

# Poverty of a family from provincial Poland and attractiveness of a school child among peers

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**Abstract:** The aim of the research was to capture the factors which differentiate the socio-metric status of a child in a class. It was expected that the factors connected with a child and a family have an influence on positive as well as negative choices of a child among peers and that they would differentiate the socio-metric status in a group. 192 pupils in the age of 11-13 from 10 schools in provincial Poland were tested. A classical J. Moreno socio-metric test was used. The result showed that economic situation of a family is the most important reason influencing the attractiveness of a child in a group. Children prefer these who are better well-off. Moreover, subjective poverty is remarkably connected with the incomplete family structure and the sex of a child, which additionally differentiates the acceptance of a child by the school class.

**Keywords:** a single-mother family, peer group

## Introduction

In the contemporary time of socio-economic changes in Poland, the researchers show a few indicators which characterize educational environment of child in terms of quality. These indicators include: a financial situation of a family, its structure and size (Kwak, 2008-2009; Lenarczyk, 2004). Among these indicators, material conditions of a family have the strongest influence on a child and they cause changes in the psyche when a child becomes an adult (Bartczak, 2014). What is more, poverty has a negative impact on their upbringing (Białas, 2001).

Szturmski observed that children and teenagers who grow up in the conditions of poverty are less physically developed, are more prone to various illnesses and lack trust in their own abilities (2006). In the families which suffer from poverty, a weak connection between a mother and a child is observed (Miller, Davis, 1997). Furthermore, these observations reveal that financial difficulties which a single-mother experiences can be identified with a less effective functioning of a family, which in turn has negative consequences for a child (Elder, Eccles, Ardel, Lord, 1995) also in full families. Children in families which are touched by poverty, as a result of lack of means to satisfy material and biological needs, feel worse than their peers (Cudak, Kowolik, Pindera, 1999). Experiencing a worse material situation of a family often leads to a gradual environmental isolation and constricting contacts with friends. Moreover,

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poverty leads to higher emotional stress and worsens satisfaction from a family life (Kotowska, Matysiak, Styrz, 2014; Mazur, Woynarowska, 2004; Napora, Kozerska, Schneider, 2014), it decreases the feeling of one's self-esteem in the eyes of the peers (Napora, Kozerska, Schneider, 2014). By taking into consideration the indicator of a subjective evaluation of family's welfare, the researchers observed a linear increase of the percentage of teenagers who assess the support as a low one, from 5.1 % in rich or rather rich families to 28.6% in poor or rather poor families. This dependency is crucial for both sexes (Mazur, Woynarowska, 2004).

Children from poor families often lack an emotional connection with parents; they are exposed to personality development disorders. The bond between parents and children weakens and the potential threat of a phenomenon of a child's social awkwardness increases. Empirical studies over the social support show that the low level is connected with the rejection of child by a social group, which in turn increases frustration and aggression. As a result, aggressive behaviour transforms into a constant tendency and it becomes connected to a child's lifestyle. People who have no feeling of belonging to a group have problems with interpersonal relations; they reveal stronger depressive symptoms and low self-esteem (Urban, 2005). This worsens and limits peer contacts and causes social isolation (Cudak, Kowolik, Pindera, 1999). A subjective evaluation of prosperity (a poor or rather poor family), sex (masculine) and low material status of the place of living are the independent variables of low achievements in learning among pupils of the middle school (Małkowska-Szkućnik, 2007, p. 158).

In contrast, scientists observed the dependency between the favourable assessment of a financial situation of a family and a higher feeling of security, love and understanding declared by the adolescents. Satisfying relationships with parents are connected with a higher level of education, a better financial situation and higher social position of a father (Kwak, 2008-2009). However, a subjective satisfying evaluation of a material position of a family does not modify the relations of daughters with peers in a school class (Napora, Pękała, 2014a, Napora, Pękała, 2014).

Early adolescence (Kwak, 2008-2009, p.2) or pre-adolescence (Radziwiłłowicz, 2012) is the time between 10-12 years old up to 15 years old. It is the time of a clear physical maturation and the increase of the need for contacts with others. Relations with peers fulfill a lot of social needs of the adolescents, including the need of belonging, success, acceptance and recognition, role play (Jundził, 1998, p. 66). They are also an occasion to develop social skills such as: communication, cooperation, empathy, showing and receiving support, solving conflicts, negotiations. Adolescents very often identify with a peer group; they spend time and dress in a similar way. Peers influence the style of adolescents' life far more than they influence their choice of values, on which parents have the greatest impact despite numerous conflicts with their growing children (Obuchowska, 2002). Children who cannot equal peers, for example in possessing attractive things, are often not accepted at school and outside it (Matyjas 2003, p. 68).

A school class, as a social group, has the most important impact on their members. Personality development of pupils depends on the structure, social relationship and emotional bond of a school class. A position of a child in a group, to some extent, results from the already developed behaviour, and what is more important, it is the place

where the personality traits develop and solidify. Taking into consideration the time pupils spend in a classroom, it is worth to emphasize the essence of a proper functioning of a school class as the one which has the strength of an educational impact (Zawada, 2013, p. 85). It was indicated that pupils who see school positively, obtain better results in learning and have higher satisfaction from school (Samdal, 2000).

By researching a social position in a group, the type of socio-metric status can be observed by classifying pupils to one of the three categories: (1) popular/ attractive children, (2) rejected children, (3) controversial children/ with average acceptance (Kulawska, 2013). The first group gets a lot of positive choices and few negative ones on the socio-metric research and they are rarely seen as the ones who are not liked. The analysis of behavioral profiles shows that these children are most often physically attractive, they have an optimistic and cheerful nature (Napora, Garbiec, in print), and they are characterized by the willingness to share with others and cooperate and they have a low level of aggression. Additionally, such children are sociable, they have friendly attitude towards others and their behaviour does not activate aggression (Schaffer, 2006). Initially, it was considered that popularity is the quality which growth can be described on a one-dimensional continuum: on the one extreme there are children accepted by the group, and on the other – the rejected ones. With time, it was determined that unpopular children/ with a low acceptance can be described as the ones who belong to two categories: the rejected and the isolated ones (Dodge, Lansford, Burks, Bates, Pettit, Fontaine, Price, 2003).

Rejected children cannot form the relationship with peers because a lot of them reveal destructive behaviour, they are often anti-social and aggressive towards other children. They have a tendency to avoid contacts with others, they rarely emphasize their rights. Other qualities which characterize these children are the frequent depression symptoms, a high level of social anxiety and a low feeling of social competence (Schaffer, 2006). Such children are also described as the shy ones, who do not speak much. Among the rejected ones, in terms of a child's sex, boys were more often described as aggressive and annoying than girls (Napora, Grabiec, 2014).

## **Method**

*The researched people* 192 pupils from primary schools age 11-13 took part. They come from six village schools and from 4 small town schools in the suburbs of the former Częstochowa voivodeship. The tests had been earlier arranged with the headmasters and class teachers. Children were assured of the anonymity of the results and the possibility to withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. Parents had been asked for the approval for their children to take part in the research. Both children and parents were informed about the purpose of the research, research problems and expected benefits. Data concerning the participants of the research is presented in table 1.

Table1. Characteristics of the researched children

No	Family factors	Descriptive statistics	
		M	
1.	Age of a child	M	11.9
		Median	12
		SD	0.82
2.	Sex	M	45.3%
		F	54.7%
3.	Family structure	full	84.4%
		single-mother family	15.6%
4.	Material status	unsatisfactory	15.1%
		sufficient	65.1%
		very good	19.8%
5.	Place of living	village	57.3%
		city	42.7%
6.	Number of siblings	none	18.8%
		1-2	65.7%
		3 and more	15.7%

*Tools* Sociometry is used in order to establish the position of a child in a class and to recognize social relations in a group (Brzeziński, 1980). It allows to define mutual likes and dislikes, popularity or lack of it, and distinguish features and qualities which are about comradeship, attractiveness and leadership in a group. It creates the possibility for the insight into emotional attitude of the researched people. Questions and tasks concerned particular answers in given situations and circumstances, which establish social relations in a group and between its individual members (Apanowicz, 2002, p. 90). A classical socio-metric J.L. Moreno test was used. It consisted of two parts: the first one which formed the respondent's particulars in which the pupils were asked about the age, sex, family structure, material status of the family<sup>2</sup>, the number of siblings and place of living. In the second part, six questions were used taking into account three socio-metric criteria of choice<sup>3</sup>. The task of each pupil was to make positive and negative choices for each criterion among peers from a school class.

<sup>2</sup> The question about material status of a family was limited to one closed (later re-coded) question about the subjective evaluation of a material situation of a family with the selection of one of the three answers.

<sup>3</sup> A class teacher asked to make a holiday news-sheet. (1a) Choose three people from the class who you would ask to help you prepare it. Justify why. (1b) Choose three people from the class who you would ask the least willingly to help you prepare a holiday news-sheet. Justify why. Imagine that you are going on a three-day-trip to Cracow. (2a) Choose three people you would like to sit next to on a coach. Justify why. (2b) Choose three people you would least like to sit next to on a coach. Justify why.

On the basis of the results three types of socio-metric positions of the researched children were differentiated: with high acceptance/ attractive (n = 77; 40.1% of pupils were counted to this group with a big amount of positive choices and a low amount of negative ones), with average (n = 54; 28.1% of children with more or less the same number of positive and negative choices) and with low acceptance/ unattractive (n = 61; 31.8% of children with a big amount of negative choices and low amount of positive ones).

*The aim, problems and research hypothesis* The aim of the research was to observe the factors which differentiate socio-metric status of a child in a school class. It was expected that the factors connected with a child and a family influence on both positive and negative choices of a child by peers and that they would differentiate the types of socio-metric status in a group. The main research problem was formed in a question: do the variables connected with a child (sex, age) and with a family (family structure, a subjective material status, place of living, number of siblings) influence the socio-metric position among peers? It was reduced to three detailed problems: 1. which of the analyzed factors influence on the positive and which on the negative choices of a child among peers and if so do they have crucial impact? 2. which factors significantly differentiate the socio-metric position of a child among peers? and 3. which factors show the connection with the variables that significantly differentiate the acceptance of a child by peers in a school class?

The results can indicate the connection between the conditions of functioning of a child's family and his attractiveness in a peer group. In other words, it was expected that the subjective evaluation of a financial prosperity of a family was an important correlate of a child's behaviour among peers.

## **Results**

For the statistical analysis Statistica programme 10.0 was used (StatSoft Inc., 2011). The conformity of the analyzed quantity variables with a regular distribution was tested with the use of Shapiro-Wilk test. Taking into account that the distributions substantially diverged from a regular distribution, and additionally the numerical amount of both compared groups was different, non-parametric methods were used to verify the hypothesis. To make the comparisons between two groups U Mann-Whitney (z) test was used, in case of a comparison for more than two groups ANOVA rang Kruskal-Wallis (H) was used, and the relevance of differences was checked by means of z test. Dependency analysis between variables represented on quality scales was done by means of chi-square test. The relevance level  $\alpha=0.05$  was assumed, the results were considered statistically significant when the test probability  $p$  fulfilled the inequality  $p<0.05$ .

### **Family and personality characteristics of a child and his attractiveness among peers**

The only statistically significant result from the analysis by means of ANOVA rang Kruskal-Wallis (H (2, N = 192) = 9.39;  $p = 0.009$ ), concerned the material status and showed its crucial impact on positive choices of a child among peers. A family's material status did not have an important influence on negative choices. It is worth paying

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(3a) Choose three people from the class you would like to live with in one room during your stay in Cracow. Justify why. (3b) Choose three people with whom you would least like to live in one room during your stay in Cracow. Justify why.

attention to the fact that sex, although it was not a factor which significantly differentiated the number of positive choices, yet for these choices, the obtained result was close to the border of statistical significance ( $z = 1.69$ ;  $p = 0.09$ ). The value which explains the positive ( $M = 9.66$ ;  $SD = 7.11$ ) and negative ( $M = 7.83$ ;  $SD = 9.92$ ) choices of girls, indicated the reversed proportion of choices in comparison with the boys' choices (respectively  $M = 7.84$ ;  $SD = 5.85$  and  $M = 9.75$ ;  $SD = 11.68$ ) (table 2).

In order to examine the influence of material status factor on the positive choices of a child by peers, a *post-hoc* test was used. It was aimed to check between which group a crucial difference appears. The results are presented in table 3 and chart 1.

Table 2. Factors influencing positive and negative choices of a child by peers from a school class

Factors	Positive choices				Negative choices			
	M	Me	SD	p.i.	M	Me	SD	p.i.
Sex								
F	9.66	9.0	7.11	.09	7.83	5.0	9.92	.38
M	7.84	8.0	5.85		9.75	5.0	11.86	
Age in years								
11	8.92	8.0	7.17		8.68	5.0	11.3	
12	8.74	8.0	6.9	.85	8.86	5.0	12.29	.26
13	8.77	9.0	5.53		8.63	6.0	8.72	
Family structure								
full	8.95	8.0	6.62	.49	8.09	5.0	10.17	.29
single-mother family	8.1	7.5	6.56		12.13	7.0	13.81	
Material status								
unsatisfactory	7.58	7.0	7.22		13.72	10.0	15.08	
sufficient	8.21	8.0	5.89	.009	7.99	5.0	9.99	.11
very good	11.66	12.0	7.62		7.33	5.0	9.0	
Place of living								
village	8.78	8.0	6.9	.76	8.75	5.0	11.26	.69
city	8.87	8.5	6.23		8.68	5.0	10.41	
Number of siblings								
none	9.5	9.0	6.84		8.5	5.0	10.63	
1-2	9.12	8.0	6.9	.23	8.03	5.0	10.37	.18
3 and more	6.73	6.5	4.47		11.9	6.5	12.91	

Table 3. Statistically significant differences between the researched groups for the positive choices

Material status of a family	Value $p$ for the multiple comparisons (bilateral) by means of Kruskal-Wallis test: $H(2, N=192) = 9.397$ ; $p = 0.009$		
	unsatisfactory (R:81.397)	sufficient (R:92,806)	very good (R:119.47)
unsatisfactory p.i.	x	0.958	0.015
sufficient p.i.	0.958	x	0.026
very good p.i.	0.015	0.026	x

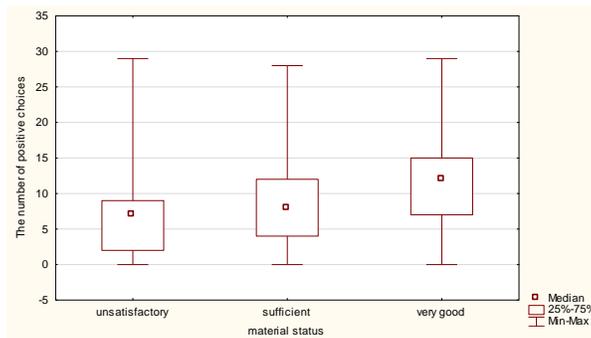


Chart 1. Material status of a family and positive choices of a child among peers

Significant differences appear between the researched groups with sufficient and very good status ( $p = 0.026$ ) as well as the unsatisfactory and very good ones ( $p = 0.015$ ). There are no differences between the researched with positive choices who evaluate the material status as the sufficient one with those who evaluate it as an unsatisfactory one. The value of median (Me) and medium (M) and average rang (R) show the highest values for the researched group with a very good status. A remarkable difference in comparison with the group with sufficient and unsatisfactory status was obtained, while the latter received the lowest values. Other factors proved to be without meaning both for the positive and negative choices of a child by peers.

### Material status of a family and a child's acceptance by peers

In order to observe the factors which differentiate the socio-metric position of a child among peers, an analysis was carried out by the means of chi-square test in the cross-group scheme 3 (material status)  $\times$  3 (type of acceptance). Sub-groups of children were selected in terms of the type of material status of a family (table 4).

Table 4. Statistically significant differences for the interaction between the type of a child's acceptance by peers and the material status of a family

Material status of a family	Type of a child's acceptance in a group						Total
	High acceptance		Average		Low acceptance		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
unsatisfactory	7	24.14	7	24.14	15	51.72	29
sufficient	47	37.90	39	31.45	38	30.65	124
very good	23	58.97	8	20.51	8	20.51	39
total							192
value $\chi^2$	12,1506						
df	2						
p.i.	.016						

The obtained result by means of chi-square test in a cross-group scheme 3 (peers' acceptance) × 3 (material status) proved to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 12.1$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $p = 0.016$ ). The share of children with a high acceptance is definitely the highest among the richest ones and it clearly decreases together with a declining material status of a family (chart 2).

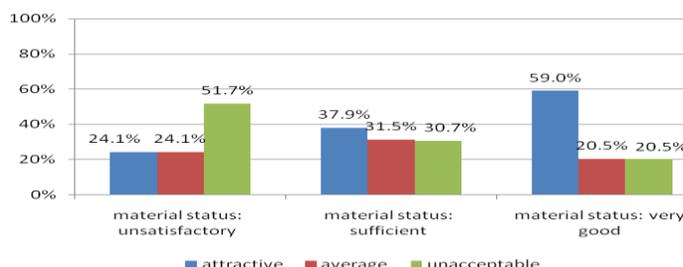


Chart 2. Material status of a family and a type of acceptance of a child by peers in a school class

### The connection of factors with variables which significantly differentiate child's acceptance by a group

In order to check whether material status co-exists with other independent variables which were researched and if they differentiate child's acceptance in a group, model chi-square was used in the analysis in the cross-group scheme 3 (material status) × 2 (sex) and in the cross-group scheme 3 (material status) × 2 (family structure).

Table 5. Statistically significant connection for the interaction between a material status of a family and sex of a child as well as family structure

Material status of a family	Sex of a child				Family structure			
	Girls		Boys		Full		Single-mother	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
unsatisfactory	19	18.45	10	11.24	22	13.58	7	23.33
sufficient	57	55.34	67	75.28	101	62.35	23	76.67
very good	27	26.21	12	13.48	39	24.07	0	0.00
total	103	100	89	100	162	100	30	100
value $\chi^2$	8.392				9.620			
df	2				2			
p.i.	.015				.008			

Among the researched, there were twice more girls than boys with a very good status. It is a statistically significant dependence ( $\chi^2 = 8.392$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .015$ ) which could influence the fact that girls were more often chosen by peers in a class. The result of chi-square test for the family structure is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 9.620$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .008$ ) and suggests that the variables co-exist.

## Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the research paper was to take a position to three research problems, which refer to the observations, that factors connected with a child and with a family influence both positive and negative choices of the researched among peers and they can differentiate a child's socio-metric position in a class. The first research question – which of the analyzed factors influence on the positive and which on the negative choices of a child by peers and if so, whether they have significant influence – can be answered that factors such as age of a child, structure and place of living as well as the number of siblings are negligible for both positive and negative choices of a child by peers in a group (table 2). Only the material status of a family significantly influences the amount of the positive choices of a child by peers but it does not have a significant influence on negative choices (table 3). Furthermore, it was observed that sex is not a factor which significantly differentiates positive and negative choices. It is worth mentioning, however, that for the positive values the result was close to the border of statistical significance ( $p = 0.09$ ). It indicates a given tendency and what is more, by comparing medians it can be seen that for the girls it has a higher value than for the boys (besides, arithmetic average as well). Maybe it is a derivative of the fact that there are more girls than boys in the research. An additional explanation can be the observation that in this age girls sympathize more with girls and boys with boys.

The result is the basis to claim that the consequences of these unfavourable factors can mean lowering of one's own value in the eyes of the peers. It is again worth emphasizing that experiencing family's material situation as the worse one, can lead to a gradual environmental isolation and reduction of contacts with peers. Children who cannot equal their peers are not accepted at school and outside it (compare Matyjas 2003).

The obtained results for the second research problem – which factors significantly differentiate the socio-metric positions of a child among peers – show a significant share of one factor which is material status of a family (table 4). The share of children with high acceptance is definitely the highest among these who subjectively evaluate the family's material status as a very good one and it clearly decreases together with its declining assessment. An important problem of poor families, which is emphasized by the researchers, is the fact that parents gradually cease to be the role models for their children. Additionally, a child has no place to learn the enthusiasm, satisfaction and happiness because in his family home there is apathy, discouragement and complaint caused by the lack of perspectives (Forma, Wolska-Długosz, 2010). What is constantly noticed by children is their extremely low social status which indicates small attractiveness for other people, the feeling of mental exclusion from a group; it can cause deprivation of important mental needs: affiliation, importance, recognition in the eyes of others, it can strengthen passive or aggressive attitude in interpersonal relations and additionally activate defense mechanisms which encourage to seek alternative social groups (Siwek, 2010, p. 36).

The last stage of the analysis was to determine which of the factors show the connection between variables which significantly differentiate a child's acceptance by peers in a class. The effects show the share of a child's sex and a family structure (table 5). In each case, the dependency is statistically significant. Hence, it can mean that girls

were a bit more liked by peers than boys or it may mean that girls subjectively evaluate the material situation of their families better than boys. What is more, the results suggest that children from single-mother families are in a worse financial situation (there are no children among them with a very good status). The obtained results for the third research problem indicate the earlier observation that the best variable (and the only one in this research) which influences a child's acceptance in a peer group, is the material status of a family.

To sum up, it can be said that some qualities which describe school children who come from small towns and villages significantly determine their type of socio-metric position among peers. Economic situation of a family is the most important reason influencing the attractiveness of a child in a peer group. Children prefer these who are better well-off. Moreover, subjective poverty is significantly connected with incomplete family structure and a child's sex, which additionally differentiate a child's acceptance by a class group.

Generally, the conclusion of the research is the proof of the observation that children prefer these peers who are better financially situated. Furthermore, additional observations from the research include:

- ✓ independently on the subjective evaluation of a material situation, boys obtain negative choices more often than girls,
- ✓ girls from the better-off families are more attractive than boys, no matter what their material situation of a family is.

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