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Gender differences in popularity discourses:
Results from an ethnically diverse Hungarian primary
school sample

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Abstract

Status among peers, popularity in particular, is one of the central concerns for adolescents. While popularity dynamics have been extensively researched in ‘Western’ contexts, less is known about other geographical areas. The present paper is written to address this gap by investigating the gendered patterns of popularity discourses among sixth-grade students (age 12–14) in Central and Northern Hungarian primary schools. The research involved conducting focus-group interviews with 144 pupils in ten school classes with a large proportion of ethnic Roma and socially disadvantaged students. The analysis draws on a critical, primarily Foucauldian, understanding of discourse and power relations. Most of our findings are in line with the ‘Western’ literature. Popularity discourses of boys were related to traditional ‘masculine’ traits such as sports, physical strength, and dominance, while girls’ discourses were centred on physical appearance, verbal aggression, ‘arrogance’, and kindness. However, while for boys ‘sensitivity’, a lack of physical strength, and the inability to ‘protect oneself’ were considered ‘unmanly’, no similar discourses of ‘unfemininity’ emerged. In the case of girls, primarily ‘liking boys too much’ was disapproved, while aggression, ‘bad behaviour’, and academic disengagement were not. The paper also briefly covers the intersections of gender and Roma ethnicity.

Keywords: discourse, early adolescence, gender, Hungary, popularity

1 Introduction

Status and popularity among peers are among the central concerns for adolescents and educators alike. An extensive body of research has found an association between one’s position in the adolescent status hierarchy and a variety of negative behavioural patterns, such as aggression, academic disengagement, and engagement in risk behaviour (e.g. Mayeux et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2006; Schwartz & Hopmeyer Gorman, 2011). Additionally, popular peers have been shown to be influential in setting peer norms (e.g. Sandstrom, 2011), thus they can contribute to the normalization and diffusion of both positive and negative behavi-

oural patterns. Importantly, however, status and popularity are not simply ‘given’, fixed aspects of one’s life; they are, to a great extent, constructed, negotiated, and re-negotiated through discourse. The dynamics of these discursive constructions are influenced by the ‘milieu’ of school classes as well as by the wider social context. In particular, the role and salience of gender, ethnicity, and social class are strongly shaped by the local and national context, norms, and prejudices. Social expectations about what boys and girls *should* or *should not* do and what the ‘place’ of men and women or certain ethnic groups or social classes is have a strong impact on what physical, personality, and behavioural attributes contribute to one’s popularity or unpopularity as function of sex, ethnicity, and social class, as well as to the ways that children and adolescents *can* talk about and negotiate these dynamics.

The gendered patterns of popularity discourses have already been researched in the British and North American literature; however, less is known about other geographical areas and cultural contexts. This paper is written to address this gap by presenting the results of focus-group research among sixth-grade primary school students (age 12–14) in Hungary. The interviews were conducted in 21 focus groups with 144 students in 10 school classes in Northern and Central Hungary. Our sample is socially and ethnically diverse, with two-thirds of the respondents belonging to the socially disadvantaged Roma minority, which also allows for the analysis of the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Gender differences in the Hungarian context might be particularly interesting, as strong gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms exist among the Hungarian population (see, for instance, European Commission, 2017, pp. 5–7; Gregor, 2016; Gregor & Rédai, 2015), while the Hungarian conservative-populist government and public intellectuals close to it have openly been engaged in anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses (Kováts & Pető, 2017). Additionally, to our knowledge, there is no qualitatively informed research about popularity discourses in the Hungarian school context, and only a few instances of research on gendered discourses in the school setting (e.g., Rédai, 2019a; 2019b).

In our analysis, we will, to some extent, draw on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and power relations by putting emphasis on the discourse-internal and discourse-external factors that give rise to certain discourses while limiting or inhibiting others. However, we will also show that, in the case of our data, a Foucauldian approach might have its limitations, especially with regard to discourse-external elements. Overall, we will see that the impact of widespread gender-stereotypical attitudes and anti-feminist political discourses on early adolescents’ discourses may be limited, in particular in the case of girls.

2 Gender and popularity: A review of the literature

Gender differences in popularity dynamics have been extensively documented in the literature. The quantitative research tradition, predominantly sociometric research, has found that activities and behaviour related to physical dominance (e.g., athletic abilities, ‘toughness’, physical and overt verbal aggression) are more strongly associated with popularity for boys, while prosocial behaviour (e.g., co-operation, kindness) and relational aggression (e.g., social manipulation, exclusion, spreading gossip) are more strongly associated with popularity for girls (Mayeux & Kleiser, 2019). Additionally, being considered likeable and funny are also more strongly associated with boys’ popularity, while the quantitative tradi-

tion has found no significant gender differences with regard to physical attractiveness, affluence, or academic competence; areas where ethnographic research has found important differences (Rose et al., 2011).

According to qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations, the most important traits and skills for boys to be perceived as popular are related to athletic abilities, physical strength (the ability to intimidate and dominate peers), being perceived as smart and humorous, school disengagement, disruptive behaviour, successful cross-gender relationships, and 'doing heterosexuality' (e.g., Adler et al., 1992; Chambers et al., 2004; Francis, 2009; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Renold, 2000). In the case of girls, the most important traits involve social skills (being 'nice' and compliant but also being 'mean' and manipulative), being fashionable, being perceived as attractive (especially by boys), and 'doing heterosexuality' but without being sexually 'too forward' (e.g., Adler et al., 1992; Chambers et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2007; Merten, 1997; Read et al., 2011; Renold, 2000).

However, the concept of the 'nice' and 'passive' girl, traditionally considered salient in the case of White middle-class girls, has been challenged from multiple directions. First, it has been shown that although overt competition for status (a traditional 'masculine' trait) is considered less acceptable for girls, more covert ways of competing for status, in particular relational aggression, gossiping, and 'meanness', are often considered central to popularity (e.g., Currie et al., 2007; Duncan, 2004; Merten, 1997; Wiseman, 2002). Although popular girls are often not widely liked (e.g., Eder, 1985), they tend to be both envied and feared for their social power (Currie et al., 2007). Peers also often consider them 'snobs' who feel that they are 'better than other kids' (Currie et al., 2007). Second, other alternative constructs have also been discussed recently in the literature, such as 'tough' and confident 'ladettes' (e.g., Jackson, 2006), or 'alpha' girls (Kindlon, 2006 cited by Bettis et al., 2016) who are assumed to be both assertive and competitive (traditional 'masculine' traits) and collaborative and relationship-oriented (traditional 'feminine' traits) (for a criticism of the 'alpha' girl discourse see Bettis et al., 2016).

Discourses of masculinity are also undergoing some changes. For instance, Read and colleagues found in a sample of secondary school students in the United Kingdom that being kind, friendly, and helpful were as frequently mentioned by boys as by girls as characteristics of popular students (Read et al., 2011). The authors argue that being kind and helpful to peers might not be considered feminized characteristics any longer, but being helpful and obedient towards the teacher is still devalued and feminized. Another study by the authors on the same sample found that academically successful popular students needed to 'balance' popularity and school achievement: almost all of them were good-looking and fashionable, and in the case of boys almost all of them were good at sports, so that they could present themselves as 'authentically' masculine, in spite of their engagement in schoolwork (Francis et al., 2010). Additionally, in order to avoid being identified as 'boffs', both high-achieving boys and girls put considerable effort into presenting their performance as 'effortless achievement' (Francis et al., 2010). Moreover, these academically successful popular students were found to be loud, assertive, and involved in the demonstration of 'gender-typical' interests: fashion, celebrities, and the production of 'maturity' for girls, and more physicality (throwing things at each other and fighting) for boys (Francis et al., 2010; see also Skelton et al., 2010).

Additionally, the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity and social class also need to be taken into consideration. For instance, Paul Willis extensively documented in his classical ethnographic study how British working-class boys ('lads') developed a 'counter-school culture' where they could achieve high peer status by adhering to violent, counter-school norms

(Willis, 1977). Although their rejection of school values and authority was the result of their developing class consciousness (and a developing sense of related social injustice), this eventually led to the reproduction of the social structure through their ending up in working-class jobs. Similarly, Ingunn Marie Eriksen described in a recent study how ethnic minority girls with an immigrant background in a Norwegian secondary school participated in the aggressive rejection of school values and in disruptive behaviour, including physical fights (Eriksen, 2019). While these girls experienced the school system as providing the potential for academic success only for (native) Norwegians, their disruptive behaviour provided them with 'the subcultural privilege of local "cool", affording them temporary status and power [...] that does not jeopardise their ethnic belonging or femininity' (p. 12). The ethnographic field studies by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu are also worth considering. Their well-known 'acting white' hypothesis proposes that 'involuntary' ethnic minorities in a subordinate social position consider certain activities to be 'prerogatives' of the White majority and members engaging in such activities (e.g., good academic performance) are seen as being integrated into White American culture at the expense of their own culture (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1992). Consequently, academic success may be resisted both by individuals and their environment, and well performing pupils may receive a variety of peer sanctions ranging from verbal disapproval to physical violence. In spite of the detailed ethnographic description and theoretical framework, the generalizability of the 'acting white' hypothesis has been questioned as large-scale quantitative studies have found mixed results (see e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1997; vs. Fryer & Torelli, 2010). Similarly, quantitative studies in Hungary among ethnic Roma students have mostly found no support for the 'acting white' hypothesis so far (Habsz & Radó, 2018; Hajdu et al. 2019; Kisfalusi, 2018; but cf. Keller, 2020).

Although the concepts of masculinity and femininity might be changing and the scope of 'acceptable' masculinities and femininities might be expanding, a large body of research demonstrates that popularity is still overwhelmingly ascribed to those students who possess the most 'gender-typical' traits and perform the most 'gender-typical' behaviour (Mayeux & Kleiser, 2019). In their *gender prototypicality theory* of popularity, Mayeux and Kleiser argue that popularity in adolescence is a 'by-product' of intensifying cross-sex interactions and competition for opposite-sex attention, and thus it is disproportionately ascribed to 'gender-typical' peers since it is they who are most likely to attract opposite-sex attention (Mayeux & Kleiser, 2019). Francis and colleagues also found that the most popular students were the ones who had frequent interactions with the opposite sex and appeared to be 'at ease' in these interactions (Francis et al., 2010). In addition, feminist criticism argues that the discourses of femininity are inherently contradictory and insupportable, which results in girls becoming 'impossible subjects': too fat or too thin, too clever or too stupid, too free or too restricted, etc. (Griffin, 2004; Read et al., 2011). Popular girls face pressure in relation to the contradictory expectations of having to look 'perfect' while not being too 'self-absorbed' about their appearance and having to attract boys' attention but in 'the right way' in order to avoid being labelled 'sluts' (Currie et al., 2007). Finally, both boys and girls seem to be concerned with 'authenticity'. Unsuccessful attempts to increase one's status by trying to be 'more cool' than one actually 'is' often leads to pariah status and 'wannabe' stigma (Read et al., 2011). However, non-popular students (especially the ones in the 'middle') sometimes challenge the dominant discourses of 'coolness' (Paechter & Clark, 2016) and authenticity (Read et al., 2011), often suggesting that popular students are the 'inauthentic' ones.

As we have seen, in certain school settings academic engagement and the perception of ‘inauthenticity’ contributes to students’ unpopularity and can also make them the targets of teasing/bullying. Additionally, students who are perceived to lack certain social skills (e.g., being ‘shy’ or ‘quiet’) are also widely reported to be unpopular (e.g. Read et al., 2011; Warrington & Younger, 2011). Connecting unpopularity to personality implies that it is the students’ ‘own fault’ that they are unpopular, while in reality these individualized characteristics are, to a great extent, socially constructed (Scott 2007 cited by Read et al., 2011). Generally, kids who ‘stand out from the crowd’ or are perceived to be ‘different’ in any way, including appearance (clothes, disability, body shape, attractiveness), behaviour (e.g., being ‘shy’ or expressing opinions contrary to those of the dominant group), abilities (being too ‘smart’ or too ‘thick’, lacking athletic ability in the case of boys) or financial background are most commonly the unpopular ones (Warrington & Younger, 2011).

Finally, the importance of inter-school variability needs to be emphasized. Studies involving more schools have found that the role of factors such as school engagement or substance use varied from school to school (e.g., Warrington & Younger, 2011). Additionally, while most studies were conducted in ‘Western’ settings, in countries with different value systems and cultural traditions results might be significantly different. For instance, Cobbett found in an Antigua sample that the association between popularity and traditional gender norms and expectations was particularly strong (Cobbett, 2014). Similarly, Xi and colleagues found in a Chinese sample that popular girls were considered to be friendly and prosocial, in contrast to most ‘Western’ results (Xi et al., 2016).

3 Discourse and discourse analysis

Discourse is one of the widely used concepts in linguistics and the social sciences, with a variety of diverging definitions and interpretations. Similarly, definitions and approaches to discourse analysis shows remarkable diversity. As a general working definition, we can say that discourse analysis focuses on the ways ‘in which language constructs and mediates social and psychological realities’ (Willig, 2014, p. 341). Critical approaches to discourse analysis focus on the ways power inequalities are maintained, reproduced, legitimized, or camouflaged through discursive and social practices. In addition to critical linguists, some sociologists and social theorists have also put the concept of discourse and the reproduction of social inequalities through language at the centre of their investigations (e.g., Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1981; Habermas, 1984). As the present analysis, to some extent, draws on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and power inequalities, some important aspects of Foucault’s approach will be briefly summarized below.

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970 entitled *The order of discourse*, Foucault outlined those discourse-internal and discourse-external procedures that he believed ‘controlled, selected, organised and redistributed’ the production of discourse in a given society as well as the methodological requirements they implied (Foucault, 1981; for a close reading see Hook, 2001). Importantly, he argued that the opposition between true and false is ‘a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system’ (Foucault, 1981, p. 54) that relies on institutional support and is reinforced by multiple layers of social practices that, at the same time, constrain other alternative discourses. Not surprisingly, the strongest discourses are the ones that attempt to ground themselves in the ‘natural’ – the scientific

and other arguments that are considered ‘reasonable’ by the dominant standards (Hook, 2001). An important question for Foucault is how different types of *subject positions*, including the privileged position of the author of a text or utterance, are made possible within the given discourse, as well as what it is that *cannot* be said from those certain positions (Hook, 2001). Additionally, Foucault outlines four methodological principles for discourse analysis: reversal, discontinuity, specificity, and exteriority (Foucault, 1981, pp. 67–73). The *principle of reversal* suggests that the focus of the analyst should be on the forms of exclusion, limitation, and approbation of discourse, while the *principle of discontinuity* argues that discourses should be treated as ‘discontinuous practices’ that sometimes ‘cross each other’, while in other cases they are ‘unaware of each other’ (p. 67). Discontinuities help destabilize the otherwise assumed coherence, unity and ‘ahistory’ of discourse, showing that even some of the most fundamental concepts are to a great extent discursive entities (Hook, 2001). The *principle of specificity* argues that discourses cannot be resolved into ‘a play of pre-existing significations’; instead, we should consider them as a practice that we ‘impose on things’ (Foucault, 1981, p. 67). We understand meanings and distinguish ‘truth-claims’ based on discourse itself, as our knowledge of the world, estimation of truth, and speaking capacity are governed by certain discursive formations (Hook, 2001). The *principle of exteriority* suggests that, instead of focusing on the ‘interior’ of discourse, we should go towards the external conditions of possibility that make certain discourses possible and define the boundaries of such discourses (Foucault, 1981, p. 67).

While Foucault’s approach to discourse may be appealing in many aspects, its practical limitations are also apparent. For instance, investigating the external conditions and events that enhance or limit certain discourses at the local and national levels would certainly go beyond the boundaries of a paper like the present one. Nevertheless, the techniques used to problematize or normalize certain behaviours and/or power relations, different subject positions, and ‘rarefactions’ of discourses (i.e., what can and cannot be said from certain subject positions), and, to a limited extent, the external social context, can be addressed in such case studies as well.

4 Data

The data for the present analysis come from the transcripts of 21 focus-group interviews conducted in Northern and Central Hungarian primary schools in the spring of 2015. The sample involved 144 sixth-grade students from 10 school classes in eight schools. The focus-group research complemented one wave of a larger longitudinal survey-data collection effort (1054 students in 53 school classes) that focused on ethnic segregation, status hierarchies, and social dynamics in class. In order to investigate the interethnic aspects of these phenomena, the survey research sampled schools with a ‘known’ higher proportion of Roma students. In line with the goals of this larger study, the focus-group interviews primarily concentrated on students’ discourses related to popularity, and to a lesser extent on their discourses about friendship and ethnicity. The selection of classes for the focus-group research was based on two considerations: a guaranteed large proportion of Roma students (as a few questions were related to ethnicity) and the availability of schools for the complementary qualitative research (as the research took place near the end of the academic year).

The interviews took the time of one school class (45 minutes) and students were asked to form their own groups prior to the interviews (most groups contained four to seven pupils). In spite of the short time frame, the atmosphere was pleasant and friendly in most groups and students were very open about a wide range of topics. This might partly be due to the fact that in most cases they had already met and talked with us during the survey data collection effort a few months earlier, as well as prior to the interviews on the day of the interviews, and partly to the fact that they could form their own groups and thus in most cases participated in these discussions together with their friends. Written permission from parents was obtained in the case of all participants, and 84 per cent of students attending these classes participated in the interviews. The sample involved four school classes in disadvantaged rural areas and six classes in urban areas (three in the capital city and three in other towns) where disadvantaged and ethnic Roma students were overrepresented. Although no systematic data on ethnicity or socioeconomic background were collected during the interviews, the related survey data for these classes show that 68 per cent of the students identified as ethnic Roma (in the full survey sample this proportion was 35 per cent).¹ In spite of not having ethnicity data on individual participants, based on interviewer observations three types of groups emerged: mixed ethnicity groups, mostly ethnic Roma groups, and only-Roma groups. These compositions were in line with the ethnic composition of the respective classes as shown by the survey results, and no general tendency to ethnic segregation was observable in group formation. On the other hand, there was a relatively strong tendency for gender segregation: most groups were fully or predominantly same sex, while a few groups were mixed (typically as the result of 'remaining' students joining groups or a high number of absentees).

The procedure for the interviews was as follows: first, students went through a warm-up session during which they introduced themselves and could express their opinions about the survey research (one or two months prior to the interviews, depending on the school). Then pupils were asked to write individually about the characteristics that they believed made someone popular in the class on a Post-it note; and after a few minutes the moderators collected these notes. Then the moderators discussed the listed characteristics with the group. There was also a list of characteristics (being good at sports, having good/bad grades, having cool gadgets, drinking alcohol and smoking) that they were asked to discuss in case any of these factors did not come up. This was followed by a few optional questions (related to describing popular pupils in the class and same-sex and cross-sex popularity, if these topics had not come up previously) and the section on popularity was closed with visual stimuli about excluded pupils (described in Section 5.1. in more detail). The section on popularity was followed by two brief sections on ethnicity (also with visual stimuli) and the conceptualization of friendship. As can be seen from this description, the interpretation of the

¹ Although it is difficult to estimate the ethnic composition of Hungarian school classes, a nationally representative school sample by TÁRKI found that approximately 10 per cent of eighth-grade students were ethnic Roma, based on parental self-identification (Hajdú et al., 2014, p. 268). Even though the measurement method and the year group are somewhat different, based on this proportion we can confidently assume that our sample did over-represent ethnic Roma students.

term 'popular' (*népszerű*) was predominantly left to the participants – an approach in line with the international literature. Although the term can traditionally refer to both being dominant/influential *and* being liked by peers, international research (mostly from English-speaking countries and Holland) shows that popularity is generally interpreted by adolescents as the status dimension associated with power, prestige, and visibility (Cillessen & Marks, 2011). Similarly, it was used predominantly in this sense by the participants as well (see below). Consequently, the discourses presented in the following sections will mostly refer to the (assumed) personality and behavioural characteristics that participants perceived as contributing to one's popularity in the given class, not necessarily the characteristics that they personally prefer. In cases when the discourse refers to social affection (preference, likeability) it will be clearly indicated.

5 Results

Overall, the description of popular boys and girls was to a great extent in line with the international literature. Girls were primarily seen as '(over)sensitive', gossipy, and manipulative by many boys, while boys were most typically seen by girls as immature and (physically) fighting among one another. Both sexes thought that popular girls were usually 'big mouthed', somewhat aggressive, and 'bossy', while popular boys were thought to be good at sports, strong, and able to 'protect themselves'. Physical appearance also came up in some of the girl's groups, where both being 'too attractive' or 'too ugly' could have negative consequences. Among boys, physical weakness was often seen negatively, in particular if one was only 'pretending to be strong' but in fact was weak. Due to the age of the participants (12–14), contact between boys and girls was typically scarce, although the importance of being popular among members of the other sex – primarily being considered attractive and/or having a romantic relationship – came up occasionally. Some boys expressed their preference for girls who were 'similar' to them, e.g., sporty, outgoing, and funny; while this type of preference did not come up among girls. Importantly, when asked about popular students in the class, boys predominantly named other boys, while girls named both boys and girls at approximately similar frequency. When asked about the meaning of 'popularity', students most typically related it to being 'cool' or to being 'known' and 'famous', while they also sometimes related it to being liked by many peers.

5.1 'Sporty' boys and 'sensitive' girls

The characteristics most frequently mentioned in the interviews were being good at sports and being too 'sensitive'. The former was the most typical factor associated with boys' popularity, while the latter was attributed to both certain boys and girls and was reported to be the most important factor behind unpopularity. Being 'sensitive' seemed to be an umbrella term for a range of characteristics including being shy, reserved, and prone to cry, but also being irritable and reacting to 'teasing' aggressively.

Susan: David, Lisa, Nancy, they cannot talk to everyone and are not popular.²

Moderator: Why not?

Tom: They are very sensitive, and when anyone talks to them they run away.

Ron: Or lash out at you.

Moderator: Alright, thank you. Anyone want to add anything to this?

Brian: Yes, in connection to this, when anyone talks to them, they're like [*imitating*] 'oh leave me alone', and they hit me, and they go away together.

(*Boy-majority group with one girl, mixed ethnicity, capital city*)

This excerpt exemplifies the multiple layers and ambiguities related to 'sensitivity'. As students who created the 'sensitivity' discourses were the dominant ones in virtually all classes (although not necessarily the ones in the numerical majority), those students who were more reserved, somewhat introverted, or in other ways less resilient to their peers teasing them were easily labelled as lacking the necessary social skills. Not being able to 'talk to everyone' was clearly presented as the fault of these students (and not, for instance, the fault of those whom they are 'not able' to talk to), while it suggests that high peer status should be attributed to those pupils who, assumedly, can get along with everyone else. Since not getting along is a two-way relationship, 'everyone' primarily refers to the dominant students who set the norms and rules of class life. Not being resilient to mocking and teasing not only leads to the stigma of being 'sensitive', but not being in tune with these dominant students also leads to the essentialization of certain personality traits – i.e., pupils who do not get on with their popular peers become consensually seen as shy or sensitive. Similarly to what we have seen in the literature, popular students often attributed popularity and unpopularity to interpersonal skills, while their less popular peers frequently saw popularity itself in a more negative light and primarily attributed it to physical appearance, sports, and different forms of 'bad behaviour' (in fact, popular students also often attributed popularity to a combination of these traits and interpersonal skills). Importantly, in many of the groups students mentioned 'not fitting in' or 'not adapting to the community' when asked to elaborate on 'sensitivity'; expressions that are typically used by teachers and other adults when they describe 'problematic' students in Hungary. It would be interesting to investigate in the future the extent to which the argumentation schemes and discursive frames that put the blame on students deemed 'unable to fit in' are provided and reinforced by teachers and other adults.

Not surprisingly, 'sensitivity' was more frequently associated with girls and was certainly considered a 'feminine' characteristic. In cases when it was associated with boys, it was considered 'unmanly', and sensitive boys were sometimes labelled 'little girls'. At around the midpoint of the interviews, students were provided with two pictures, one of them showing a group of boys with one clearly being excluded; the other picture a group of girls with the same configuration. Students were asked to describe what they saw in the pictures, why

² All transcripts presented in this paper were translated into English by the author, and names have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

this situation had occurred, and whether there were similar situations in their class. The following excerpt shows one example when students associated sensitivity with being feminine.

Mark: [*about the boy in the picture*] [He's] sensitive, that's why. Look at him, how sensitive he is. He's a little girl.

Paul: This is Billie [*a classmate*], and this is whatshisname.

(*Mixed gender, mixed ethnicity group, small town*)

While 'sensitivity' was most frequently mentioned in relation to unpopularity, 'arrogance' was a characteristic sometimes used to describe popular girls. These girls were considered popular, although widely disliked, and were perceived to 'look down on others' while having a 'huge ego'. Coolness and popularity were frequently interpreted as denigrating, mocking, and taunting others; however, this association was more typical in the case of girls.

Moderator: And Sandra, why is she arrogant?

Several students: Because she denigrates everybody, she taunts everyone.

Barbara: And [she thinks] she's the best at everything. [*others agree*]

Moderator: [*asking another girl*] What do you think?

Carolyn: She's a loudmouth.

[..]

Amanda: She denigrates everyone...

Martha: But when we say the same to her, she gets offended immediately.

Carolyn: She gets outraged.

Moderator: And Martha, why do you think it's possible that Sandra is so arrogant and still popular?

Martha: She's not popular at all.

Moderator: She's not. [*others disagree*] Uhm, so she's popular but not in the good sense?

Several students: yes, yes.

Amanda: And if someone dares talk to her, she denigrates them, and shouts at them. So I think because of this. No one dares to taunt her, they look up on her out of fear.

(*Mixed gender, mostly Roma group, small town*)

Sports, football in particular, were presented as being of central importance for every group of boys. Additionally, boxing and the ability to 'protect oneself' physically were also frequently mentioned. Being good at football was a source of pride for boys, and sometimes they also implied that this would make them more attractive among girls. Interestingly, in spite of this central importance, the assumption that not being skilled at sports would hinder one's chances of becoming popular was downplayed or rejected in every group of boys. Among girls, sports only occasionally came up and did not seem to be of central importance. Importantly, as the dominant members of girl groups were typically not very fond of doing sports, girls who were originally more positive about sports eventually also started to downplay their importance.

5.2 Physical strength and violence

As mentioned earlier, the topic of physical strength was central in boys' discourses of popularity. Those who were strong and fought a lot were frequently reported to be more popular and an ethos of 'toughness' was often verbalized. Occasionally, fighting together was mentioned as one of the major bonding experiences and an integral part of school life for boys. Physical violence was almost always framed by the perpetrators as a proportional reaction to another person's verbal or physical attacks, or at least was presented in neutral terms (e.g. 'there was a fight'), and respondents hardly ever positioned themselves as initiators of these conflicts. On the one hand, this shows that physical violence needs to be 'justified' for peers (or at least for the adult moderator) in order to be considered 'acceptable'. On the other hand, the openness with which respondents talked about such events suggests that, under certain circumstances, the surrounding adult environment did not always judge these events as unacceptable, at least not in the case of boys. Additionally, trying to participate in these demonstrations of strength without the corresponding physical capacity ('pretending to be strong') resulted in extreme unpopularity. These unsuccessful attempts to increase one's status (without having the 'right' physical capabilities) are related to the question of authenticity. As we have seen in the literature, students who 'pretend' to be someone other than they 'really are' can become extremely unpopular. In addition to strength being an important 'masculine' trait, 'fearless' attitudes were just as important. The following excerpt shows the difficulty, and almost impossibility, of boys admitting being afraid of violent peers.

Moderator: And, by the way, does it make someone more popular, if s/he is a bit more violent, fights [physically]? Or are you afraid of them?

Dan: We are afraid.

Steve: It's not that we are afraid of them but... [*hesitates*]

Moderator: So you're not afraid of them?

Brian: I'm not afraid of anyone either.

Dan: I'm not afraid of anyone either.

(*Mixed gender, mostly Roma group, small town*)

Reports of physical fights were rare among girls, and on the few occasions when they were mentioned, these stories were about students not present in the group, or the statements were phrased in very general terms (e.g., 'there are fights'). Realistically, one could expect that such confrontations actually occur more rarely among girls; however, the lack of 'owning up' to such activities shows that these fights might be less acceptable (for adults) in the case of girls, or at least they are less a source of 'pride' (for an exception, see the analysis of some of the only-Roma classes below). However, while physical strength and fights were not central to girls' identities, *never* was it mentioned in relation to any of these reports that such activity would be 'unfeminine' or unacceptable in the case of girls.

It is important to mention that prosocial traits such as 'kindness' and 'friendliness' were just as frequently associated with popularity by boys as aggression. Similarly, 'kindness' was more frequently mentioned by girls than 'arrogance' or different forms of verbal aggression. However, intensive discourses similar to the ones related to strength, sensitivity, or arrogance were not created around these prosocial traits, and even after further questions by the moderators their elaboration remained limited.

5.3 Physical appearance and romantic relationships

Due to the age of the participants, physical attraction and romantic relationships were less emphatic than they are in older age groups. However, the importance of physical appearance, especially in the case of girls, came up occasionally. On the one hand, it involved being physically attractive and having the 'right type' of body, while on the other hand it included being 'fashionable' and 'having style'. While boys talked about attractiveness in rather general terms, pointing out that it can contribute to popularity among members of the other sex, for girls it was often the source of both popularity and jealousy. For instance, in one girl's group some participants argued that pretty girls were popular while their less attractive peers were rejected ('no one wants the ugly one').

Physical attraction and romantic relationships can be difficult topics to talk about for this age group, especially when they are asked about by an adult moderator. The following excerpt exemplifies this difficulty; participants in one of the girl groups were asked (on this occasion by a female moderator) about their popular peers in the class.

Several girls: Lisa, you Lisa

Lisa: Why me?

Pam: I'd rather not say that now...

Amy: Because you love boys.

Lisa: It's not true.

[..]

Moderator: So, girls, why did you name Lisa?

Pam: You only have to look at her.

Moderator: So you think if someone is good-looking then she can be popular among girls.

Pam: Let's say if she's better at something than them.

(Only-Roma girl group, rural area)

In this example we can see that, in line with the general gender stereotypes, 'loving boys' is framed somewhat pejoratively in the case of girls, in particular in the case of girls who are pretty and attractive. This negative association is clear from Lisa's rejection of the assumption of 'loving boys', as well as from the seemingly evasive answers of Pam. However, in spite of the pejorative connotations, it is admitted that being pretty and attractive to boys does contribute to one's popularity, and Lisa was indeed one of the most dominant participants in this group.

While being pretty and attractive to boys were related to popularity, having actual romantic or even physical relationships was seen much more negatively and in one group of girls physical relationships were even labelled 'lame'. In particular, having more than one (former) boyfriend or 'switching' between boys came with the risk of being labelled a 'slut' (and consequently losing status, at least among girls).

Amy: And they [the boys] share their girlfriend.

Moderator: Can you tell me a bit about this? What does it mean?

Amy: There is Jennifer for instance who is together with Jason and...

Lisa: ... And a brother who took his brother's girlfriend.

Moderator: Okay, so there are two brothers and one took away the girlfriend from the other.

Several girls: No, rather the girl is switching [*others agree in the background*]

Moderator: And why do you think the boys are not bothered by this?

Lisa: Well, the girl is a big slut [*others agree*].

(*Only-Roma girl group, rural area*)

While having 'too much' interest in boys had negative effects on girls' popularity, no such tendency was reported among boys. In fact, present and former relationships were reported to be important parts of some of the dominant boys' popularity, while no stigma was attached to having more relationships at once.

In relation to physical appearance, 'coolness' in appearance (e.g., hair and clothes), being fashionable, and having 'good style' were occasionally mentioned by both girls and boys. As the sample included schools mostly located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and/or classes with a high proportion of disadvantaged students, financial background and the ability to buy 'trendy' clothes and gadgets were less emphatic factors than they would have been among predominantly middle-class students. However, while explicit references to financial inequality were mostly missing, discourses around being 'stylish' as well as around personal hygiene (e.g., being smelly, wearing the same clothes) often emerged. Both areas, while seemingly related to the 'character' of the pupils in question, are, to a significant extent, related to socioeconomic differences, as not everyone can afford to be stylish even according to the 'local standards' of these classes. Similarly, the ability to attend to personal hygiene is often determined by the housing conditions of the students' families in these disadvantaged regions.

5.4 Themes without gender differences: substance use, 'bad behaviour', and academic engagement

There were some themes regarding which the quantitative and ethnographic literature frequently identifies gender differences in popularity dynamics, but in the discourses of the participants of the current study such differences did not really appear. There were three such well-identifiable areas: 'bad behaviour' (e.g. swearing, fighting, disrupting the class), substance use (smoking), and academic engagement. Given their educational importance and the somewhat surprising lack of difference, these themes will be briefly discussed below.

Different forms of bad behaviour at school, including swearing, fighting, taunting others, and showing disrespect towards teachers, frequently came up during the interviews. In some classes bad behaviour was considered an important component of popularity and dominant participants boasted about their 'acts' and the consequences of their bad behaviour (e.g., disciplinary hearings). However, whether 'bad behaviour' was a source of 'pride' or talked about disapprovingly was rather connected to the local class and school atmosphere than to gender differences. Similarly, the acceptance and prevalence of substance use, almost exclusively smoking, also seemed to be related to the local 'milieu' and not that much to gen-

der. Interestingly, smoking was initially almost always denied, and students frequently expressed their discontent with moderators asking about it. However, after being assured that neither their parents nor their teachers would learn about their answers, they gradually admitted that it was an important part of popularity, as they often looked up to those peers who 'dared' to smoke. Even after admitting its importance, they frequently emphasized that the ones who smoked were 'in the other group' and controlled each other to ensure that no one mentioned names. This silence and reluctance related to smoking clearly reflects the value system of an adult environment that most probably strongly punishes such activities. Some pupils even mentioned that their parents would 'kill' them if they learnt about them smoking, while such fears were never verbalized, as we have seen above, in relation to violence and other forms of 'bad behaviour'.

The stereotype of the ugly, anti-social, and 'lame' nerd frequently came up. In some groups, negative attitudes and hostility towards good students were explicitly verbalized. In these groups, studying and following school rules in general was considered 'lame'. However, similarly to the topics in the previous section, this was rather related to the class and school 'milieu' than to gender differences. The following excerpt gives an illustrative example of good academic performance and a lack of social skills being conflated into the category 'nerd' – one pupil (Rob) had to 'defend' himself by emphasizing that he was 'not learning too much', while his friend (Brian), one of the most dominant and popular students in the class, needed to emphasize the social skills of Rob.

Brian: Rob is not a nerd, not a nerd because he can talk to anyone.

Rob: I'm not learning too much.

Brian: Because nerds study only for themselves.

(Boy-majority group with one girl, mixed ethnicity, capital city)

However, while Rob and Brian fought the stigma of Rob being labelled a 'nerd', the underlying narrative that conflates diligence and the lack of social skills and thus stigmatizes 'nerds' was not challenged in any way.

5.5 Ethnicity and gender

Finally, some points about the intersections of gender and ethnicity need to be emphasized. As mentioned above, data on the ethnicity of individual participants was not collected during the interviews; however, based on the interviewers' perception, the ethnic composition of the groups can be divided into three categories: mixed ethnicity, mostly Roma, and only-Roma groups. Due to the lack of individual ethnicity information, the small number of groups, and the non-representative nature of the sample, strong conclusions regarding ethnic differences cannot be made. Nevertheless, different ethnic compositions may be compared: while the different mixed-ethnicity groups did not show remarkable differences and came from either the capital city or small towns, three out of the four classes in rural areas were almost exclusively attended by Roma pupils. While the number of these fully segregated classes (schools) was relatively small in the sample, it is noticeable that in two out of the three of them strong negative attitudes towards school and academic engagement were verbalized by the dominant students as well as a kind of 'ethos' of physical fights and disruptive

behaviour. At the same time, these students expressed negative sentiments towards academically engaged peers and those who follow school rules. This phenomenon, to some extent, seems to resemble the 'oppositional culture' described in the international literature. Since (the majority of) those of Roma ethnicity suffer from social marginalization and widespread prejudice and discrimination in Hungary (including residential and educational segregation and labour-market discrimination) and the gap in the educational performance of Roma and non-Roma students is significant (which means the lack of school success), it is conceivable that similar social dynamics may have been at play in these two classes.

Interestingly, similarly to the findings of Eriksen (2019), these discourses were more powerfully and vehemently expressed by girls; although they were prevalent both in the boys' and girls' groups. Additionally, for the dominant girls in these classes being 'tough' and 'Gypsy-like' (i.e. 'not sensitive') was of central importance. The following excerpts show two examples from the same group of the appraisal of disruptive behaviour and resentment towards peers who follow the rules.

Moderator: And how does behaving badly make someone popular?

Linda: That's just the way it is with us, we dig it if someone behaves badly.

Moderator: And what does s/he do, what does it mean if someone behaves badly?

Linda: Swears at teachers, talks during the class, hits, taunts others.

Moderator: And someone who behaves well?

Linda: That's not really [popular].

Kimberly: That's not good.

Jessica: That's not.

Linda: Quiet, a dog.

Moderator: A dog?

Linda: Someone who is not bad, just is [there]. That's not good.

Linda: Just sitting at your desk [all day], like an old man, that's not [cool].

Kimberly: That's not [cool].

Linda: I'd like to hit them on the head.

Moderator: So it's not possible for someone to be both [a good student and cool]?

Linda: No, not in this class.

(Only-Roma girl group, rural area)

Clearly, conducting a systematic comparison of different ethnic group compositions and exploring the dynamics and conditions for such potential 'oppositional cultures' goes beyond the scope of the current paper and related sample. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to conduct research on popularity discourses in more segregated (rural) schools/areas to generate a better comparative perspective, as well as to collect ethnicity information on the individual participants in order to get a more refined picture about potential ethnic differences.

6 Conclusion

The paper focused on the gendered patterns of popularity discourse among sixth-grade students in Northern and Central Hungarian primary schools. The analysis took a critical approach to the discourses and narratives presented by the students. We saw that, mostly in line with the international literature, boys' popularity discourses were primarily organized around athletic abilities, physical strength, and verbal and physical dominance over other peers, while girls' discourses were, to a great extent, organized around physical appearance, verbal aggression, 'arrogance', and kindness. 'Sensitivity' – i.e., a lack of resilience to mocking and taunting – was seen as negative in the case of both genders and was considered 'unmanly' in the case of boys. While a lack of physical strength and the 'ability to protect oneself' was strongly connected to the lack of masculinity in the case of boys, similar discourses of 'unfemininity' did not emerge. In fact, among girls primarily 'liking boys too much' was disapproved of in a way that followed a gendered pattern, while no similar prohibition on 'bad behaviour' or academic disengagement emerged. Since ethnic Roma students constituted approximately two-thirds of the sample, at the end of our analysis we were also able to briefly refer to the intersections of gender and ethnicity. We saw that in two out of the three classes in ethnically segregated school environments a strong rejection of pro-school values and strong approval of disruptive behaviour were verbalized, and this was particularly visible in the case of the dominant, 'tough' girls in these only-Roma classes.

Our results underline the importance of investigating gender differences in popularity discourses in different cultural contexts as well as the importance of focusing on ethnicity and socio-economic background. Even though, as we saw above, the Hungarian population demonstrates some of the strongest gender stereotypes in the European Union, and anti-feminist political discourses have been prevalent in the last few years, the effects of these factors seem to have been limited in the case of our sample. While the boys and girls in the sample frequently associated popularity with 'gender-typical' traits and behaviours, these associations mostly seemed to be in line with 'Western' findings. Additionally, while physically weak and/or 'sensitive' boys were seen as unmanly by their dominant peers, no discourses of 'unfemininity' emerged and constraints on 'unacceptable' feminine behaviour were also limited (with the exception of 'loving boys too much'). This may partly be due to the age of the participants (12–14) and partly to the ethnic and socio-economic composition of our sample; we propose that research on older age groups and different socio-economic backgrounds could clarify temporal trajectories and class differences in the gender-typicality of popularity discourses. Similarly, research in other Central and Eastern European countries, in particular in states with a sizeable Roma minority, could clarify national and ethnic differences, even within similar cultural contexts.

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