

## **POPULARITY, GENDER, AND SOCIAL INCLUSION AMONG GIRLS IN ETHNICALLY DIVERSE CONTEXTS IN NORWAY**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the phenomenon of popularity and its implications for gender construction, social inclusion, and gender equality among girls in two ethnically diverse contexts in Norway. At one field site, girls of immigrant origin were a majority, at the other they were a minority. Based on detailed ethnographic methodology and participant observation over time, this study shows that the crucial dimensions of popularity overlap with “economies of dignity” and vary according to whether the ethnic Norwegians are in a minority or majority position. The dimensions of popularity, which include the importance of attracting the male gaze, are connected to consumption. My results suggest that consumption influences girls’ construction of gender, and may have negative consequences for the inclusion of immigrant girls when in a minority, because they often live in low-income families. The article concludes that the overlap between the dimensions of popularity and the tokens of value of the economies of dignity underlines the importance of how power, through popularity, works among children. One implication of this power is that neither ethnic Norwegian girls nor girls of immigrant origin appear to live in a climate of gender equality.

**Keywords:** popularity, peer power, inclusion/exclusion, gender construction, gender equality

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Research on children's social hierarchies and the phenomenon of popularity among girls is not new (Hey, 1997; Thorne, 1993), but is quite rare within the field of anthropology. I first became interested in studying children's social hierarchies in 2002, while doing anthropological fieldwork for my PhD. In later projects I have studied how social hierarchies relate to consumption as "including strategies" (Rysst, 2015, 2016, 2019); the data for this article are drawn from those studies. The phenomenon of popularity is related to consumption, as will be shown in two ethnically diverse field sites in Norway. Not only are these field sites ethnically diverse, but they also differ socioeconomically, and thus in the resources available to families and children as consumers. Most importantly, in Norway, children of immigrant origin often live in low-income families, which limits their participation in social activities that cost money. The article is thus in dialogue with other research focusing on ethnicity, social inclusion, and consumption, particularly the work of Allison Pugh (2009; see also Lareau, 2003). The questions I address are:

- What are the crucial dimensions of the social construction of popularity among girls at two ethnically diverse field sites in Norway?
- What are the implications of popularity for (a) gender construction, (b) social inclusion of girls of immigrant origin, and (c) gender equality?

### ***Short Literature Review***

A search on Google Scholar, "girls and popularity", gave 387,000 results, showing a vast amount of literature on the theme, often in the field of psychology (e.g., Duffy et al., 2016; Lease & Kennedy, 2002; Gommens et al., 2017; Xi et al., 2016). A specialized search on "girls, popularity and ethnography" reduced the results to 35,800. It appears that the studies of Adler and Adler (2001), Eder and Corsaro (1999) and Merten (1997) are groundbreaking and often referred to in recent texts, but newer research is not abundant (see Duffy et al., 2016; Duncan & Owens, 2011; Gommans et al., 2017; Read et al., 2011; Xi et al., 2016). Moreover, from the literature search, it appears that "popularity" is not often an explicit focus, but is implicit in the texts. The works of Barrie Thorne (1993), Rachel Simmons (2002), Marjorie H. Goodwin (2006), and Linda Duits (2008) are relevant examples of this, while Lease and Kennedy (2002), Duncan (2011), Duffy et al. (2016), Xi et al. (2016), and Gommens et al. (2017) have the word "popularity" in the title. All these articles point to the importance of an attractive appearance for popularity among girls, as does Renold (2005). Others highlight the importance of spending power (Adler & Adler, 2001; Lease & Kennedy, 2002; Pugh, 2009; Rysst, 2008, 2015, 2016, 2019). For instance, Adler and Adler wrote of the importance of consumer goods for popularity: "The norms of popular appearance included designer clothing" (Adler & Adler, 2001, p. 50). In some, the connection between social power and popularity is underlined: "Being popular is a key determinant of social power in peer groups of older elementary school students" (Lease & Kennedy, 2002, p. 87; see also Gommans et al., 2017). Simmons also argued that being popular "is no walk in the park. Competition and insecurity are rampant" (2002, p. 173). Once in the popular group, girls have to

work continuously to stay there. Linda Duits (2008) presented an ethnographic account following young girls of diverse ethnic backgrounds in the multicultural Dutch society and showed that the girls in her study defined popularity as having many friends or having a favourable appearance. Duncan and Owens (2011), in a study of the relationship between “bully” and “popular” in two English schools, found that popularity was highly related to attractiveness to boys in both schools, and also that popular girls tended to bully others. Regarding Norwegian studies of relevance, Aasebo (2011) showed that being high-achieving in upper secondary school did not qualify for popularity, while exhibiting heteronormative attractiveness and experimenting with alcohol and sex did. Heteronormativity (Butler, 1993) and the “male gaze” (Well, 2017) are implicit in the works of Duncan and Owens (2011) and Aasebo (2011). “ ‘Male gaze’ is a term coined by film critic Laura Mulvey to describe the cinematic angle of a heterosexual male on a female character” (Well, 2017). Girls and women are viewed as sexual objects by males; that is, they are judged according to heterosexual attractiveness, which is a gaze girls and women also employ vis-à-vis each other (Well, 2017). The gaze of interest to the study of popularity may thus be understood to include a male gaze. Dmitrow-Devold’s (2016) doctoral study on Norwegian teenage bloggers also touches on the male gaze and popularity, explicitly illustrating the importance of popularity for how these girls blog. They blogged on themes they expected potential and actual followers would like, such as fashion trends, make-up, and body work they believed may improve attractiveness (Dmitrow-Devold, 2016). In sum, popularity among girls appears to be closely related to heteronormativity and to attractive appearance aided by consumption. The present study is, as far as I am informed, the only Norwegian work that explicitly addresses popularity among girls of diverse ethnic origins living in two ethnically and geographically diverse field sites in Norway.

## **Background**

Norway has experienced ethnically diverse immigration since the late 1960s. Today, Norway has approximately five million inhabitants, of whom foreign-born citizens and citizens born in Norway to immigrant parents make up 16.3% (Statistics Norway, 2016a). Oslo has the largest population of people of immigrant background, both in relative and absolute terms. Of Oslo’s 658,400 inhabitants, 163,300 were immigrants and 50,900 were Norwegians born to immigrant parents as of January 1, 2016; these two figures combined constitute 33% of the capital’s entire population (Statistics Norway, 2016a).

One of the field sites of this study was the school “Furu” in “Eastside” (both pseudonyms), located 10 minutes’ drive east of the city center of Oslo. Eastside had approximately 9000 inhabitants at the time I did the fieldwork. In 2009, people of immigrant origin comprised 56% of this population (Aalandslid, 2009). The other field site was the school “Mesna” in “Inland City” (also pseudonyms), situated in the Gudbrand Valley, approximately two hours’ drive north of Oslo. In January 2015, the total population of Inland City was 27,476 (Lillehammer, n.d). In January 2016, there were 2,772 foreign-born residents and Norwegians born to immigrant parents. Of

these, 506 were Norwegians born to immigrant parents (Statistics Norway, 2016b). Thus, 11.9% of the total population in Inland City was of immigrant origin compared to 33% in Oslo and more than 56% in Eastside.

In the Nordic countries, Norway included, equality regarding living conditions, gender, sexuality, and race is both a political ambition and a cultural ideal (Formark & Ohman, 2013, p. 5; Gullestad, 2002; Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009; Lien et al., 2001). Norway's image in the world beyond appears to be that of an affluent, egalitarian, and homogeneous society (Gullestad, 2002; Korsnes et al., 2014; Lien et al., 2001); moreover, Nordic — and thus Norwegian — girls are seen as having achieved a freedom of gender and sexuality absent in many other countries (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2013). This article touches on three aspects of these issues — living conditions, gender, and ethnicity — and how these dimensions are related to popularity and social inclusion.

In general, children in Norway are taught official Norwegian gender values: that girls and boys have the same opportunities regarding education and careers, and can engage in the same activities and choose who they will be and how they will present themselves. The Norwegian focus on gender equality, both in kindergartens and schools and in public political debates, may be a challenge for girls of immigrant origin, whose families may have other gender ideals related to ethnic cultural values (Oyewumi, 2005; Schröeter, 2013). Immigrant girls in Muslim families are often more protected and are expected to stay at home more than boys are. Girls of immigrant origin often experience more restrictions and expectations regarding how to dress and act than their brothers do (Rysst, 2015; Vestel, 2004). This may influence how these girls experience social inclusion among their peers in Norway, as appearance, clothes, and social participation are important for social inclusion (Rysst, 2015, 2019). Therefore, for the purposes of this article, informed by the works of Moore (1994) and Lien et al. (2001), I define gender equality as the possibility to freely engage in activities and construct gender without risking social exclusion in the peer group or family. I argue that childhood is contested for girls of immigrant origin because they must relate to and negotiate cultural values from both their country of origin and Norway in their construction of gender, which has implications for gender equality. For instance, parents may not want their daughters to become “too Norwegian”. This criticism usually implies that they may disapprove of their daughters' construction of gender, as being more “Norwegian” or “Western” than their cultural gender ideals permit. When this is the case, the girls are not free to construct gender as they wish, which in turn may influence their friendship relations (Rysst, 2015, 2019; Vestel, 2004).

Set against this backdrop, I will discuss the social construction of popularity as it relates to gender construction, social inclusion, and gender equality among girls in two ethnically diverse contexts in Norway. Data from fieldwork done in 2015, among children at one school in Inland City where ethnic Norwegians are a majority, are to be compared with data from another fieldwork done from 2010 to 2011, at Furu School in Eastside near Oslo where ethnic Norwegians are a minority. “Ethnic Norwegian” denotes people who have been born in Norway and have both parents and grandparents also born in Norway.

## Methodology

Anthropological methodology is open-ended and inductive; it is “experience-near” or “emic”, in that concepts used by the informants are taken as the point of departure for understanding their lifeworlds. Anthropology does not involve the testing of hypotheses, and its practices differ from those of other disciplines in that data are written down in notebooks and not formally coded and categorized before analysis and interpretation take place (Okely, 2012). Anthropological methodology has at its core participant observation over an extended period in combination with informal interviews and conversations. In this article, experience-near concepts, such as “popularity”, “foreigner”, and “Norwegian”, are taken as points of departure for the interpretation in order to grasp “the native’s point of view” (i.e., the insider’s perspective; Geertz, 1983). Many anthropologists, myself included, concur with the arguments made by sociologists Jerolmack and Khan (2014) in the article “Talk is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy”, in which they discuss the role of interviews and the spoken word in understanding people’s lifeworlds. The “attitudinal fallacy” is “the error of inferring situated behavior from verbal accounts of sentiments and schemas” (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014, p. 200). They argue that, “Not only is it the case that people commonly act in ways that are inconsistent with their expressed attitudes, but they also routinely provide inaccurate accounts of their past activities.” (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014, p. 200).

Anthropologists are aware of the discrepancy between what is said and what is done, and underline the importance of achieving knowledge through the body: “Participant observation involves more than co-residence, verbal interaction and observation; it also involves knowledge through the body, through all the senses” (Okely, 2012, p. 77). In the following, I describe my methodological approaches in the field.

At both field sites, the Mesna School in Eastside in Oslo and the Furu School in Inland City, I presented myself to the students as a researcher interested in how they lived their lives in school and elsewhere. I told them I was not a teacher and was not there to discipline or monitor them. I did not find it hard to establish contact with all of the girls, irrespective of their ethnic origins, even though I am a middle-aged, White, ethnic Norwegian woman. I told them about my own childhood experiences and my experiences as a mother of three daughters, which appeared to be a good icebreaker for the conversations to come. After some weeks, they became accustomed to my presence, and one boy at Furu School even presented me to a new teacher as “a member of our class”. However, it is possible that the girls at both field sites, when they realized my interest in friendships and presentations of self, became more aware of their own ways of dressing and self-presentations. It is also possible that a younger woman without children would have established a stronger rapport.

In addition to participant observation and informal interviews, the teachers at both field sites gave me access to their sociograms, which worked as guidelines for my own mappings. The parents and children were informed about this, as making sociograms is quite a common practice

in Norwegian schools (Bo & Schiefloe, 2007). Sociograms are mappings of the children's friendship networks compiled from confidential information the children have given to the teacher. The sociograms overlapped my own observations and interpretations of friendship networks. As such, I believe data collected through my presence over time, my observations, and the sociograms point to issues the girls may not have revealed about friendships in the interviews, which were conducted in pairs or in groups.

Writing up was done by careful reading of my handwritten notes and careful reading of transcribed informal interviews. My search for repeating themes and expressions concerning friendship circles and concepts of social classification yielded “popularity”, “Norwegian”, and “foreigner”. Further details of methods are given in the descriptions of the field sites below.

## **Field Sites**

### ***Site 1, Inland City***

Participant observation at Mesna School, Inland City, lasted from August to December of 2015. I obtained access to the sixth form of 11 year olds, which I was interested in because of a relatively high number of students of immigrant origin in that form. According to the principal, Mesna was one of the schools in Inland City with a high number of students of immigrant origin, and had a total number of 595 students representing 21 languages. Most of the immigrant children in this school were of refugee origin from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe.

Despite the principal's observations about the high number of immigrant children at Mesna School, I noted that when compared to Furu School, where a vast majority of the students were of immigrant origin, Mesna School represented the opposite: most of the students there had ethnic Norwegian backgrounds. In addition, of 50 pupils in the sixth form, only nine girls and one boy were of immigrant origin, and two girls were of mixed ethnicity.

In Mesna School I did participant observation and wrote notes in the classroom of 6A with 25 students, over 4 months, two days per week, sitting at the back observing and chatting to those who came by. I tried to observe everything that was going on among all the children, and was particularly alert to informal comments not meant for my ears. Informal comments may elucidate relational aspects that more formal interview settings do not. I followed the girls in the schoolyard and in other activities in school contexts. I conducted eight informal interviews with 15 girls in 6A and three girls of immigrant origin in 6B. The interview guide was organized by themes, not detailed questions. The themes related to friendship networks, who hangs out with whom, leisure time activities, and opinions about school and life in general. The interviews were done during lunch break. I brought drinks and snacks to make the situation more relaxed. I interviewed the girls in pairs or in groups of three, and did my best to make sure that the girls in these groups were friends, because I believed the girls would speak more freely and would be more honest when they

trusted the others in the room. I also believed, based on common sense, that the girls would be quieter and more reserved if I talked to them alone. Of course, I don't know if I was right, but the girls did seem to speak freely in the pairs or groups and did not appear reserved when we had our talks. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by me.

### *Site 2, Eastside, Oslo*

In 2010 and 2011, I conducted research with both boys and girls at Furu School, in Eastside, Oslo. According to the principal, there were approximately 475 students at the school, living in families originating from 16 to 18 different countries. I did participant observation over six months in the fifth to sixth form, two days a week. Among the children, only one student, Pernille, was ethnic Norwegian; the others were of Pakistani, Moroccan, Turkish, and Afghan backgrounds. I followed them in breaks, jumped rope with them, joined them on a weekend tour to the mountains, and tried to map their friendship networks as the point of departure for informal interviews and conversations among the girls (Rysst, 2015, 2016). I did 13 informal interviews of girls, mostly in groups of two, after school had ended for the day. I was allowed to use one of the rooms in the school and I brought drinks and biscuits in order to try and make the girls more relaxed. As at Mesna School, the interview guide was organized by themes such as friendship networks, leisure time activities, and opinions about school and life in general. The total interview sample for this article consisted of 14 girls and two teachers, and the talks were recorded and transcribed by me.

### *Ethical Considerations*

At both field sites, the parents were informed through a meeting and a letter. The parents of all the girls included in this article gave written permission. The girls themselves also wanted to participate. Both parents and children were informed that the children were free to withdraw at any time, and that all names used would be pseudonyms. I kept the original name of the ethnic background if that group was numerous, but if the child was the only representative, I gave her an ethnic background very close to the original. This anonymization included the names of the schools "Furu" and "Mesna", and the places "Inland City" and "Eastside" in Oslo; the terms "Furu" and "Mesna" refer to the school settings only, not locations. The themes of discussion, popularity, and social inclusion may be understood as sensitive, which I have been aware of and tried to anonymize as much as possible without turning the text into fiction. As such, if they read the text, it is possible that the children and the teachers will recognize each other, but no one outside their circles will recognize them. Some years have now passed since I did the fieldwork and I believe there are no ethical problems in how the girls are presented. In addition, the *Norsk senter for forskningsdata* [Norwegian Centre for Research Data] approved the projects before I started fieldwork at both field sites.

## Theoretical Approaches

### *Gender Construction*

Over the last two decades, modern childhood has become increasingly commercialized in the Western world (Borch et al., 2019; Brusdal & Fronnes, 2008; Buckingham & Tingstad, 2010; Cook, 2004; Pugh, 2009; Siegel et al., 2001; Sorensen, 2014). As a result, more and more aspects of children’s lives cost money — for instance, “must-have” clothes and organized leisure activities. This commercialized situation increases the possibility of social exclusion related to socioeconomic position. The commercialization of childhood influences gender construction, how girls (and boys) use material items in doing gender (Butler, 1993; Moore, 1994; Rysst, 2008, 2015, 2019; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Informed by West and Zimmerman (1987), Butler (1993), and Moore (1994), I view gender construction as relational and dynamic, and as having competences, activities, and appearance, including clothes and hairstyles, as vital elements (Rysst, 2016, p. 163).

As I have previously noted (Rysst, 2016, p. 162), post-structuralist researchers (e.g., Henrietta Moore, 1994) have argued that multiple identities or selves are acted out in different social contexts. Modern and post-structuralist conceptualizations of the self differ in that the former reads the self as having a core, while the latter views the self as fragmented (Lorentzen & Muhleisen, 2006). Moore argues that a single subject can no longer be equated with a single individual, as each individual is a multiply constituted subject and “take[s] up multiple subject positions within a range of discourses and social practices” (Moore, 1994, p. 55). This theoretical approach is relevant regarding intracultural variation and the construction of ethnic identities, particularly among foreign-born residents of a country and their children. Against this backdrop, in a situation with both parents and friends present, a daughter may position herself differently depending on her understanding of expectations from the persons interacting with her. This concerns the Norwegian-born girls of immigrants included in this study because they have “one foot in two cultures” and thus navigate cultural values from both their parents’ country of origin and the country they now live in, that is, Norway. Ethnic Norwegian girls do not experience similar parental talk about challenges regarding various ethnic values and gender construction. Still, it is understood that all the girls in this study have multiple identities and that feminine identities may vary according to social contexts (Rysst, 2015, 2016, 2019).

### *Economy of Dignity*

Sociologist Allison Pugh (2009) stated that the most important relational process among children concerns how to secure the experience of belonging among peers. Her analysis of children’s “longing and belonging” argues that children everywhere “claim, contest, and exchange among themselves the terms of their social belonging, or just what it would take to be able to participate among their peers” (p. 6). She termed this system of social meanings the “economy of dignity”, where “dignity” refers to being “worthy of belonging” or having “an absolute capability to take part in the community” (p. 7). Pugh held that “children together shape their own economies of dignity” (p. 8). However, I argue that it is not “children together” but those accorded influence



and power who are likely to define the tokens of value. Therefore, I reconstruct Pugh's definition of "economy of dignity" by noting that it is "the popular children, here girls, who shape the peer group's economy of dignity". Pugh (2009) further said that the economy of dignity "in turn transforms particular goods and experiences into tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning" (p. 8). I am aware that children relate to and talk about the popular children in various degrees, but I suggest that they all know what their peer group's "tokens of value" are, and relate to these in some way, as I will return to later. Pugh (2009) observed that, "when children came home with their desires turned into needs by the alchemy of dignity" (p. 8), most parents responded by fulfilling those desires in order to satisfy their children's need for social belonging. The concept of economy of dignity is a fruitful analytic tool for understanding popularity, gender construction, and relationships, as I will show.

The anthropologists Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1996) argued that "goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges" (p. xv). Their views enrich our understanding of how material items are used in negotiating social position among children. The "goods" or things can be markers in social classification; for instance, in demarcating social categories among girls, such as "popular" and "unpopular" (Renold, 2005; Rysst, 2008, 2019). I argue that the popular children have the strongest influence on what are to be "fences or bridges" and relevant gender constructions, which is directly related to what is included in the economy of dignity in the peer group, which I take to include all children of the same age in a school, and to consist of a hierarchy of subgroups with the popular children at the top. Goods used as bridges, such as iPhones, are elements in the economy of dignity, and may be observed as such by the researcher. I suggest children in all groups share the same tokens of value, but vary in the level of respect with which they regard them, the strength of their desire to possess them, and their ability to acquire them.

### ***Popularity and Peer Power***

Popularity, though ubiquitous, is not an easy phenomenon to understand. The literature presented above points to what Adler and Adler, and others, expressed: that "popularity" denotes rank in the hierarchy of social positions, and thus social power (Adler & Adler, 2001, p. 38; Duffy et al., 2016; Duncan & Owens, 2011; Gommans et al., 2017; Read et al., 2011; Simmons, 2002; Xi et al., 2016). Informed by these works, I construct my definition of popularity as "a social construction that classifies some persons' relationships as more socially attractive than others; an attractiveness that infuses these persons with power". The social construction of popularity varies with time, place, gender, ethnicity, and class, but appears to have a common core. As indicated, I argue that popularity and peer power are closely related in that popular children become leaders able to define "the tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning" (Pugh, 2009, p. 8). As such, popular children represent peer power, well expressed by Adler and Adler (2001): "Leaders derived power through their popularity and then used it to influence membership and social stratification within the group" (p. 57). In other words, they influence the social hierarchy of the peer group.

The concept of power is an abstract and experience-distant concept used to enhance understanding of the experience-near concept of popularity, which is used by the children. “Peer power” is not used by the children, but by analysts. In line with this, Michel Foucault’s (1976) theory of power as a relation that operates at the micro level of social relations helps to elucidate the phenomenon of popularity. As explained in a former article (Rysst & Klepp, 2012), Foucault argues that:

Power is not owned by one group and then used to dominate another; rather, power is more dispersed and involves a willingness to internalize the gaze of a generalized other who may be watching (Foucault, 1976). This gaze need not be connected to particular people, but is experienced as the possibility that others may be watching. (p. 260)

I argue that regarding girls and popularity, power is connected to particular people, but power is also an active relational force — a judging gaze. Such gazes are subjectively experienced as they discipline the body according to expectations implied in this gaze. In this light, peer power may be understood as a force residing in the relationships between girls that shapes these relationships according to the tastes or views of a particular girl or a group of girls. The combination of peer power and social attraction is thus fundamental to the construction of popularity. Concerning the girls in this article, I argue that they are influenced by the gaze of the popular, or by how they understand that gaze, in their construction of gender. As described above, this gaze is informed by heteronormativity and the male gaze (Butler, 1993; Well, 2017). As such, the gaze of the popular is directly related to gender construction, and indirectly to social inclusion and gender equality. How much each girl has the interest or the financial resources to construct gender according to the popular gaze varies, but the point here is that most girls relate to it in some way or other. The tokens of value defined by the popular group are found among the unpopular too, but not followed as strictly as among the popular group.

## Results and Discussion

### *The Crucial Dimensions of Popularity*

**Mesna School, Inland City:** All the children in this school, girls and boys alike, spoke without prompting about “the popular” and identified almost the same children as forming part of the popular group. The following conversation with Dimitra, a girl of Russian origin, and Sirin, a girl from Afghanistan, serves as an illustration of the social climate. I introduced the theme of friendship by asking who were best friends in their class:

Dimitra: There is a lot of “drama” among the girls ...

Sirin: There are so to speak two popular groups, or just one ...

Mari: And who are they?

Dimitra: Ingrid, Mette, Else, Tone (6A), Anne, but the most popular are Mette, Ingrid and Anne, because they are so-called “cool”....

Mari: But what does it mean to be cool?

Dimitra: They talk to people who are cool ... and they try to be, so they buy clothes from popular shops ...

Sirin: And then there are many groups that are unpopular ... like me, I am not popular ... (laughs)

Mari: Hm, and what about the other groups you mentioned?

Dimitra: Ludmila, Fatou, Slovenka, you and me, and some in the other class who are not popular ... but I don't want to be popular, but I don't want to be ... really excluded.

This conversation indicates how the girls relate to the power of popularity in their everyday relational practices. This was a theme the girls introduced, not the researcher. It resides in their relationships as a disciplinary force forming their opinions on appearance and thus gender construction, in that a certain femininity position is experienced as necessary to avoid being “really excluded”, at least from the popular group. The “drama” Dimitra mentions concerns negotiations among the girls, particularly the popular ones, of who is “in” or “out” of the group at certain periods of time. This is an indication of the competition Simmons wrote about, that it is hard work staying in the popular group (Simmons, 2002, p. 173).

I read Dimitra as wanting a position in the popular group, even though she says “but I don't want to be popular”. I did not trust her utterance here: my observations and knowledge acquired by “hanging around” told me something else. She was often seen around the popular children, discussing and arguing, and she spoke a lot about them in informal conversations. From what Dimitra said, I read popularity to be intimately related to gender construction, in that the popular exhibit a particular way of doing gender (Rysst, 2019) that is seen as “cool”, a style Dimitra tried to imitate by sometimes wearing an item of a popular brand. According to the girls, to experience belonging among the popular certain clothes must be worn: the popular group sported a cool style from “popular shops”. This was to some extent connected to clothes that were more expensive, and was thus directly related to socioeconomic position. In school, the popular girls sported a cool femininity subject position, or cool gender identity, which the girls in the other groups were aware of, and tried to imitate to some degree (Rysst, 2017).

It is perhaps no coincidence that the three most popular girls (Mette, Ingrid, Anne) were ethnic Norwegians and had educated parents with well-paid jobs. Interestingly, this is almost identical to what I found east of Oslo, in Ostli, thirteen years ago: The popular girls were the ones considered good looking by their peers and who came from ethnic Norwegian middle-class families (Rysst, 2008). It also resonates with research on girls and girlhood in other parts of the Western world (Adler & Adler, 2001; Goodwin, 2006; Hey, 1997; Renold, 2005; Simmons, 2002; Thorne, 1993). This research has in common the finding that popular girls are often those who are considered good looking and are from the higher social classes.

In the study that I present here, Kudra, of East African origin, represents an interesting case in that she explicitly aspired to a position among the ethnic Norwegians and the popular girls. Some also mentioned her as part of the popular group. She too may read as being disciplined by the gaze of popularity in how she spoke about the popular, and how clothes and appearance were important for her construction of gender and experience of inclusion. Here is how she described this:

- Kudra: Mette and Anne are very best friends, and they are also very popular....  
Mari: Hm, but what do you think is the reason why these girls are popular?  
Kudra: Hm ... I think it is their behaviour ... and appearance. That they buy new clothes, new brands ...  
Kristin: Very long hair ... and that they know and talk a lot about others....  
Kudra: And they are a lot with the boys, teasing them and such....  
Mari: But do you then feel a pressure to have similar clothes?  
Kristin and Kudra: Yes, a bit....  
Kudra: But it is very difficult, because you want to be popular too ... and be liked by many. That's why I want to get new clothes and such.

Kudra confirmed what the other girls said above, that appearance and clothes were important, and added long hair and flirting as necessary for being popular. However, Kudra pointed to an important distinction in the quest for social inclusion in saying that she wants “to be liked by many”, not necessarily only by the popular. This is an important distinction to bear in mind, in that the experience of belonging among peers in general is also important, not only belonging to the popular group. However, I suggest that the gaze of the popular, which includes the heterosexual male gaze of the dominant boys, disciplines the quest for social belonging among peers in general, not only for inclusion among the most popular. In other words, the girls’ social hierarchy is influenced by the gaze of popularity.

When I understood that the most popular girls all were ethnic Norwegians, I asked Dimitra for some elaborations:

- Mari: Do you think it is possible to be popular if you have an ethnic origin other than Norwegian?  
Dimitra: That is *very* difficult! One has to be perfect! You must be “Norwegian-pretty” (norsk-pen). Norwegians are often blonde and have a very white complexion....  
Mari: But so have you?  
Dimitra: Yes, I have, but I, I am somewhat pretty in my country of origin, but here I am just ordinary, but the blondes in Norway are different.

In Dimitra’s experience, it was impossible to be popular if you were not “Norwegian-pretty”. To her, this included having a “very white complexion”, which indicates that skin colour may be of importance for being high on the social hierarchy (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993;

Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009; Prieur, 2004). The irony in this for Dimitra is that she had the same complexion, but still did not qualify as “correctly” white from her point of view. She regarded herself as a “foreigner”, a category that usually implies a darker complexion than ethnic Norwegians (Prieur, 2004; Rysst, 2019). Said differently, the label “foreigner” includes people with brown or black skin, but also other physiognomic characteristics not typically found among ethnic Norwegians, such as brown eyes, or black or curly hair. Dimitra surely experienced a judging gaze regarding appearance; that is, of a gender construction that may qualify for popularity, which thus contradicts the assumption of gender equality, when gender equality is defined as the possibility to freely engage in activities and construct gender without risking social exclusion in the peer group or family (see Background). She classified herself through the gaze of popularity, not her own, which resulted in her seeing herself as less “perfect” and not “White” in the same manner as the ethnic Norwegian girls. In addition, it was a teacher’s impression that Dimitra, in particular, was very concerned about brands. In spite of living in a household with strained financial resources, Dimitra now and then wore clothes of expensive brands, as mentioned above. This may confirm that she aspired to a higher position in the peer group, as suggested previously, and that she believed wearing clothes of certain brands would help her achieve this (Dyer, 1997; Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009).

The popular group of Ingrid, Mette, and Anne sported similar gender positions by emphasizing good looks, long hair, fashionable clothes, an interest in dating, and participation in activities like football, cross-country skiing, and dance. They also had in common middle-class backgrounds, with parents who had relatively high income. In addition to playing football on the local football team for girls, they also attended what they called a “professional football school”, a special after-school activity with limited enrolment, resulting in children finding themselves on waiting lists. It was common for the ethnic Norwegian girls to pursue two or more paid leisure activities and to go on holidays abroad. In short, the tokens of value and femininity positions of the girls at Mesna clearly reflected a commercialized childhood, as everything cost money, particularly clothes, individual leisure activities, sports gear, and holidays (Borch et al., 2019). As such, it is difficult for girls of financially strained families to construct gender in order to match the “particular goods and experiences transformed into tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning” (Pugh, 2009, p. 8) that are reflected in the lives of popular girls.

The vigilant reader may by now have remarked that the “particular goods and activities transformed into tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning” — the bridges for inclusion and thus the content of these girls’ overarching economy of dignity — overlap with the dominating characteristics in the social construction of popularity, and thus the femininity positions needed to enhance belonging in the overall peer group. I interpret the crucial dimensions of popularity and the contents of their economy of dignity to consist of the following: attractive appearance; an interest in sports, particularly being a footballer; dating; clothes defined as “cool”; paid leisure activities; holidays abroad; hairstyle (long hair); and possession of attractive material items, such

as an iPhone. In addition, I speculate that white skin also is a prerequisite for popularity (Borch et al., 2019; Dyer, 1997; Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009; Rysst, 2008, 2015, 2019).

### *At Furu School, Eastside, Oslo*

I had spent some months among the Furu children before I arranged to talk to them after school. I was allowed to use a room in the school, and brought biscuits and drinks for the occasion.

The theme of popularity was not as explicit at Furu School as at Mesna; the participants at Furu did not speak about it spontaneously. The categories of “popular” and “not popular” were not part of their social classification system. In contrast to Mesna, the hierarchy among the children was related to religious affiliation and ethnic origin, illustrated by their social categories of “Muslim or not Muslim”, “Norwegian or foreigner”, and “Brown, Black, or White”. The social categories (experience-near terms) point to dominant values in their social contexts, which reflect that ethnic and religious affiliation is important in their everyday lives as also found by Ghorashi et al. (2009). Even though they did not have the categories of popular and not popular, my interpretation of their friendship network is, nevertheless, that some girls are more attractive friends than others are. In other words, the phenomenon of popularity existed as at Mesna, but was expressed in other terms. This was indicated in interviews when the girls hesitated on my direct question about popular girls, as in this conversation with Rosie, of Chinese origin, and Rania, of Turkish origin:

Rania: Fatima thinks so much about Sahra, she calls on her all the time, and Sahra gets fed up, and sighs, “Jesus, stop it!!”

Mari: So Sahra, she is popular then?

Rosie: I don’t know, I wouldn’t say she is *unpopular*.

It is evident that both of these girls hesitate to label anyone as “popular” or “unpopular”. The reason may be that they have talked a lot in class about the importance of everyone being equal, and that all are to be included, which are frequent themes in Norwegian kindergartens and schools. This talk about equality was more frequent at Furu than at Mesna. Rosie’s hesitation may also have been because she did not feel very popular, as she did not have close ties to anyone in her class (Rysst, 2015). However, I read Sahra, of Turkish origin, and Pernille, of ethnic Norwegian background, to be the most popular girls in their class, based on observations, interviews, and the mapping of their social network. Both Sahra and Pernille were attractive friends and referred to by many. The most obvious reason that Sahra had this position is, I believe, that she was considered good looking, had a sympathetic personality, was good at sports, and constructed gender through how these girls defined “cool enough” clothes (to be described below). In addition, she danced at the “Girls’ Café”, a free leisure-time activity centre managed by the local Red Cross. Dance was the most popular leisure activity among the girls, although only Sahra and Pernille attended the classes. I suggest it was the combined effect of these relevant dimensions that gave Sahra her high social position. There was less “drama” around these girls than at Mesna, although a continuous negotiation went on with regard to expanding the popular dyad to include

Fatima. At the end of the sixth form she was included. Sahra was the most popular girl, probably in part because she was a representative of the majority of children at Furu, by virtue of having a foreign, Muslim background. In addition, she was quite fair-skinned. Research in Scandinavia and in other parts of the Western world, for instance the United States, has illustrated the priority of Whiteness for inclusion in many social contexts, which may have relevance also at Furu School (Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009; Hunter, 2016; Prieur, 2004). Inequality through skin tone, termed “colourism”, is a known phenomenon from critical race and Whiteness research (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Hunter, 2016). Teachers at the Furu School told me in informal conversations that they also had the impression that fair skin colour had higher social prestige among the children than brown and black.

Ethnic Norwegian Pernille was also popular and fair-skinned, and the relationship between her and Sahra showed how they influenced each other according to gender construction, by sharing the same style of dressing. This is the style most of the other girls appeared to aspire to as well. As such, how Sahra and Pernille dressed and behaved is understood to highlight important tokens of value in the girls’ economy of dignity, and thus in the judging gaze of popularity. The style they sported was a cool, teenage-inspired style with tight jeans, long sweaters, and sweaters with hoods, clothes that worked as bridges for inclusion in the peer group. They both had shoulder-length or longer hair, usually tied in ponytails or plaits. Possession of attractive material objects, such as an iPhone, conferred a special position here as well. All these items, which were parts of their social construction of popularity, were also elements in their economy of dignity, paralleling the situation at Mesna School. And lastly, I also suggest here that fair skin was more conducive to popularity than darker skin, as Dimitra expressed above: you had to be “Norwegian-pretty” in order to qualify as popular.

### ***Implications of Popularity***

The relationships between popular girls and how they relate to their peer groups are important and interesting because, as popular children — with all that such influence and power implies — they may dominate the peer relationships in many ways (Adler & Adler, 2001; Duits, 2008; Goodwin, 2006; Hey, 1997; Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993). They are the center of attention, and have the power to define the relevant gender constructions and tokens of value (Pugh, 2009, p. 6), as I will discuss below.

### ***Gender Construction, Social Inclusion, and Gender Equality at Mesna School***

I read the friendship network of the Mesna girls to indicate a pattern of ties distributed according to ethnic background; that is, according to the broad categories of foreigner or Norwegian, but not according to particular nationalities or ethnicities. The ethnic Norwegian girls who were not part of the popular group (Hilde, Astrid, Kristin, Tone), formed a loose group of their own. However, I read them as constructing their gender identities as disciplined by the gaze of popularity; they attempted the cool style, but did not succeed at doing this and were still defined by others and themselves as having an ordinary style. Thus, while caring about the popular style

and feeling disciplined by a judging gaze that to some extent they tried to live up to, their personal gender constructions satisfied inclusion in a group of “ordinaries”.

I also observed that crossing ethnic lines seemed to be rather a one-way street. So, for example, Kudra was the only girl of foreign origin who was mentioned as a “friend” by ethnic Norwegians, and who was also included in the ethnic Norwegian girls’ friendship network, while more ethnic Norwegians were identified as friends by other girls of immigrant origin. This could be read as an attempt on part of immigrant girls to seek acceptance among ethnic Norwegians.

Interestingly, all the girls of foreign origin, except Kudra, belonged to the group of immigrant girls around Dimitra. It appears that “birds of a feather flock together”, which may support Beverly D. Tatum’s (2003) postulation that hanging out with children of similar ethnic origin, in this case as foreigners, is a good and even necessary prerequisite for building positive ethnic identities and belonging. In contrast, Kudra primarily spent time with ethnic Norwegians and was more included and quite popular because, as I saw it, she implemented a clearer assimilation strategy in how she constructed gender (see below) than the others of immigrant origin. She participated in football and aspired to a position in the popular group, imitating their appearance and ways of dressing. She tried to be and look like the ethnic Norwegians in school rather than foregrounding her African ethnic identity, which, according to Berry (2011), may be termed an “assimilation strategy”: a strategy whereby the minority group does not wish to maintain their cultural integrity, but aspires to belong to the dominant group. In addition, in the case of Kudra, the other children praised her for speaking Norwegian fluently, even though she was born abroad and only arrived in Lillehammer in her seventh year. Proficiency in the Norwegian language helped the inclusion of immigrant children in general, but I found no indication of this contributing to inclusion among the popular.

As I saw it, all the dimensions in the informants’ economy of dignity worked as bridges for popular gender construction, which then led to inclusion. These bridges, which appeared to be centered on appearance and participation in paid leisure activities (first and foremost, football), were necessary for belonging, and were harder to achieve for girls of immigrant origin when they were in the minority because their families were generally less well off than ethnic Norwegians (Aalandslid & Tronstad, 2010). While I did not have detailed information about the financial situations of immigrant families at Mesna, other than knowing something about the job situation of the parents of the girls I knew personally, my observations seemed to confirm the findings of Aalandslid and Tronstad (2010). Where crossing the financial bridge was not possible, the girls of immigrant origin formed a group of their own, with an accepted “inside group” that reflected femininity positions inspired by the popular gaze. In this group, inclusion was possible without matching the overall economy of dignity, such as participation in football. These girls said they didn’t like football, which may have been true, but Dimitra said her mother did not want her to play football because it is a “masculine” activity. In other words, her mother did not share the Norwegian cultural value of gender equality.



When it comes to the question of gender equality among the girls at Mesna, the data that I gathered suggest that they are not free to construct gender in such a way as to experience belonging and social inclusion both in school and at home. They are all disciplined by the judging gaze of popularity, which, of course, prioritizes the popular girls of middle-class families, because they use this gaze themselves, influenced by popular culture, and by social and financial forces in their surroundings. As such, girls living in immigrant families appear to have a harder time achieving the experience of social inclusion when they live in low-income families and do not choose to adopt an assimilation strategy.

### *Gender Construction, Social Inclusion, and Gender Equality at Furu School*

At first sight, it was difficult to argue that friendship ties were systematically distributed at Furu school according to ethnic background, as they were at Mesna. The two most popular girls represented different countries of origin but constructed gender in similar ways, as shown above. A closer scrutiny, however, indicated that girls of similar religious affiliation, here Muslim, flocked together (5 girls). There were only two non-Muslims in their class, Rosie and Pernille, and Rosie had no close friends among her classmates. I argue that the girls at Furu are also disciplined by the judging gaze of popularity in their construction of gender, which has some interesting features because of the situation of immigrant girls being in the majority.

As the girls at Furu School gradually approached puberty during the sixth form, an Islam-inspired covering-up code started to dominate their gender construction by way of dressing. They constructed a culturally-mixed — hybrid — gender position consisting of fashionable clothes, but with tunics and long sweaters over tights or jeans in order to hide their buttocks. Rania and Fatima also wore hijabs. This hybrid femininity position consisting of both cultural and religious items, in combination with general Norwegian fashion, may be read as a consequence of negotiating a balance between the cultural values of their countries of origin and those of Norway. This was explained by the participants as follows:

Sahra: We don't like scanty clothing; we want to hide our behinds ...

Mari: Hm ... I think that is rather usual among Muslim girls ... ethnic Norwegians don't think like this?

Sahra: No, she (Pernille) is very influenced by how we ... I don't mean to insult by saying this ... but one gets influenced by the people one hangs out with and she doesn't socialize with very many Norwegians.

Pernille constructed gender by adjusting to the covering-up code of the majority, which the popular girl Sahra had adopted, along with Fatima as a new girl in the popular group. Sahra remarked that Pernille had adapted to the majority dressing code, saying that Pernille once wore shorts to school, at which point Pernille quickly underscored the fact that she wore tights underneath, meaning that her legs were acceptably covered (Rysst, 2015).

This covering-up code did not visibly exist in the gender constructions at Mesna among the Muslim girls I got to know. Here too, the girls adjusted to the majority's definition of clothing styles, which in their case was defined by ethnic Norwegians, who were not concerned about hiding their bodies. Mette, for instance, often wore jeans with a very short top, showing her stomach or back if she bent over. As such, the girlhood at Furu School in general may be understood as more contested than at Mesna, because the majority of Furu girls had to negotiate cultural and religious values both from their countries of origin and from Norway. In contrast, the majority of girls at Mesna did not have to negotiate cultural values in their gender constructions beyond, perhaps, discussions with their parents concerning price category and clothes being too "grown-up" for their age group (Rysst, 2017). However, the girlhood of the minority (immigrant) girls at Mesna may have been more contested than that of the majority (immigrant) girls at Furu, because social inclusion appeared more difficult to achieve at Mesna without adopting an assimilation strategy. Clothing style appears to have been equally contested in both schools, but always dominated by the popular girls in the majority group.

In contrast to what was included in the economy of dignity at Mesna School, at Furu there existed no overarching leisure activities such as football to serve as bridges for inclusion. None of the girls at Furu played organized football. This may be because most of them were Muslims, and because football was defined as a masculine sport, as some Muslim parents pointed out at Mesna. In fact, none of the girls at Furu attended paid, organized leisure activities, and therefore appeared to exclude these as parts of their gender construction and economy of dignity. However, the free indoor activities at the Girls' Café served as bridges to some extent; these included dance, ping-pong, and video games.

In sum, at Furu School there existed no pressure to participate in any paid activity outside school in order to experience belonging and social inclusion. This suggests that their local girlhood was less influenced by commercialization than at Mesna and in other places where ethnic Norwegians are in the majority. For instance, at the Ostli School of my previous research (Rysst, 2008), where 60% of the children were ethnic Norwegian, the material items of the economy of dignity were of more expensive brands than at Furu, and included paid leisure activities, quite similar to the situation at Mesna. The popular girls there were also White, ethnic Norwegians of the middle class, who defined the content of their economy of dignity and the dominant gender positions. This resulted in girls from immigrant backgrounds and low-income families having a hard time experiencing social inclusion (Rysst, 2008, 2019).

When it comes to the issue of gender equality, the Furu girls, similar to those at Mesna, may be read as not free to construct gender as they wish. The Furu girls of immigrant origin, being in the majority, sported a hybrid femininity position informed by cultural values from both their countries of origin and the host country. As such, they avoided social exclusion in the family and also among peers. For the most popular girl, Sahra, it was possible to construct gender in harmony with both her parents and the popular girls, being one herself, while Pernille adjusted to the Muslim-informed norms of the majority in order to experience social inclusion.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that the crucial dimensions of the social construction of popularity among young girls at two field sites in Norway varied according to minority/majority positions, and overlapped the tokens of value in their economies of dignity. This overlap confirms the relevance of my reformulation of Pugh's (2009) definition of economy of dignity to include the word "popular", as mentioned earlier: "The popular children, here girls, shape the peer group's economy of dignity which in turn transforms particular goods and experiences into tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning" (adapted from Pugh, 2009, p. 8). The overlap also underlines the importance of how power, through popularity, works among children and how minority children, irrespective of ethnic origin, often adapt to the norms of the majority in their construction of gender. The dominant femininity positions at both field sites were constructed by the popular girls. All the girls experienced these femininity positions as a disciplining, judging gaze, and respected and followed them to a greater or lesser degree. Their gender constructions were influenced by this gaze, enmeshed with the male gaze, and reflected a commercialized childhood, particularly at Mesna where ethnic Norwegian girls from middle-class families were in the majority. This commercialization of young girls is influenced by teenage, popular culture and affects the girls' appearance and activities (Rysst, 2008, 2015, 2019; Sorensen 2014). This may have particular negative ramifications for the social inclusion of girls of immigrant Muslim families when in the minority, as shown in Mesna School.

The revealed overlap between the dimensions of popularity and "the tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning" (Pugh, 2009, p. 8) in the girls' economy of dignity, suggests a number of overall conclusions. If Pugh is correct in that, for children everywhere, the most important thing is the experience of belonging, and that what is needed for this experience among peers is influenced by the popular children, they have an important position for the well-being of their peers. I suggest the overlap between the social construction of popularity and the tokens of value of economy of dignity is found in most childhood contexts in industrialized societies, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. I also suggest that the overlap underlines the profound importance of taking peer power and the power of popularity seriously when conducting research concerning children and social inclusion. Social inclusion and popularity appear to depend on how the child furnishes the values of the economy of dignity, and this needs to be unpacked in order to understand more deeply what goes on among children. More insight into these processes may support the work of parents and teachers to include marginalized children.

It appears that when girls of immigrant origin are in the minority, they have more difficulty with social inclusion in the popular group, and perhaps in the overall peer group, than when they are in the majority. These differences are primarily related to lack of money (i.e., socioeconomic position) but also to cultural values relating to ethnicity and religion, and their family's priorities with regard to consumption. However, when the majority live in low-income families, popular girls included, the economy of dignity appears to contain fewer expensive items and activities than when the popular girls live in ethnic Norwegian middle-class families.

The final implication of the overlap of popularity and economy of dignity is that neither ethnic Norwegian girls, popular or otherwise, nor girls of immigrant origin, irrespective of ethnic origin, appear to live in a climate of gender equality. None of them are free to construct and do gender without risking social exclusion in the peer group or family. On the contrary, we have seen that the judging gaze of popularity disciplines all the girls to construct gender in accordance with their definition of their economy of dignity.

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