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## Social interactions as self-esteem predictors in young boys and girls of two countries

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### *Abstract*

*Relationships with significant others represent an important source of self-esteem of young people. A positive relationship with parents, peers and teachers is related to higher self-esteem. This research aimed to establish the relative contribution of mother and father behaviors, friendship quality, and teacher interaction in explaining student self-esteem considering their gender and belonging country (Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina). The research was conducted on students in Croatia (N=189) and B&H (N=292) with the average age of 13.4 years. Even though there were no significant differences in the self-esteem of boys and girls and students in both countries, there were significant differences in the perception of social interaction quality. Boys experience relationships of lower quality with parents and friends, while students in B&H report lower quality of their relationship with parents but more closeness to their teacher. The less pupils experience parental rejection and control and the more they experience parental acceptance and closeness in teacher interaction, their self-esteem is higher. Mother's behaviors have the greatest individual contribution to explaining the variance of self-esteem, followed by the father's and teacher's behavior, while friendship quality has no significant contribution to explaining pupil self-esteem. The only significant predictor in the last step of the analysis was teacher closeness. Together, this set of predictors explains 19% of the variance of student self-esteem. The mother's behavior is the most important socialization factor in explaining adolescent self-esteem.*

*Keywords: self-esteem, parental behavior (acceptance, rejection, control), quality of friendship, teacher interaction (influence, proximity), gender, country*

Self-esteem is a socio-psychological construct referring to the entire evaluation of oneself including the feelings of general happiness and satisfaction (Harter, 1999). The primary sources of information that form self-evaluation are value, self-perception, and comparison with others (Schwalbe and Staples, 1991), while parents, peers, and teachers offer information that shape self-esteem in adolescents. Two mutually connected processes explain the development of self-esteem in interaction with others. Firstly, a person compares his social identities, opinions and capacities with those of other people. If a person experiences himself as inferior compared to those he is in an interaction with, that will reflect negatively on his self-esteem. Secondly, a person evaluates himself through interaction with others. If significant others do not have a high opinion of him/her, it will reflect on the perception of his/her self-value, resulting in low self-esteem respectively (McMullin & Cairney, 2004).

It is well-known that positive interactions with significant others influence numerous positive developmental outcomes such as self-esteem. One of the key questions that is being discussed is who has such an influence. The most researched is the influence of parents followed by peers and then teachers. Most research includes separate contribution of parents, peers, and teachers, even though we also found research that has taken into consideration all three groups of significant others. What can be concluded when generally speaking of the influence of parents, peers, and teachers on development is that it depends on the age and gender of the pupil and the developmental aspect. Parents have a stronger contribution in the area of longstanding goals (i.e., choice of interest and education, moral values), peers in the areas of entertainment, dressing, spending free time, and delinquent behavior (when family interactions are lacking in strength and quality) (Klarin, Penezić, & Šimić Šašić, 2014; Klarin, Proroković, & Šimić Šašić, 2010a), and teachers in the academic achievement area (Martin et al., 2007). Besides the fact that each of the significant others has an individual contribution, their mutual activity has recently been discussed. In this sense, the model of continuity and compensation is used (Cooper & Cooper, 1992, according to Raboteg-Šarić, 2014). The model of continuity relies on the attachment and social learning theory according to which there is a similarity in the relationship between the child and parents and the relationship with peers and thus with teachers. The compensation model draws on Sullivan's interpersonal theory (1953), according to which positive experiences in one area can have a protective function in another area.

### **The contribution of significant others to student self-esteem**

Juhasz (1989) asked 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students to rank significant others according to their importance and to explain what significant others do or say to make them feel good or bad. He found that parents ranked as the most important, followed by peers, brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers and other relatives. Teachers were at the bottom of the list. Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) tested the relationship between the representations of relationships with parents, teachers, and peers and school adjustment, motivation, and self-esteem. It appeared that representations of relationships with parents and teachers contributed to the explanation of school functioning (school adjustment and motivation), while representations of relationships with parents and peers were significant in explaining self-esteem. Students who feel secure in the relationship with their parents and peers, who have emotional support and support in school issues from their parents and peers, have higher self-esteem. Moreover, identification with parents is positively related, while identification with peers is negatively related to general self-esteem, which authors explain by different inter-personal orientation. Those students who identify themselves with peers do so to comply with peers or are more directed towards their peers due to lack of self-esteem. Students who identify themselves with significant adults (parents and teachers) are more engaged in school and have more positive feelings which can indicate that identification with adults is connected with the internationalization of values transferred by them (Ryan et al., 1994).

Research, in general, indicates that self-esteem is positively related to parental acceptance and support, and negatively related to over protection and control from parents (Hay & Ashman, 2003; Bean & Northrup, 2009) especially in western cultures (Herz & Gullone, 1999). The effects of parental support are stronger in girls than in boys (according to Burnett & Demnar, 1996). Specifically, parental warmth, care and closeness, and authoritative parenthood, show a positive relationship with self-esteem in adolescence (Raboteg-Šarić & Šakić, 2012), while roughness and control or, in other words, authoritarian parenthood, are negatively associated with self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967; Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008). Burnett and Demnar (1996) investigated the relation between self-esteem and closeness with mother, father, two best friends, and the present teacher among children aged 8-12. All four variables showed a significant positive correlation with self-esteem, whereby closeness to the mother was most strongly associated with self-esteem while closeness with the father was least strongly associated with self-esteem (particularly in boys).

Furthermore, it was established that girls felt greater closeness with the teacher than boys. Cattley (2004) found a greater contribution from parental support than from teacher support, which leaves space for improving the relationship with the teacher. The relationship with the teacher is weaker as students grow older which indicates that the teacher contribution depends on age. Teacher support and encouragement of a student's autonomy are, in general, related to high self-esteem. The teacher's inclusion, support, order and organization, and innovations are positively related to the student's self-esteem while the teacher's control is negatively related to self-esteem in students (Nelson, 1984; Demirdag, 2015). Šimić Šašić (2012) established that in a positive interaction with the "best" teacher, self-esteem is positively associated with leadership, helping, and understanding, while negative self-esteem is associated with insecurity, dissatisfaction, conflict, and strictness of the teacher. In a negative interaction with the "worst" teacher, self-esteem is not related to any teacher behavior. Teachers with poorer classroom management strategies have problems with class management, i.e. most of the time that should be spend on teaching is used to discipline students, which have negative impact on students' self-esteem (Demirdag, 2015).

Bishop and Inderbitzen (1995) established that people who do not accomplish a reciprocal friendship have lower self-esteem than those who have at least one such friendship. Also, having or not having at least one mutual friendship is more important for adolescent self-esteem than being accepted among peers. Moreover, Birkeland, Breivik, and Wold (2014) reported that being accepted by peers has a generally protective effect on general self-esteem in adolescents in cases when closeness with parents is at a low level.

Gender is a variable that additionally complicates the influence of social interaction on self-esteem. Besides showing gender differences, research has shown different relative importance of individual significant others in the explanation of self-esteem. Research has shown that support from adult figures (parent and teacher) are more important for the self-esteem of girls than that of boys (Brajša-Žganec, Raboteg-Šarić, & Franc, 2000; Burnett & Demnar, 1996). Research results also show gender differences in the perception of interactions with significant others. Keresteš (1999) concludes that parents control sons more than daughters (psychologically and behaviourally). Macuka (2007) found gender differences in the perception of father's control and mother's emotionality. Boys experience higher levels of psychological control from their father, more rejection and less acceptance from their mother than girls do.

In order to fully understand the development of an individual, he/she must be observed within the context he is growing up in. Cultural values can have influence on self-esteem, and different cultures can evaluate and encourage different behaviors (Marshall, 2001). Cultural values and ideals are transferred through procedures of upbringing, in other words, through the interaction of a child with significant others. Research has shown that there are differences in parental beliefs, goals and values (Davis-Kean, 2005; Wigfield et al., 2006), parental behavior (Kim & Rohner, 2002; Zervides & Knowles, 2007) and teacher behavior (Beyazkurk & Kesner, 2005; Khine & Fisher, 2004) in different cultures. Some of our earlier researches have shown differences between adolescents in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). Youth in B&H are more involved in family interaction (Klarin, Proroković, Šimić Šašić, & Arnaudova, 2012), consider that parents have a stronger influence on decision making in different spheres of their lives (Klarin, et al., 2010a), and have a more positive evaluation of the quality of friendship (Klarin, Proroković, & Šimić Šašić, 2010b). Klarin, Proroković, and Šimić Šašić (2012) have established that quality of family and peer interaction contribute less to the explanation of self-esteem in youth in B&H than in young people in Croatia. Besides, it seems that young people in B&H show a greater orientation toward collectivism than young people in Croatia (Šimić Šašić & Klarin, 2014; Puhalo, 2005). Even though B&H and Croatia have a joint history, the collapse of the former Socialist Republics of Yugoslavia and the transfer from socialism to capitalism systems that differ in economic, political, and ideological aspects, did not have an equally intensive impact on all the countries. According to the data of the Agency for Statistics (<http://www.bhas.ba>) and the State Institute for Statistics (<http://www.dzs.hr>), B&H has a lower gross domestic product, a lower average salary, a higher employment rate, a lower purchasing power, etc. Almost 60% of the inhabitants in Croatia lives in cities, while the same number of inhabitants in B&H live in the country. 16.4% of the population in Croatia has a university degree, and 9.5% is without any education or with incomplete elementary school, while in B&H 12.8% of the population has a university degree, and 14.7% has no education or completed elementary school education. They also differ in ethical content and religion of the population.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to establish the relative contribution of mother and father behaviors, friendship quality, and teacher interaction in explaining self-esteem of students in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first research problem was to investigate whether girls and boys in Croatia and B&H differ in self-esteem and the quality of interaction with parents, friends, and teachers. We

assume that pupils in B&H could give a more positive evaluation to the quality of interaction with significant others than pupils in Croatia, and boys could give a worse evaluation of the quality of social interaction. The second problem was to investigate the relationship between the quality of interaction with significant others and self-esteem. We expect positive behavior of parents (acceptance), better friendship quality and a more positive relationship with the teacher to be positively, while parental rejection and control to be negatively connected with self-esteem. The third problem was to examine individual contributions of mother and father behavior, friendship quality, and teacher interaction in explaining self-esteem of pupils in both countries. Parent behaviors, especially that of the mother, are expected to have the highest predictive value.

## Method

### Sample

The participants in this research were 483 pupils from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade of elementary school in Croatia (Zadar, N=189), and there were 92 boys (49.46%) and 94 girls (50.54%), while in the sample from B&H there were 158 boys (54.67%) and 131 girls (45.33%). In these two samples, pupils mutually differed in some sociodemographic variables. Pupils in B&H were somewhat younger ( $t=2.19$ ,  $p=0.03$ ;  $M_{hr}=13.49$ ,  $M_{b\&h}=13.35$ ), which can be attributed to the fact that in Croatia children start first grade when turning 6 by April 1<sup>st</sup> while in B&H, they start school when turning 6 by September 1<sup>st</sup> of the current year. Statistically significant differences were established among the samples considering their place of residence ( $\chi^2=267.23$ ,  $p=.00$ ). Most pupils in Croatia live in the city (96.08%) while in B&H most pupils live in the country (87%). Pupils of the two countries differ in the education of their parents. Parents (mother and father) in B&H have a lower level of education ( $\chi^2=61.13$ ,  $p=.00$ ;  $\chi^2=45.92$ ,  $p=.00$ ). There are more unemployed mothers in B&H ( $\chi^2=28.18$ ,  $p=.00$ ), while the differences in the employment of fathers were not statistically significant. The examinees were not asked of their ethnicity, but since in Čitluk and Ljubuški most of the inhabitants are of Croatian nationality (Herzegovina-Neretva and Western Herzegovina County), this means that the samples are similar in ethnicity.

### Measures

*The self-esteem scale* – (Vizek-Vidović & Kuterovac-Jagodić, 1996) consists of 12 items that measure general self-esteem, the students' assessment of their own value. An example item is "I have many good features". Pupils appraised how much they agree with each statement on a 5-point scale (1- I completely disagree to 5- I completely agree). The coefficient of internal consistency of the self-esteem scale was  $\alpha=.89$  in the Croatian sample and  $\alpha=.80$  in the sample from B&H.

*The perception of parent behavior scale* (Macuka, 2007) – measures rejection, acceptance, and psychological control of the mother and father. Rejection refers to the negative emotional relationship of a child with his mother and father. The subscale includes 8 items (i.e., "He/she does not show that he/she loves me" and "I have the feeling that he/she does not notice me"). Acceptance refers to the positive emotional relationship between the child and parents ("My mother and I have an honest relationship", "He/she offers me security"). This subscale includes 7 items. The control dimension refers to behavior mechanisms that are directed towards modifying child behavior such as punishment, threatening, underestimation, comparison with other children, and similar, and it can be defined as psychological control. The subscale has 10 items ("He/she mocks me in front of others", "He rarely smiles at me"). On a 5-degree scale, examinees evaluated to what extent each claim was correct (1- not correct at all, 2- partially correct and 3- correct). The coefficients of reliability of the used subscales were satisfactory in both samples. The results in the pupil sample in Croatia were: rejection (mother  $\alpha=.81$ , father  $\alpha=.79$ ), acceptance (mother  $\alpha=.78$ , father  $\alpha=.74$ ) and control (mother  $\alpha=.88$ , father  $\alpha=.85$ ), in the sample of pupils from B&H: rejection (mother  $\alpha=.76$ , father  $\alpha=.73$ ) acceptance (mother  $\alpha=.71$ , father  $\alpha=.73$ ) and control (mother  $\alpha=.82$ , father  $\alpha=.82$ ).

*The friendship quality scale* (Klarin, 2005) consists of 30 items that refer to the appraisal of friendship with one's best friend, its value, emotional support and conflict resolution, mutual assistance and activity. The scale result is interpreted as friendship quality. Examples of items are: "We always borrow things from each other", "He/she defends me when someone slanders me"; "We confide secrets to each other". On a 5-degree scale, examinees evaluated how much each one of the items referred to their best friend (1-It's never true for my friend, up to 5 –always true for my friend). The scale coefficient of reliability was  $\alpha=.96$  in the Croatian sample and  $\alpha=.94$  in the B&H sample.

*The questionnaire on teacher interaction* (Wubbels et al., 1993; according to Šimić Šašić, 2012) – measures six teacher behaviors: leadership, helping/friendly behavior, understanding, giving freedom to students, uncertain behavior, dissatisfaction, admonishing, and strictness. The Australian questionnaire version for students was used in this research and it consists of 48 items. Each subscale is measured by 6 items, and in this research each item for conflict quality and strictness had a weak connection with the total result so they were left out in the formation of the total result. The coefficients of internal consistency stood in the order stated in the scale: .90, .89, .91, .78, .88, .90, .82 and .86 for the sample in Croatia and .76, .75, .76, .72, .75, .76, .79, i .82 for the sample in B&H. Students were to evaluate how often the teacher behaved in a certain way in class assisted by a five-degree scale (1- never, 5- always). <sup>2</sup>The combinations of these behaviors give a typical profile of the interpersonal teacher and student relationship (i.e., directive, authoritative, tolerant, repressive, etc.). In scoring results in single subscales, it is possible to express individual results in two dimensions: dimension of influence and dimension of proximity<sup>3</sup>. The teacher's behavior: strictness and leadership, uncertain and giving students freedom contribute more to the result of the dimension of influence, while friendship and understanding with dissatisfaction and conflict contribute more to the dimension of proximity (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). The dimension of influence (dominance/submissiveness) points to who runs or controls communication and how often, while the dimension of proximity marks the degree of cooperativity or closeness among participants in communication.

## Procedure

The research was conducted with the approval of the principal, expert service and parents. The questionnaire was anonymously filled out by pupils during one class. In both samples, pupils evaluated the interaction with the Croatian language teacher considering that the most of their classes consisted of the Croatian language class.

## Results

The first research problem was to investigate whether girls and boys in Croatia and B&H differ in self-esteem and the quality of interaction with parents, friends, and teachers. To answer this research problem, two-way analyses of variance were conducted. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for self-esteem, parental rejection, acceptance and control, friendship quality, and influence and teacher proximity, and the results of a two-way variance analysis with regards to gender and country.

Two-way analysis of variance results indicates that no significant difference exists in self-esteem and mother acceptance of male and female students in Croatia and B&H. Significant differences have been established in mother rejection with reference to gender. Boys give higher appraisals to mother rejection. A difference in the perception of mother control was also set up between pupils in the two countries. Pupils in B&H appraised the mother's use of greater psychological control than students in Croatia. Statistically significant differences were established in the evaluation of the father's behavior - the differences in rejection and control were significant considering gender and country, while the difference in acceptance were significant only with respect to the country. Boys and pupils in B&H experienced higher rejection and psychological control by their father. Pupils in B&H experienced lower acceptance by the father. With respect to friendship quality, girls from both countries evaluated greater friendship quality than boys, while the interaction of gender and country was significant. The friendship quality difference between boys and girls, was more pronounced in Croatia than in B&H. In general, the greatest evaluations of friendship quality were given by girls in Croatia and the worst by boys in Croatia. Small differences were established in the appraisal of teacher's influence and closeness. The interaction of gender and the belonging country showed to be significant for the teacher influence. However, later analyses (Bonferroni test) showed that differences were not so large (significant). Finally, students in B&H perceive their teachers closer than students in Croatia.

<sup>2</sup>Total results in all measurement instruments are created as an average value.

<sup>3</sup>According to the formula:  $(.92*lea)+(.38*hel)-(.38*und)-(.92*giv)-(.92*unc)-(.38*dis)+(.38*adm)+(.92*str)$  for influence dimension and  $(.38*lea)+(.92*hel)+(.92*und)+(.38*giv)-(.38*unc)-(.92*dis)-(.92*adm)-(.38*str)$  for closeness dimension (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005).



Table 1

*Descriptive statistics for measurement variables for boys and girls in both countries and the results of two-way variance analysis (gender X country)*

	Croatia		B&H			F (p)
	M M (SD)	F M (SD)	M M (SD)	F M (SD)		
Self-esteem	3.96 (.80)	3.77 (.86)	3.90 (.69)	3.81 (.80)	gender	3.52 (.06)
					country	.01 (.92)
					gender x country	.48 (.49)
Rejection (Mother)	1.40 (.48)	1.25 (.35)	1.45 (.45)	1.34 (.37)	gender	9.54 (.02)
					country	2.58 (.11)
					gender x country	.36 (.55)
Acceptance (Mother)	2.50 (.46)	2.57 (.41)	2.49 (.57)	2.59 (.34)	gender	3.19 (.08)
					country	.01 (.94)
					gender x country	.15 (.70)
Control (Mother)	1.51 (.48)	1.44 (.43)	1.58 (.46)	1.57 (.39)	gender	1.11 (.29)
					country	5.38 (.02)
					gender x country	.43 (.51)
Rejection (Father)	1.39 (.44)	1.26 (.36)	1.47 (.43)	1.41 (.38)	gender	4.62 (.03)
					country	7.77 (.01)
					gender x country	.61 (.44)
Acceptance (Father)	2.51 (.42)	2.44 (.43)	2.41 (.44)	2.34 (.41)	gender	2.13 (.16)
					country	4.73 (.03)
					gender x country	.01 (.91)
Control (Father)	1.48 (.44)	1.32 (.34)	1.56 (.45)	1.45 (.35)	gender	10.77 (.00)
					country	6.15 (.01)
					gender x country	.24 (.62)
Friendship quality	3.78 (.84)	4.42 (.60)	4.03 (.71)	4.30 (.58)	gender	39.83 (.00)
					country	.90 (.34)
					gender x country	6.54 (.01)
Teacher's influence	1.79(1.5 4)	2.43 (1.44)	1.95 (1.59)	1.73 (1.84)	gender	1.22 (.27)
					country	1.80 (.18)
					gender x country	4.68 (.03)
Teacher's proximity	3.71 (4.54)	3.40 (4.20)	4.19 (3.11)	4.78 (3.20)	gender	.10 (.075)
					country	4.19 (.04)
					gender x country	1.00 (.32)

The second problem of this research was to examine the relationship between self-esteem and mother and father behaviour, friendship quality, and teacher interaction. Pearson coefficients of correlation between the examined variables are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Correlations among measurement variables on the whole sample*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Country	1.00											
2. Gender	-.05	1.00										
3. Self-esteem	.00	-.08	1.00									
4. Mother rejection	.09	-.16**	-.31**	1.00								
5. Mother acceptance	.00	.09	.23**	-.38**	1.00							
6. Mother control	.11*	-.06	-.32**	.70**	-.29**	1.00						
7. Father rejection	.14**	-.11*	-.30**	.74**	-.37**	.55**	1.00					
8. Father acceptance	-.10*	-.08	.26**	-.31**	.58**	-.23**	-.35**	1.00				
9. Father control	.13**	-.17**	-.29**	.53**	-.22**	.73**	.59**	-.18**	1.00			
10. Friendship quality	.04	.29**	.05	-.14**	.19**	-.07	-.14*	.17**	-.05	1.00		
11. Teacher's influence	-.08	.05	.04	-.02	.08	-.01	.02	.10	-.01	.12	1.00	
12. Teacher's proximity	.13*	.03	.27**	-.34**	.23**	-.36**	-.23**	.14*	-.28**	.17**	-.04	1.00

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

In the correlation analysis, we see that pupils who report more parental acceptance and less rejection and control have higher self-esteem. Also, a higher level of self-esteem is associated with more closeness in the interaction with the teacher. Moreover, pupils in B&H experience less acceptance from the father, but more control from the mother, as well as more control and rejection from the father. They also experience more closeness in their interaction with the teacher. Boys experience more rejection by both parents and more control from the father. They also report of lower friendship quality than girls. Next, both parental rejection and control are negatively correlated with friendship quality and teacher closeness while acceptance is positively correlated with these variables. All parental behaviors are statistically significantly correlated with teacher closeness, while friendship quality is not statistically significantly correlated with mother and father control. Parental behaviors are not related to teacher influence. In general, the more positively pupils evaluate the relationship with parents, the more positive is the evaluation of friendship quality and closeness in interaction with the teacher.

The final problem in this research was to examine individual contributions of mother and father behavior, friendship quality, and teacher interaction in explaining self-esteem. Since there was no difference in the levels of self-esteem according to gender and the belonging country, but there were differences in some predictor variables, we decided to conduct a hierarchical regression analysis controlling for gender and the country of belonging in the first step of the analysis. In the next step, and according to results of previous research, mother behaviors were included, followed by father behaviors, friendship quality, and finally teacher interaction. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Results of hierarchical regression analysis with self-esteem as the criterion variable (N=213)*

predictors	Self-esteem				
	1 <sup>st</sup> step Beta	2 <sup>nd</sup> step Beta	3 <sup>rd</sup> step Beta	4 <sup>th</sup> step Beta	5 <sup>th</sup> step Beta
1. Country	.00	.03	.05	.05	.04
Gender	-.08	-.13*	-.13	-.13	-.12
2. Mother rejection		-.17	-.11	-.11	-.08
Mother acceptance		.13	.05	.05	.04
Mother control		-.17	-.08	-.08	-.05
3. Father rejection			-.05	-.05	-.07
Father acceptance			.13	.12	.12
Father control			-.14	-.14	-.13
4. Friendship quality				.02	-.01
5. Teacher's influence					.04
Teacher's proximity					.15*
$\Delta R^2$		.14**	.02	.00	.02
$R^2$	.01	.15**	.17**	.17**	.19**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

The results of hierarchical regression analysis show that gender and the country of belonging do not contribute significantly to the explanation of pupil self-esteem (1% of the criterion variance). The behaviors of the mother included in the second step increase the percentage of the explained variance significantly (additional 14%). The inclusion of these variables resulted in a significant standardized regression coefficient for gender, which indicates the presence of suppressor effects. The third set of variables, behaviors of the father, do not add to the explanation of self-esteem significantly (only 2% of the variance). Now gender becomes a non-significant predictor, which may indicate that parental behaviors are a mediator in the relationship between the pupils' gender and self-esteem. In the fourth step, the included friendship quality did not show any contribution to explaining the variance of self-esteem. In the final, fifth step, variables of teacher interaction explain only 2% of the variance of self-esteem, but teacher closeness is a significant predictor of self-esteem. The total set of predictor variables explains 19% of the variance of pupil self-esteem. Pupils with teachers who show more closeness in their interaction with the class report of a higher level of self-esteem.

## Discussion

The first research problem was to examine whether girls and boys and pupils in Croatia and B&H differed in self-esteem and the quality of interaction with parents, friends and teachers. Differences in self-esteem between boys and girls and pupils in the two countries were not established, but some differences in parental behavior perceptions, in friendship quality and interaction quality with teachers considering gender and country were found. Research on early adolescence (from 11-13 years of age) shows that boys and girls have a similar level of self-esteem, but later gender differences become significant and usually in favor of boys (McMullin & Cairney, 2004).

In comparing the perception of parental behavior in boys and girls from the two countries, we can conclude that these two groups differ more in the evaluation of the father's behavior than that of the mother. Statistically significant differences in the perception of the mother's behavior were established for rejection with respect to gender and for control with respect to the country. With regards to the father's behavior, statistically significant differences with respect to the country were established in all three behavioral dimensions, while gender differences were established in rejection and control. Boys generally experience more mother and father rejection and more psychological control from the father when compared to girls. In other words, boys experience a negative emotional relationship with both parents to a greater extent, and fathers punish, threaten and underestimate them more. Keresteš (1999) determined that both mothers and fathers had a tighter behavioral and psychological control over sons than over daughters, while she did not establish differences in the appraisal of emotion. Macuka (2007) found a higher level of psychological control of the father over boys while the difference in the psychological control of the mother was not statistically significant. On the other hand, Macuka reported the differences in the emotional relationship with the mother (boys evaluated more mother rejection and acceptance than girls), but not with the father. It is possible that the found differences are a result of specific samples, as well as age issues. The samples in the research mentioned above included children from 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades of elementary school, and it is well known that positive relationships with parents are declining with age while perception of control is strengthening. Pupils in B&H experience more control from the mother but more rejection, less acceptance and more control from the father too. Previous studies showed no significant differences in students' satisfaction with families in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Klarin i Šimić Šašić, 2009; Klarin et al., 2012a). There is a possibility that inconsistent results are a consequence of the different operationalization of family variables, considering that the scale used in the preceding research measures family satisfaction in its entirety. A worse relationship with the father (more rejection and control and lower acceptance), as well as generally negative parental behavior in B&H can be explained by traditional relationships and stricter parents in B&H, who mostly live in villages. This can be a consequence of poorer socioeconomic family circumstances or certain cultural differences. Some earlier research showed that B&H is more collectivistically oriented than Croatia (Šimić Šašić & Klarin, 2014; Puhalo, 2005), and collectivistic cultures cherish tradition, respect and authority where parents are more prone to punishment (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1993, Gaias et al., 2012). But it seems that differences in socioeconomic circumstances in families in B&H and Croatia might be much more important. It has been established that samples differ with reference to residence, parents' education, and mother's employment which reflects on the economic power in the family and can influence the level of family stress and parental behavior. Economic stress reduces parental quality, parents are strict and upbringing practices are inconsistent (Čudina-Obradović & Obradović, 2006). We also know that parents with a lower level of education are more prone to authoritarian parenting styles and have more psychological and behavioral control over their children (according to Lacković-Grgin, 2011). These socio-economic circumstances are generally worse for families in B&H.

In the friendship quality evaluations, assumptions have been confirmed on gender differences between boys and girls whereby girls from both countries evaluate friendship quality more positively than boys. Gender interaction and country are significant due to the fact that friendship quality is best evaluated by girls in Croatia, while given the worst evaluation by boys in Croatia. Girls, in general, create more intimate friendships and describe friendship relationships in terms of closeness and emotional attachment unlike boys (Klarin et al., 2010b). In this research, we have not confirmed the differences in the friendship quality of students in the two countries, which can be a consequence of the sample specificity. The prior research was carried out on a sample of high school students, and the students from B&H were from the Zenica-Doboj Canton region (Žepče).

In the end, the assumption of a difference in teacher interaction perception was not found between boys and girls, but the assumption of a positive teacher interaction with pupils in B&H was established. Students in B&H perceive their teachers as being more ready to cooperate and help (greater proximity) than students in Croatia. Similar differences in the appraisal of quality of interactions with the



teacher were established by Beyazkurk and Kesner (2005) comparing teachers from Turkey and the USA. Teachers in Turkey (more collectivist-orientated) show a significantly higher closeness in relationships with students than teachers in the USA. The authors of this research explain these differences by socialization, pointing out that it is important for parents in Turkey that children have a close relationship with the teacher, while parents in the USA do not see the importance of a close relationship with the teacher for their children's school success.

The parental and teacher interaction variables relations with self-esteem are in line with the results of previous researches (Bean & Northrup, 2009; Buri et al, 1998; Coopersmith, 1967; Demirdag, 2015; Hay & Ashman, 2003; Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008; Herz & Gullone, 1999; Nelson, 1984; Raboteg-Šarić & Šakić, 2012; Šimić Šašić, 2012). Pupils with higher self-esteem are those who experience less rejection and control, more acceptance from the father and mother, and more assistance and understanding (closeness) in teacher interaction. In the conducted research, the best-friendship quality is not related to self-esteem, which is not in accordance with the viewpoint of Bishop and Inderbitzen (1995). They believe that it is more important for adolescents' self-esteem to have or not have at least one mutual friendship than to be accepted among peers. It is possible that friendships in early adolescence are not firm enough, and that acceptance by peers is more important for self-esteem. The correlations between the measures of various social interactions points to the similarity in relationships of adolescents with parents, peers and teachers, and confirm the model of continuity.

The main problem of this study was to examine the independent contribution of mother and father behaviors, the quality of friendship, and of teacher interaction in explaining the self-esteem of pupils. The results of hierarchical regression analysis have shown that mothers' behaviors contribute most strongly to the explanation of self-esteem in adolescents. The contribution of the father and the teacher is equally small (2%), and the quality of friendship does not contribute to explaining self-esteem of the pupils at all. These results are consistent with the results of other authors. Burnett and Demnar (1996) found that closeness of the mother is most strongly associated with self-esteem of children aged 8-12 years, compared to the two best friends, current teacher and father. Cattley (2004) reports a stronger contribution of parents than teachers. Raboteg-Šarić (2014) also states that a stronger predictor of self-esteem is the attachment to parents than attachment to friends. In fact, she states that attachment to parents is associated with indicators of adjustment (such as self-esteem, satisfaction with marriage, psychological problems, violent behavior) in adulthood, which is not the case with friendships. It seems that we can conclude that the mother's behavior (a higher level of acceptance, lower levels of rejection and control) is the most important factor of pupils' self-esteem in early adolescence (although no single behavior is a statistically significant predictor, together these variables statistically significantly explain the highest percentage of self-esteem variance). In the end, the teacher closeness also showed to be important. This means that along with the behavior of the mother, a higher level of understanding and assistance by the teacher contributes to higher self-esteem of the pupils.

## Conclusion

In this study, we have found that groups of pupils (boys and girls, pupils in Croatia and B&H) give a more similar evaluation of the mother's behavior than that of the father's. The assumption of worse quality in boys' social interaction has partly been established since they give a worse evaluation than girls with respect to the relationship with parents and friendship quality. Pupils in Croatia have a more positive relationship with parents while pupils in B&H have a more close relationship with the teacher. The assumption on a relationship of parental behaviors and the teacher interaction with self-esteem was confirmed, along with the assumption on the importance of the behaviors of the mother in explaining self-esteem in adolescents. The mother's behavior is the most important socialization factor in explaining self-esteem in adolescents.

The possibility to generalize the conclusions in this study is limited due to the fact that it was conducted on the small and convenient samples of pupils. Future research should check the relationship of these variables in representative samples, investigate parental belief and strictness in the upbringing of children, and establish the contribution of cultural features and socioeconomic status to explaining the behavior of parents, peers and teachers. Relationships between the measured variables should be examined for different age groups. In other words, it is necessary to examine potential moderators and mediators with regard to the relationship between social interactions and pupil self-esteem.

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