

SEX DIFFERENCES IN PUPILS' COMMITMENT TO  
SCHOOL SUCCESS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the viewpoint, influential since J.S. Coleman's The Adolescent Society (1961), that girls over-value peer popularity, boys over-value sporting success, and both devalue high academic achievement in school. This viewpoint has been supported by reference to the influence of peer status systems on valuations of school success (e.g. Coleman, 1961; Sinclair, 1976), and by descriptions of sex differences in personality development and the function of peer groups (e.g. Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Weitz, 1977).

This paper suggests that processes underlying commitment to school success are similar for both sexes. They can be described as responses to opportunities for rewards offered by peers, parents and teachers. These reward opportunities can be influenced by organisational policies adopted by the school administration.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN VALUES

In his study, Coleman (1961) found that American high school boys valued sporting success more than peer popularity or high academic attainment. Girls valued extra-curricula activity and popularity above academic success.

Although there has been some dispute about the emphasis to be placed upon the distribution of success valuations, replications of Coleman's study have agreed with the sex differences he found (e.g. for Australian studies see Campbell and McSweeney, 1970; Hore, 1972; Connell, and others, 1975; Sinclair, 1976).

Several interpretations for these sex differences have been offered. Coleman emphasised the centrality to the adolescent of acceptability to the opposite sex. In the rating-dating jungle, personal characteristics and being in with the right crowd were crucial for the girls' popularity (Coleman, 1961:41). Douvan and Adelson (1966) emphasized differences in personality development and socialisation. The critical question for the girls in their study was "Who is my husband?". For boys, it was "What is my work?". In the middle years of adolescence, girls' friendship groups are smaller, more oriented to intimate personal discussions. Girls' status hierarchies are based more upon personal appearance and personality traits than are those of boys. Boys friendship groups provide companionship rather than intimacy. Their status systems are more strongly based on prowess in sport or fighting, drinking or chasing girls (see also Connell, and others, 1975: 170ff).

It may be true that valuations of school success can be characterised fruitfully as the products of sex-role socialization or sex-based personality traits. However, the existing research suffers from at least two weaknesses. Firstly, the taken for granted sex differences in success valuations are partly a product of a limited research methodology. Secondly, emphasis on sex differences overlooks the possibility that similar processes may be operating on both sexes to influence their commitment to, or alienation from, the various opportunity structures of the school.

#### METHODOLOGICAL FACTORS

In Coleman's original study, a forced-choice question was employed, in which students were asked to choose to be remembered at school for one of the following: Brilliant Student, Most Popular, Leader in Activities (girls) or Athletic Star (boys). In the major Australian studies in the area, boys have been allowed to indicate a preference for being remembered as "Leader in Activities", and girls have been allowed to choose "Athletic Star".

The forced-choice format prevents students from expressing a strong interest in several areas of success. It does not allow students to express degrees of commitment to, or alienation from, success in any or all of the available success opportunities.

For these reasons it seems useful to supplement the forced-choice format with a question which enables students to indicate all performance areas to which they are committed or to which they feel indifferent or hostile.

This procedure was carried out for a sample of 510 Form 5 students in six Melbourne secondary schools. These schools were chosen to provide variability in socioeconomic background, based on characteristics known about them because of their inclusion in a wider sample in the 15-18 Project at La Trobe University (for details of the sample, see Poole and Simkin, 1978). The schools in the present study comprise one coeducational and one girls' high school of lower socioeconomic status; one coeducational high school and one Catholic boys' college of middle socioeconomic status, and two private schools of higher socioeconomic status.\*

The following format was employed in a questionnaire administered to these Form 5 students.

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\* The socioeconomic status categories are based upon students responses to questions about their parents occupation and educational attainment. The occupational backgrounds were scored according to Congalton's (1969) 7-point scale. For details, see Simkin(1979).

Listed below are a number of things which students at school have a chance to be good at. For each of these things, circle the number which best indicates how you feel about doing well at it.

- 1 I would not like to do well at this
- 2 It doesn't matter to much to me how I do
- 3 I would like very much to do well at this

Activity	Number
Coming top of the class in school work	1 2 3
Being very good at sport	1 2 3
Being good in things like the orchestra, choir or drama	1 2 3
Being very popular with the teachers	1 2 3
Being very popular with the other students at school	1 2 3
Being a form captain, house captain or prefect, or in some other position of responsibility	1 2 3

Now, underline the thing you would most like to do well at.

The responses to the forced-choice aspect of the question are set out in Table 1. This table indicates that, for the sample as a whole, academic success is most valued, just ahead of peer popularity with sporting success third in importance.

TABLE 1 -- Percentages of students most wanting to succeed in various performance areas

Success Area	All Students (493)	All Boys (297)	All Girls (196)
Academic	35.5	39.9	28.8
Leadership	2.0	1.4	2.8
Activities	7.5	7.7	7.3
Sport	21.2	24.3	16.5
Popularity with peers	32.8	26.8	43.5
Popularity with teachers	0.9	0.8	1.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

There do appear to be sex differences in the distribution of valuations, in that boys value academic success above sport and activities, whereas girls value peer popularity above academic success, with a low valuation on sport. The other areas are not of much importance when the forced-choice format is employed. The boys in general are not less committed to success in extra-curricular activities than are the girls.

These distributions place the present sample of students sharply in contrast to those in Coleman's sample, who valued athletic success more highly than peers popularity or academic success. The girls in the present sample have a similarly high valuation of popularity as their American counterparts, but place a higher value on academic success than on success in the extra-curriculum. The results in this sample are quite close to those found for Sydney high school students by Sinclair (1976: 64), although the girls in his sample rated activities to be more important than sport.

To what extent does the picture remain the same when the students are asked to indicate their level of commitment to each of the success areas of the school? The distributions of these responses are set out in Table 2. At the aggregate level, academic success and peer popularity are highly valued by two-thirds of the students and sporting success is valued by one-half. In some important respects the sex differences in valuations disappear when the forced-choice format is employed. Both girls and boys value academic success as highly as sport or peer popularity. Girls value academic success as highly as do boys.

TABLE 2 -- Percentage distributions of valuations of success in school performance areas: all students

Success area valued	Would like success	Don't mind	Would not like success	Total
All students (N = 492)				
Academic	65.3	25.9	7.9	100.0
Leadership	18.4	50.4	31.2	100.0
Activities	24.4	41.2	34.1	100.0
Sport	52.4	42.7	4.6	100.0
Peer pop.	65.1	39.1	4.8	100.0
Teacher pop.	23.5	65.2	10.8	100.0
All boys (N = 295)				
Academic	64.5	27.2	8.1	100.0
Leadership	12.1	55.0	32.5	100.0
Activities	18.8	38.9	41.9	100.0
Sport	58.1	37.3	4.7	100.0
Peer pop.	61.4	32.9	5.7	100.0
Teacher pop.	18.1	70.5	11.4	100.0
All girls (N = 197)				
Academic	68.0	24.2	7.7	100.0
Leadership	28.4	43.8	27.3	100.0
Activities	32.9	44.8	22.2	100.0
Sport	44.3	51.3	4.1	100.0
Peer pop.	71.6	25.3	3.1	100.0
Teacher pop.	32.0	58.3	9.7	100.0

The sex differences in valuations are that girls place more emphasis on popularity than on sport, and more emphasis on popularity than do boys. Boys regard sport as being as important as popularity. Girls are noticeably more interested in success in leadership positions, extra-curricular activities and popularity with teachers.

In summary, there are still some differences in valuations of success opportunities in schools, but the extent and distribution of these can be seen to be a product of the methodology employed to study them. The most important findings which emerge when the forced-choice format is abandoned are that girls do not place a lower valuation on academic success than do boys, and that neither sex devalues academic success in relation to the other opportunity structures of the school. Some of the existing taken for granted wisdom needs to be challenged.

SIMILARITY OF PROCESSES FOR GIRLS AND BOYS

Emphasising sex differences in valuations of school success can lead to a neglect of other perspectives which emphasise processes which are experienced by both girls and boys. Some of these perspectives are set out, briefly below.

## (i) Meritocratic influences.

The basic argument of this perspective is that children bring to school different abilities, attitudes, valuations and patterns of behaviour. Over time, children with different abilities and levels of performance develop different levels of commitment to, or alienation from, the success opportunities available in the school (e.g. Jackson and Marsden, 1962; Toomey, 1974; Bellaby, 1977).

## (ii) Socioeconomic status influences.

There has been considerable debate in Australia and elsewhere about the influence of home background factors on educational attitudes and values. Toomey's (1974) arguments suggest that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that valuations would be influenced by socioeconomic status. Connell, however, has argued that:

we can say that children from different status groups show much the same range of values connected with education, show on average similar attitudes to schooling ... we may infer that there are status differences in educational expectations and hopes and wishes, but not on educationally-relevant values or attitudes in the strict sense (Connell, 1977: 171, 176).

Turner's (1964) perspective suggests that students' values are influenced not so much by their status of origin as by their perceptions of the values and behaviours appropriate to their desired or anticipated status of origin. Turner called this process 'anticipatory socialisation'.

## (iii) Peer influences.

This perspective builds on the social psychological evidence that friendships are often based upon similarities of attitudes and values. Kerckhoff (1972) has put forward quite strongly the viewpoint that friendship groups are related to differences in orientation to the various facets of school life.

The variety of cliques (in high school) offers the adolescent a potential for significant social relations with youngsters who emphasise rather different values and motives and who vary in the kinds of knowledge and skill they have acquired .. One chooses and is chosen by some of these, and rejects and is rejected by others ... A dual process of selection and reinforcement tends to occur within the clique structure of the peer group. Those with similar attitudes and values form cliques, and the social relations within cliques act as sources of influence to reinforce the commitment to those attitudes and values (Kerckhoff, 1972: 93-7).

## (iv) School organisational influences.

A number of writers have argued that practices which separate children into streams with different statuses and different career destinations are powerful sources of commitment to, or alienation from, success in school (e.g., Polk and Halferty, 1972; Claydon, Knight and Rado, 1978).

This paper is not concerned with the logic or empirical evidence presented in the sociological literature in support of these various perspectives. The only concern here is to

present evidence that these perspective are as potentially useful as sex-based explanations of commitment to success in school.

The method adopted here is to show the relative strength of association of different student characteristics with the holding of high levels of commitment to success in the areas of academic and sporting achievement and peer popularity. Table 3 sets out the percentage differences in the extent to which students in various categories hold high valuations of success. These percentage differences represent the influence on valuations attributable to being in the 'high' category on each of the characteristics, viz., high performance, high socioeconomic status, high educational ambitions or having friends with high valuations of success.

TABLE 3 -- Weighted Net Percentage Differences<sup>1</sup> in success valuations attributable to high levels of performance, socioeconomic status, educational ambition and possessing friends with high valuations of success.

Valued success area <sup>2</sup>	High performance <sup>3</sup>	High socio-economic status <sup>4</sup>	High educational ambition <sup>5</sup>	High friends' valuations <sup>6</sup>
BOYS				
Academic	8.8	2.4	19.2	6.0
Sporting	29.1	- 2.3	11.3	7.6
Peer popularity	16.6	0.9	13.3	20.3
Average	18.2	0.3	14.3	11.3
GIRLS				
Academic	0.2	3.4	14.2	20.2
Sporting	42.9	- 2.8	7.4	36.0
Peer popularity	8.6	18.6	17.6	0.2
Average	17.2	6.4	13.0	18.8
PERCENTAGE-POINT ADVANTAGE TO GIRLS				
	- 1.0	+ 6.1	- 1.3	+ 7.5

1 For explanation, see text.

2 Defined by wanting to do well in that area (see text).

3 High academic performance defined as above average score on ACER ML and MQ tests. High sporting performance defined as membership of school team. High Peer popularity defined as having above average (for each school) nominations as a popular student.

4 High socioeconomic status defined as father's occupation in categories 1-3 in Congalton's 7-point scale.

5 High educational ambition defined as above Form 6.

6 High friends' valuations defined as possessing a majority of nominated friends whose valuations of the success area are also high.

As an illustration, the percentage difference of 8.8 in the top left hand corner of Table 3 reflects the fact that 68.3 per cent of the boys with high academic ability have high valuations of academic success, compared to 59.5 per cent of the boys who have low academic ability who have high valuations of academic success. The percentage differences are controlled for the relationship between academic ability, fathers' occupation, educational ambition and the possession of friends with high valuations of success. They are weighted to take into account the varying numbers of

students who fall into the 'high' categories of each of these characteristics. For computational details, the reader is referred to Spady (1970).

The data in Table 3 indicate that there are few differences between boys and girls in terms of the association of the various characteristics with the holding of high valuations of success. The largest sex difference relates to the possession of friends with high valuations of success. Girls are 7.5 percentage points more likely than boys to hold high valuations if they possess friends with high valuations of success. The major associations with high valuations of success for both sexes are high sporting performance and the possession of friends with high valuations of sporting success or peer popularity. This is a reflection of the process whereby students are 'locked in' to school if they are successful in any area: the extra-curriculum and informal status system of the school do not compete with the formal academic system of the school, but, rather, reinforce it.

For both sexes, ability, ambition and peer valuations are related to commitment to school, suggesting that the school status, anticipatory socialisation and peer influence perspectives might be fruitful avenues for the analysis of variations in students valuations of school success.

#### SCHOOL ORGANISATIONAL INFLUENCES

The following section illustrates, very briefly, how school organisation can influence the distribution of various success opportunities, irrespective of levels of ability, socioeconomic status or educational ambition.

For this illustration, two schools with different distributions of valuations of success, socioeconomic status and educational ambition have been selected from the six schools in the study. The summary statistics for the two schools are set out in Table 4.

TABLE 4 -- Summary statistics for College Boys' and Southern Girls' High School

	College Boys' (N = 122)	Southern Girls' (N = 52)
Percentages of students in high categories of academic ability <sup>1</sup>	73.8	33.3
socioeconomic status <sup>2</sup>	50.3	17.7
educational ambition <sup>3</sup>	64.8	28.8
Percentages of students with high valuations of success in various areas: <sup>4</sup>		
academic	50.0	63.5
leadership	13.1	44.2
activities	34.4	17.3
sport	51.6	44.2
popularity with peers	61.5	63.5
popularity with teachers	17.2	30.8

1 Defined as students scoring above the sample mean on ACER ML and MQ tests.

2 Defined as students with fathers in occupational categories on Congalton's 7-point scale.

3 Defined as students expecting to pursue tertiary studies.

4 Defined as students who 'would like to do well' in each of the success areas.

College Boys' is well over a century old. It boasts spacious grounds, many facilities for sport and extra-curricular activities, a high pass rate at the Higher School Certificate examinations and many graduates who have subsequently achieved distinction in the fields of science, medicine, the professions, business and industry.

Southern Girls' High School was built several decades ago as a school for the daughters of the local market township, now a suburb of the expanded metropolis. Most of its graduates have become mothers, a few have become nurses, teachers and secretaries. A handful have graduated from a university. The school does not offer HSC courses, but it does have a gymnasium and good sporting facilities.

At College Boys' the success valuations are, in comparison with other boys' schools in the sample, lower for academic and sporting success, higher for participation in extra-curricular activities and average for the other areas. The boys are streamed by ability and by course of study. Forms A, B and C are science students. Forms D, E and F are composed of different proportions of students in humanities and commercial subjects. Many of the boys questioned described the peer status system as three-tiered. For example, one boy wrote that:

There are three factions at College Boys'. Long hairs (hi-lows), the Boys (skinheads and hangers on) and middle of the road (conservative). You have to pretend you're hip to be popular with the hi-lows, you have to walk like a cowboy and bash under-12's to be a 'boy' and be a conservative to be a conservative.

Written and verbal comments from other boys and analysis of friendship groups in the different forms indicated that the science students constituted the majority of the conservatives, arts students the majority of the long-hairs (also called hippies, druggies and weirdos) and commercial students the majority of skinheads (also called skinhead bashers, bikies and Jew-baiters). The science students placed high valuations on academic success and were strongly represented in school sporting teams.

However, overall valuations of academic and sporting success at College Boys' are not high, because a majority of the boys in the humanities and commercial streams did not embrace values which they saw as the hallmarks of 'conservatism'. Many of these students placed a higher value upon extra-curricular activities and were strongly represented in the school choirs, orchestras, drama groups and in pop music groups outside school. There was a tendency not to value popularity because it implied seeking approval from members of the science group.

These antagonistic valuations were most obvious in the composition of friendship groups. About one-half of the friendship groups were composed of boys who described themselves as belonging to the same one of the three major orientations described above. The clustering tendency was strongest among the science students, and stronger at College Boys' than in any of the other schools, where science students were not separated so markedly from students in other courses.

In contrast, the girls at Southern High described the peer status structure in terms of friendly co-operation between the various groups. The school administration had for a long time

followed a policy of co-opting the girls' status system in the interest of developing skills in leadership, service to the community and gaining experience in the co-operative management of the daily affairs of the school. Thus, the majority of the girls in Form 5 were involved in committees that organised activities such as the school cafeteria, the office, the daily information sheet, the library, the gymnasium and sports store, the lunch-time activities, the dances (with boys from a neighbouring school) and a range of community services and fund-raising activities.

Friendship groups were not based upon form group or course of study but on committee membership. There was a very high valuation of leadership, especially in areas seen to bring favourable attention to the school. In comparison with the others in the sample, Southern High girls devalued academic success and activities or popularity-seeking behaviour which focussed attention on the individual rather than the group or the school. A typical sentiment was expressed by the girl who wrote that to be popular:

... be a good kid. Nice personality, laughing and helpful, not catty. Be on the school liaison committee and lots of social service. Good looking boyfriend with a car.

The emphasis in these sentiments is quite different from the sharp differentiation between groups at College Boys', which was associated with the alienation of a large minority from the success valuations of the 'conservative' elite. The organisational policy of the administration at Southern Girls' may not have been responsible for producing the distribution of success valuations there, but it was perceived by a number of the teachers and students as a key factor in encouraging a valuation of the successful student as one who worked toward a climate of friendly co-operation for the well-being of the larger group.

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