

Being Called a ‘Streber’: The Roles of Personality and Competition in the Labelling of Academically Oriented Students

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Abstract: The current research investigated a phenomenon that has received little attention so far: the labelling of students who are characterised by a strong academic orientation. We analysed whether personality predicts being labelled a ‘Streber’ (literally a person who strives for success; German origin, similar to the English word ‘nerd’) and labelling others as Strebers. Besides individual characteristics, we examined the impact of the classroom context. In Study 1 ($N=317$), eighth-grade students nominated classmates who were considered to be Strebers and provided self-ratings on how often they had labelled others as Strebers. In Study 2 ($N=358$), using a round robin design, we had students rate each of their classmates on the extent to which the students perceived their classmates to be Strebers. Results showed that being labelled was associated with introversion and conscientiousness. Labelling others was related to extraversion, low conscientiousness and low agreeableness. Furthermore, the labelling and the expected relation between individual characteristics and labelling were stronger in high-achieving than in low-achieving classes. Results are discussed with respect to personality traits as potential risk factors in peer stigmatisation and the impact of the classroom context. Copyright © 2012 European Association of Personality Psychology

Key words: personality; adolescents; Streber; Big Five; labelling; social relations model

At the end of Grade 5, Marius’ achievements decrease. His parents don’t know that the other children in class punish him when he receives an A. At the beginning of Grade 6, he complains about stomach aches or headaches on Monday mornings. He stops doing his homework and doesn’t talk about school at home. Every morning when he boards the school bus, the mental war starts over again. (Schoener, 2010, p. 2, transl. by authors)

In most societies, academic striving is positively valued, as demonstrated by international comparisons or efforts to improve individual performances (e.g. Program for International Student Assessment PISA; OECD, 2009; No Child Left Behind Act; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). But academic striving seems to have another side of the coin as illustrated by the initial story. Ironically, there are contexts in which high achievement is rather unpopular. Very little attention has been paid to this phenomenon, although it has been observed at the workplace (Kim & Glomb, 2010) or among students in college (Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, & Butera, 2009; Exline & Lobel, 1999). Likewise, it seems that academic orientation has a bad reputation among adolescents too.

THE LABELLING OF ACADEMICALLY ORIENTED STUDENTS AS ‘STREBERS’¹

In contrast to general societal demands, peers tend to stigmatise academically oriented classmates as ‘Strebers’ (Boehnke, Pelkner, & Kurman, 2004; Breidenstein & Meier, 2004; Rentzsch, Schütz, & Schröder-Abé, 2011). Etymologically, Streber is a German word describing a person who *strives* for something (cf. German verb ‘streben’; Dutch verb ‘streven’). From a cross-cultural perspective, labels that are very similar to the German ‘Streber’ are found across different countries and societies, for example, in the USA (‘nerd’; e.g. Bishop et al., 2004; Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994) or Israel (‘Hnun’; e.g. Boehnke, 2008). Similar English concepts are ‘dork,’ ‘brain’ (e.g. Prinstein & La Greca, 2002), ‘geek’ (e.g. Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005) and ‘teacher’s pet’ (e.g. Tal & Babad, 1990). All labels have in common that they are used to refer to academically oriented students. Still, there are some differences; for example, a Streber typically is a student who is associated with ambitious studying and academic striving, whereas those who spend much time at the computer are often called nerds (Duden, 2007; Hornby, 2005).

Being labelled a Streber is not a trifle. The term Streber is one of the most frequently used and most feared labels among adolescents at school (Pelkner & Boehnke, 2003). It is a well-known fact that students like Marius, who obviously put much

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¹In German, there is no ‘s’ for the plural of ‘Streber.’ We added an ‘s’ at the end to make it sound more natural in English.