and don’t dress well, and Anne, Carrie, Debbie, and all those guys have an attitude problem.

[What do you mean?]

**LISA:** An attitude problem is just coming in to impress people and like beating people up constantly or being really mean.

**BETTY:** If you’re not popular, you mostly get treated like you’re really stupid. They stare at you and go, “Uhh.” Like if someone does something bad, then the popular girl will tell all the other popular girls, and then they’ll go, “Oh, I hate you, you’re so immature.” Then they’d tell their whole gang and then their whole gang won’t like you one bit.

Thus, one of the most common forms of boundary maintenance among friendship groups, both intra- and interclique, involved the use of rumors and gossip (Parker and Gottman 1989). Shared secrets were passed among friends, cementing their relational bonds (Simmel 1950), while derisive rumors were told about outsiders. These were tactics girls used to create and maintain exclusivity. During classroom instructional periods, many of the girls were preoccupied with passing notes to one another. These behaviors primarily involved the girls in the popular cliques, who often derided the girls in the unpopular groups. This type of behavior not only separated the groups, but maintained the popular crowd’s position at the top of the social hierarchy. As Simmel (1950, p. 314) stated:

“The lie which maintains itself, which is not seen through, is undoubtedly a means of asserting intellectual superiority and of using it to control and suppress the less intelligent (if intelligence is measured as knowledge of the social situation).”

**Academic Performance**

In contrast to the boys, the girls never seemed to develop the machismo culture that forced them to disdain and disengage from academics. Although not all popular girls were smart or academic achievers, they did not suffer any stigma from performing well scholastically. Throughout elementary school, most girls continued to try to attain the favor of their teachers and to do well on their assignments. They gained status from their classmates for getting good grades and performing difficult assignments. The extent to which a school’s policies favored clumping students of like abilities in homogeneous learning groups or classes affected the influence of academic stratification on girls’ cliques. Homogeneous academic groupings were less common during the early elementary years, but increased in frequency as students approached sixth grade and their performance curve spread out wider. By fifth or sixth grade, then, girls were more likely to become friends with others of similar scholastic levels. Depending on the size of the school, within each grade there might be both a clique of academically inclined popular girls and a clique composed of popular girls who did not perform as well and who bestowed lower salience on schoolwork.

**DISCUSSION**

One of the major contributions of this work lies in its illustration of the role of popularity in gender socialization. Gaining and maintaining popularity has enormous significance on children’s lives (cf. Eder 1985), influencing their ability to make friends, to be included in fun activities, and to develop a positive sense of self-esteem. In discerning, adapting to, and creatively forging these features of popularity, children actively
socialize themselves to the gender roles embodied in their peer culture.

Our research suggests that many of the features of popularity described here arise and become differentiated at an earlier age than previous studies have shown. Factors that were considered primarily salient only to adolescent gendered cultures can now be seen as having their roots in elementary school. Thus, the girls we observed were already deriving status from their success in grooming, clothes, and other appearance-related variables; social sophistication and friendship ties; romantic success, measured through popularity and going with boys; affluence and its correlates of material possessions and leisure pursuits; and academic performance. Boys, even in the predominantly White middle-class schools that we studied, were accorded popularity and respect for distancing themselves from deference to authority and investment in academic effort and for displaying traits, such as toughness, trouble, domination, coolness, and interpersonal bragging and sparring skills. These peer focal concerns, the determinants of popularity, embody the models of children’s idealized gender roles.

A second contribution of this research lies in the gender images of elementary school children it portrays. As we noted earlier, previous characterizations of boys’ and girls’ gender roles have emphasized differences in their active and passive natures. Our research suggests that these depictions are of mixed validity: the images still exist, but boys’ and girls’ behavior incorporates some elements of both features. In addition to these dimensions, however, girls’ and boys’ popularity factors and gender roles incorporate elements of an achieved versus ascribed dichotomy that has not been addressed in the literature. Both these dimensions can be seen, to some extent, in overlapping and independent fashions in the gender models. Our research suggests that the following images embody the focal concerns of boys’ and girls’ gender roles.

Boys prosper in the youthful popularity system and carve out their gender identities through a successful internalization and expression of the male ethos. Their focal concerns evoke an awareness of and aspiration to the cult of masculinity, through which they can demonstrate their growth, maturity, and distance from the femininity characterizing their early family-oriented lives. They try to adopt elements of the machismo posture through their toughness and defiance of adult authority, challenging prescribed rules and roles in class, and distancing themselves from academics. They also strive for admiration and reputation among peers by bragging and boasting about their exploits (despite norms of modesty) in sports, experiments with deviant behavior, success with girls, and dominance over other boys.

Boys’ culture also embodies their expression of physicality in its central focus on active participation and prowess in sports. Boys spend most of their free time outdoors, carving out and conquering space, filling it up with their play and games, and overrunning the play of girls and younger boys (cf. Thorne 1986). Their physicality is competitive and dominating, structured to involve contests in which one individual or team bests the other and revels in the victory. Physical displays, both within and outside the game structure, can also culminate in physical aggression and fights between boys, through which masculinity is tested and dominance is established.

The active nature of boys’ lives is tied to their orientation of autonomy. Boys know that part of growing up involves measuring up, or proving themselves as men. Thus, they prepare themselves for this eventuality by regularly measuring themselves against each other. They strive for independence from adult authority figures, for self-reliance, and for toughness. They cut themselves and each other off from the cult of coddling with sharp remarks and derogations against “babylike” behavior, toughening themselves in preparation for their adult role.

Finally, boys enter the culture of coolness, assuming suitably detached postures and attitudes, both within and outside their groups. They act cool in
distancing themselves from things they used to like, but now define as feminine or nerdy. They act cool by repressing emotionality and dealing with others on a physical level. Most especially, they try to act cool to protect themselves in cross-gender relations, to avoid excessively weakening themselves because of their structural position of having to expose their interest in girls and to face possible rejection. They are not always successful in this regard, however, for they sometimes become emotional and show it in dealing with girls, hanging on, despite rejection, to the hope that a girl will like them and go with them.

The focal concerns of the girls’ peer culture and gender role revolve around a different set of skills and values. In contrast to the boys’ defiance, girls become absorbed into a *culture of compliance and conformity*. Especially at school, they occupy themselves with games and social interactions in which they practice and perfect established social roles, rules, and relationships. They not only follow explicitly stated rules, but extrapolate upon them, enforcing them on others as well. Their superior performance in school reflects, not necessarily their greater innate intelligence, but their more passive adherence to the normative order. Yet they do have instances of assertiveness, rebellion, or misbehavior, which are likely to be directed into social channels, toward other girls, or at home, toward their families.

From an earlier age than boys, girls are attracted to the *culture of romance* (cf. Eisenhart and Holland 1983; Simon, Eder, and Evans 1992; Valli 1988). They fantasize about romantic involvements with boys and become interested, sooner, in crossing gender lines for relationships, both platonic and otherwise. They absorb idealized images of gendered ways of relating to boys that are based partly on traditional roles. This romantic ideal fosters flirtatious behavior that is more active in its teasing and chasing than were previous models and more egalitarian in relationship power (girls go “dutch,” arrange transportation, initiate more activities, and are not content merely to acquiesce to boys’ wishes).

Its ultimate aim, however, is to lure boys into the feminine realm of intimacy, emotions, and relationship work. Girls who accomplish romance successfully, by attracting a boy, gain status among other girls.

Passivity is also inherent in the *ideology of domesticity* (Valli 1988) that characterizes girls’ play and interaction. Unlike the boys, who search for the physical limits of their bodies and the social limits of their school, group, and society through their efforts to challenge these limits, the girls carve out inner space. They live indoor lives; draw indoor scenes; and concern themselves with gathering others around them. They focus on the emotional dimension of expression and become more adept at intimacy and cooperation than at openly competing against others (cf. Deaux 1977; Gilligan 1982; Karweit and Hansell 1983). In this way, they prepare themselves for the domestic and maternal roles.

Hovering over all this is an *orientation of ascription* that is found, although in an eroded form compared to years past. From their families and the mass-media culture, they learn that the woman’s role has been to attract a man who will bestow his status on her. Although many more of their mothers have careers than in previous generations, they see that these jobs are often accorded secondary stature within the family and may be located within the sphere of “women’s occupations.” Many elementary school girls plan to have careers in addition to being mothers, yet they also perceive that women still get status partly by its being attached to them. Therefore, they look to see what is attached to other girls. This orientation comes out in their preoccupation with ascribed features of potential playmates, such as their material possessions, life-styles, houses, and appearance (cf. Eder 1985). As part of this reflected role, girls also learn that women have often gotten what they want through indirectness and manipulation, rather than through direct action (a component of their flirting), and thus indirectness and manipulation remain part of their behavioral repertoire.

These ascribed-achieved and active-passive divergences are found in the
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popularity factors and the idealized gender images, yet oppositional elements are also clearly present. Boys are passive in leveling themselves academically to conform to peer-group norms and manipulative and indirect, like girls, in their jockeying to maintain both boundaries around their friendship groups and their own positions within these groups. They may not be as concerned about ascribed characteristics and social class as are girls, but they are cognizant of appearance and material possessions. At the same time, girls are active in their everyday behavior. They work to get good grades, to participate in sports (a greatly expanded realm, although not as yet a strongly popularity-inducing one), to be involved in extracurricular activities, and to stay embedded within their cliques.

Hence, boys and girls are both active and passive within their own realms. They employ agency within the structural framework provided by their gender roles, socially constructing their behavior so it accords with the impressions they seek to achieve popularity among their peers. Under the guise of passivity and being attached, girls actively produce their peer status (although they may do so indirectly), while boys engineer images of themselves as forthright, active, and democratic, all the while working the back channels and scanning others for ascribed traits. Thus both boys and girls actively create their roles of relative passivity and activity, achievement and ascription, in accord with their perceptions of the larger culture. These are patterns and roles that they learn in childhood and that they will continue to evince as adults.

As a third contribution of this research, we compare these children’s gender roles with models from earlier times. Looking at the composition of these images, we see that in their complexity, their integration of oppositional elements that expand and androgenize them, they represent a slight historical shift from previous generations. This has been a focus of concern for those studying changes in the gender roles of men and women in society. In our middle-class sample, we found more achievement-oriented female role models for girls and more structural avenues open for them to be active and accomplished. The girls knew and espoused the rhetoric of feminism, that they had rights and expectations within society. To a greater extent than did the boys, then, they attained some gender-role expansion: They could more acceptably pursue the traditionally male avenues of sports, achievement, autonomy, and initiative toward the opposite sex. Such a crossover among boys into “feminine” areas was less acceptable, however, and still negatively sanctioned.

These changes have created some modification in the traditional gender roles, especially for girls. Thus, compared to previous studies that found only minimal changes in children’s gender socialization (Best 1983; Hoffman 1977), the notions of appropriate roles and behaviors of the girls in our study accord somewhat greater with societal transformations. At the same time, the boys still predominantly sought and attained popularity and acceptance through traditional gendered behavior. This “progressive” population is precisely where one would expect the greatest changes in gender roles to begin appearing, for many of these children came from highly educated, professional, and dual-career families. While these modifications are becoming more visible among this group, researchers should note that they may well be weaker among a broader spectrum of other racial and class groups. Future research could profit from examining divergences and affinities in the gender roles of elementary school children across such racial and class lines.

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