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# Aggression to Gain Social Status: An Examination of Middle and High School Females

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Aggression to Gain Social Status: An Examination of Middle and High School Females

Thesis Submitted to  
The Graduate School of  
Education and Professional Development

In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Education Specialist in  
the School Psychology Program

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The current study examined which type of aggression middle and high school females used most: indirect or direct aggression. Popularity (social standing) was also examined in order to help determine whether or not a female's popularity was increased or decreased by which type of aggression, if any, she used the most. It was hypothesized that popular females used indirect aggression more than non-popular peers. Thirty participants were selected from grades seven through twelve at a rural combined middle/high school in Monongalia County, West Virginia. Participants were asked to nominate two popular and two unpopular females. Next, participants completed an aggression questionnaire (The Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales) for each participant. Data was analyzed with T-tests to compare indirect and direct aggression scores for popular and unpopular females. Results revealed that in middle and high school both popular and unpopular females used more indirect than direct aggression.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Peer aggression, such as bullying, is common throughout elementary, middle, and high school. Routine bullying in schools is increasing with as many as 15-20% of students experiencing some form of bullying throughout their education (Lazarus, Jimerson, & Brock, 2002). Bullying is defined as occurring when a person is exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more persons. Bullying occurs because of a reaction to a person, reaction to a situation, or because of temperament and parenting. Other times, bullying occurs to achieve a goal, such as increasing social status (Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Bullies may aggress to achieve popularity or increase their status in the class. In fact, aggression in school is usually due to social friction in order to increase one's social status (Duncan, 2004). Teachers often do not recognize the indirect forms of bullying until it is at a very serious stage (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Teachers also overestimate how safe the school environment is (Lazarus et al.). With so many students experiencing peer aggression accompanied with psychological effects as serious as dropping out of school, it is important for educators to recognize and understand the seriousness of indirect bullying.

#### **Types of Aggression**

Aggression can be broken down into the subcategories of physical aggression and relational aggression. Relational aggression is sometimes referred to as social aggression or indirect aggression. Relational aggression is defined as a way to damage peer relationships in covert ways (Owens et al., 2000). Research has well established the fact that females aggress as

much as males but use relational aggression more frequently (Conway, 2005). Males use more physical aggression, whereas females use more relational aggression by attempting to damage peer relationships. The differences between the sexes in forms of preference for aggression can be explained by gender roles. Females are taught to display less physically aggressive behavior and are treated differently from males as early as birth and during this time, expectations for each gender are set. Females are more jealous than males over their friendship groups (Parker, Low, Walker, & Gamm, 2005). Females' friendships require more intimacy because they rely on each other for advice and support. Focus group studies reveal that females are also aware that their friendships seem to be more important to each other than males' friendships (Duncan, 2004). Relationships of males aren't as close because their friendship groups are noted to be larger and focus on activities and physical dominance. Therefore, females use relational aggression aimed toward friendships because dominance isn't important; males use physical aggression to gain dominance because that is a sign of group status (Owens et al., 2000).

Aggression can be further separated into two distinct styles based upon the intended goal of the bully: proactive aggression and reactive aggression (Sijtsema et al., 2009). Proactive aggression is aggression directed toward an outcome or goal. Dominance and prestige are the goals of proactive aggression and are mostly associated with bullying behaviors. The aggressor uses either physical or verbal aggression as a means to obtain the goal. Proactive aggression is not a response to a situation, rather, it is aggression used to gain the goal of dominance. Reactive aggression is aggressive behavior that is based upon a response to anger. The goal of reactive aggression is to reduce frustration as a result of being provoked by someone else. In addition, proactive aggression isn't always seen by peers as negative and may not be associated with being a bully. Bullying used to achieve popularity can be a form of proactive aggression because

bullying is used to obtain the goal of increasing one's social status in the group. It is often difficult to ascertain whether or not bullying occurs because of a goal (proactive) or because of a response to a situation (reactive). However, the best indicator of a proactive bullying event is to observe bullying that occurs without provocation. In other words, proactive aggression is more indicative of goal-directed bullying than reactive aggression. As a result, this study will examine proactive aggression (rather than reactive aggression) because proactive is mostly associated with bullying.

### **Female Use of Relational Aggression**

Evolutionary Theory describes aggression as a form of intra-sexual selection: members of the same sex competing against one another to gain group status. Female use of relational aggression is influenced by both competition and courtship (Griskevicius et al., 2009). Reasons that relational aggression occurs are because of friendship jealousy, competition between members of the same sex, and competition for members of the opposite sex--all of which influences one's social status. Females are particularly abusive to one another during the adolescence phase. Jealousy between friendships is a common reason for relational aggression between females. Physical aggression isn't commonly used in adolescent girls because of fear the bully will lower their status in the group if they were to physically confront someone and lose. From an evolutionary perspective, physical aggression for females is a high-cost, low-benefit strategy, whereas, relational aggression is a low-cost, high-benefit strategy (Griskevicius et al., 2009). Relational aggression also helps the female escape accountability. If the bully attains a goal through the use of relational aggression, she is rewarded and not accountable, which increases the chance the behavior will happen again.

Relational aggression can take on many forms: talking about one another, starting and spreading rumors, telling someone's secret, talking loud enough for someone to hear you, name calling, and using code names for the girls the bullies are talking about (Owens et al., 2000). Behaviors can also take on the form of exclusion from the group. Tactics relationally aggressive females use to accomplish social exclusion include: ignoring, expulsion, and ostracism. In addition, relationally aggressive females may prank telephone call the victim, write on desks or bathroom stalls, move personal property (lunchbox to a different table), have popular boys make fun of the victim, and write letters or notes about the victim. Relational aggression can progress to physical aggression and direct violence. Females report that social aggression happens because of boredom, to gain attention, for revenge, competition over guys, and because it is less obvious than physical aggression. Victims of relational aggression may experience depression and loneliness (Owens et al., 2000). They may also experience denial, want to transfer schools (escape), be paranoid of future relationships, or be paranoid that someone is always talking about them. Students may even stay home from school to not be bullied and experience a drop in grades (Lazarus et al., 2002).

### **Types of Social Status**

Social status can be separated into two terms: sociometric status and perceived status. Sociometric status is being liked or disliked. Perceived status is the actual standing of the individual in the group and is based on reputation. True status or the actual social standing of an individual is best measured for this study by perceived status because it demonstrates one's dominance in the group rather than liking or disliking the person (sociometric). Perceived status is most related to relational aggression (La Fontana & Cillessen, 2002). Sometimes popular

people are not liked; therefore sociometric status is not a valid measure of true popularity. The current study will use perceived status (as measured by the peer nomination procedure) as the tool for identifying popular individuals.

Teachers can predict the social status of students based on their social skills (Stuart, Gresham, & Elliot, 1991). However, relational aggression is also a social skill. Female students using relational aggression must have an established network of friends and social understanding. They must also have confidence in their social ability (Puckett, Aikens, & Cillessen, 2008). Relational aggression may achieve goals in the short-term, but its negative effects are noticed by peers. In order to be effective, it must be used in combination with pro-social behavior. Therefore, social status is not only associated with aggression but also associated with positive qualities. Physical attractiveness, fashion, and popularity with boys are also indicators of perceived status (Duncan, 2004). Studies on seventh and eighth grade females found that relational aggression correlated positively with the pro-social behaviors of leadership, self-efficacy, and cooperation (Puckett et al.). Perceived status also had a positive relationship with the pro-social behaviors of self-efficacy, leadership, cooperation, and sociability. Perceived status of an individual was the highest when both self-efficacy and relational aggression were high. Clearly, relational aggression has an effect on social status, but it must be used correctly in combination with pro-social behaviors. Teachers have a hard time determining if relational aggression is occurring in the classroom and because of pro-social correlates to relational aggression it is easy to see why the aggressors may be difficult to identify. In addition, it is unclear if relational aggression and social status are correlated past middle school. Most studies have focused on middle school aggressive behaviors because of the increase in aggression commonly seen during adolescence.

## **Age of Onset**

Adolescence is a common time to see an increase in aggression and bullying, although it begins very young (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997). This happens because at the adolescent stage, students are trying to gain access to the opposite sex (Sijtsema et al., 2009). Aggression has been documented from an evolutionary perspective to increase status and increase the chances of finding a mate for reproducing (Griskevicius et al., 2009). In addition to competition over the opposite sex, anti-social behavior also becomes a way to fit in during adolescence (La Fontana & Cillessen, 2002). Differences between aggressive behaviors being seen as popular in adolescence were found (La Fontana & Cillessen, 2002). For females, relational aggression was popular in early middle school; sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade females showed a positive correlation between relational aggression and social status. It appears that in elementary school, relational aggression is not perceived as popular. However, by middle school the rules are different in that aggression becomes popular. In addition, popularity is part of the developmental process in children. Mature and popular youth have the social skills to use indirect aggression correctly. Youth who are immature and have poorly developed social skills may attempt to use indirect aggression. However, immature youths' attempts at indirect aggression are usually done incorrectly.

Not many studies have been conducted on the relationship between social status and aggression in high school. Girls believe that as they move into secondary school, having an intimate friendship or a best friend is less important (Duncan, 2004). Girls begin to reach out past their previous social network and friendship jealousy happens infrequently. Research shows that as grade level increases, friendship jealousy decreases (Parker et al., 2005). Although it is noted

that this form of aggression is prevalent during middle school and declines somewhat with maturity no direct comparisons between high schools and middle schools have been made in the literature. Reports also supporting the fact that a decline between middle school and high school occurs is the fact that more middle school than high school female students report being bullied (Lazarus et al., 2002). The authors reported that bullying is the most serious in middle school.

### **Middle School Compositions**

Aggressive behaviors have been reported to increase in middle school and also during transition phases. However, there are different grade compositions within a middle school with some requiring more transition periods throughout a female's education. A common configuration for the middle school grades is grades six through eight. However, this is not always the case. Some middle schools can be combined with elementary schools (Grades K-12), some can be considered a separate junior high school (Grades 7 through 9), or some middle schools can even be combined with high schools (Grades 7 through 12). Much research has been devoted to understanding what is best for middle school students and has indicated that the environments of each of the combinations of middle schools are different. Students in the middle grades are experiencing a variety of changes: hormonal, cognitive, changes with friendships and family (Alspauh, 1998). Because of the changes occurring during middle school most researchers argue for a separate and distinct middle school but it is easy to understand why aggression may increase with these changes.

Despite the research that supports separate and distinct middle schools, students are more likely to drop out of school when there are more transitions throughout a student's career (Alspauh, 1998). High schools that include middle school (Grades 7-12) experience lower drop-

out rates than school systems who utilize an elementary, middle, and high school model. In fact, the lowest drop-out rates were found to occur in small rural high schools that encompass grades 7-12. This occurs because students have the opportunity to develop friendships and schools of this type have been noted to put much investment into extra-curricular activities which promotes a stronger devotion to the school (Alspaugh, 1998). In addition, smaller, more rural schools have a smaller enrollment which gives a wider array of opportunity for students to participate in extra-curricular activities. Longer and more fully developed friendships are found in a school with a grade span of 7-12. Teacher-student relationships are also better developed in schools with the 7-12 grade span. This study will investigate a rural combined middle and high school which encompasses grades 7-12, to investigate if females' use of relational aggression occurs in schools with less transition phases and with better developed teacher-student relationship.

### **Statement of Hypothesis**

The present study will be a partial replication of the Kantz (2006), Marshall University study in which popularity and direct and indirect aggression were examined in eighth-grade females. The goal of the present study, however, is to examine relational aggression in a combined middle/high school. It is hypothesized that perceived-popular females will show a preference for indirect aggression (because of their maturity and social understanding); perceived-unpopular females will show a preference for direct aggression (due to lack of social understanding and unsuccessful implementation of indirect aggression). The goal of the present study is to examine whether females perceived as having a high social status in a combined middle/high school show preference for types of aggression (as rated by female students) than females from a separate and distinct middle school and high school.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHOD**

#### **Research Design**

The study consisted of two independent variables with the first independent variable being grade level (middle school, high school). The second independent variable was obtained by assigning each female to a popular group or unpopular group based on the number of nominations each female received. The dependent variable under investigation was aggression (direct and indirect); scores for aggression were obtained from the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS). The format of this study is a Static group, quasi-experimental comparison between age groups (middle school and high school).

#### **Participants**

Females from a combined middle/high school in Monongalia County, WV, were chosen to participate in this study. The school comprised grades 7-12 in the same building. Participants were selected based upon written parental permission to participate. A total of 192 parental consent forms were given to all females at the school during their homeroom class period. Of the consent forms distributed, thirty students returned and consented to the study (twelve 7<sup>th</sup> grade females, four 8<sup>th</sup> grade females, four 9<sup>th</sup> grade females, four 10<sup>th</sup> grade females, and six 11<sup>th</sup> grade females). All females were Caucasian American except one Asian American, who was included in the sample. Grades 7 and 8 were the middle school grades used in the study; grades 9, 10, and 11 were the high school grades used in the study. Grade 12 was excluded from the study because only one participant returned a parental consent.

## **Materials**

Data was obtained with The Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS) and a peer popularity nomination procedure. Female students were given a list of girls who received permission to participate from their grade. In addition to the peer nomination sheet, the participants were given one DIAS for each girl in their grade.

## **Instruments**

A peer nomination form was developed for each grade. Female participants were asked to nominate two females who they believed belonged to a popular group at school and two females they believed belonged to an unpopular group at school. Normally, the peer nomination procedure asks females to nominate the most and least popular girls at school. However, the current study changed the procedure to state: popular group and unpopular group at school. The statement was changed to accommodate the concerns expressed by the school's administration as they wanted to ensure no female was singled out. Participants were also asked to use perceived popularity instead of sociometric popularity (liking or disliking the person).

The Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (DIAS) was used to measure direct and indirect aggression. The DIAS is a peer reported behavior scale that measures direct aggression, indirect aggression, and verbal aggression with a 4 point Likert Scale (0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = sometimes, 3 = quite often, and 4 = very often). The scale assesses verbal aggression separately or combined with direct aggression. Verbal aggression was combined with direct aggression for this study. The scale takes around twenty minutes to fill out per person. The scale was designed for use on ages 8-15. Internal Consistency for the DIAS was reported to be between 0.78-0.96.

No other measures of reliability or validity have been reported for the DIAS (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kuakiainen, 1992).

The DIAS has the following question on the top of each survey: “Tell us how each of your classmates’ acts when he/she has problems with or gets angry with another classmate.”

Direct aggression items include: hits the other one, yells at or argues with the other one, kicks the other one, insults the other one, trips the other one, says he/she is going to hurt the other one, shoves the other one, calls the other one names, takes things from the other one, teases the other one, pushes the other one down to the ground, and pulls at the other one. Indirect aggression items include: shuts the other one out of the group, becomes friends with another as a kind of revenge, ignores the other one, gossips about the other one, tells bad or false stories about the other one, plans secretly to bother the other one, says bad things behind the other one’s back, says to others “Let’s not be with him/her,” tells the other one’s secrets to a third person, writes small notes where the other one is criticized, criticizes the other one’s hair or clothing, and tries to get others to dislike the person he/she is angry with.

## **Procedures**

Permission from the principal to conduct the study was first obtained. Parental permission forms were developed and distributed during the homeroom class period to all girls in grades 7-12 at the school. Participants were told that the study was investigating aggression or bullying in popular and unpopular groups at school and if they were willing to participate they would be entered into a drawing for a gift card to the mall. Females were reminded that they had four days to return the consents to their homeroom teacher. In addition, a reminder announcement was made over the school’s intercom system twice per day.

Once the permission slips were received, rosters for each grade were developed which included all the names and assigned numbers to all females who had permission to participate. The female students who did not give consent to participate were not included on the grade roster. In addition, a packet was put together that included the peer nomination sheet and one DIAS per grade level participant for each female completing the nominations and surveys.

Data was collected the following week during school hours from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> period. However, females were not pulled out of core classes. During each classroom period of data collection, girls from all grades were called into the school library by the school's secretary. Participants sat two per table and were placed with a female from a different grade to help with confidentiality. First, the examiner asked the participants to nominate two girls from the popular group and then two girls from the unpopular group at school. They were not permitted to nominate any females from any other grade. Participants only had access to a list of the girls from their grade only. The first statement on the peer nomination sheet asked girls to circle the names of two girls they believed belonged to a popular group at school. This statement was followed by the list of names and a number assigned to each name. The second statement on the peer nomination sheet asked girls to circle the names of two girls they believed belonged to an unpopular group at school, followed by the same list of names and assigned numbers.

The examiner then read the first DIAS allowed and reminded the females to check the nomination form to obtain the correct name for each assigned number. Participants were then permitted to fill out the rest of the DIAS forms on their own. Each participant was asked to fill out a DIAS for every girl in their grade. The DIAS forms were attached to the back of the peer nomination sheet and included one survey per grade participant with their number instead of

name listed at the top of the survey. The girls referred back to the peer nomination sheet to determine what individual was assigned the number on the top of each DIAS.

After data collection was complete, to be classified as popular or unpopular, a female had to receive two or more nominations for that category. No participant was in both categories. For each grade, each participant was placed in the popular or unpopular category for their grade. The same procedure was repeated for each comparison age group (middle school, high school). Next, a direct aggression and indirect aggression score was calculated for each participant for each survey completed about them.

### **Data Analysis**

T-tests were conducted for the middle school and high school groups using the computer software program Excel to analyze data. The T-tests investigated perceived-popular females' use of indirect versus direct aggression and perceived-unpopular females' use of indirect versus direct aggression in both middle and high school. Each individual nomination score was entered into Excel for each participant. Lastly, a total score on direct and indirect aggression was calculated and the comparison age groups were examined.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

Each comparison age group received a different number of ratings from their peers based on how many students participated. Scores for direct aggression could range from 0-48 per DIAS and scores for indirect aggression could range from 0-48 per DIAS for each girl in both middle and high school. The study hypothesized that 1) unpopular groups of females used more direct aggression, and 2) popular groups of females used more indirect aggression. The study compared middle school and high school females. Grades seven and eight were the middle school grades used in the study; grades nine, ten, and eleven were the high school grades used in the study.

For the middle school sample, it was found that perceived-popular females used significantly more indirect aggression than direct aggression,  $t(142) = 1.66$ ,  $p < .001$ . Perceived-unpopular females also used significantly more indirect aggression than direct aggression,  $t(142) = 1.66$ ,  $p < .05$ . Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the middle school sample.

Table 1 also shows the means and standard deviations for the high school sample. Similar results were obtained for high school females. Perceived-popular females used significantly more indirect aggression than direct aggression,  $t(58) = 1.67$ ,  $p < .05$ . Perceived-unpopular females also used significantly more indirect aggression than direct aggression,  $t(58) = 1.67$ ,  $p < .05$ .

A direct comparison was not able to be made due to the fact that the middle school sample had 16 participants and the high school sample had 14 participants. However, even though the high school sample had two less participants, high school females had a higher mean aggression score for both direct and indirect aggression.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION**

The study examined the use of direct and indirect aggression in perceived-popular and perceived-unpopular females. The study hypothesized that perceived-popular females used more indirect aggression, and that perceived-unpopular females used more direct aggression. The study hypotheses are based on findings that indirect aggression is a social skill and that aggression is part of the developmental process. Perceived-popular females use indirect aggression correctly because of their maturity and social understanding. However, perceived-unpopular females use direct aggression more frequently due to their lack of social understanding and unsuccessful implementation of indirect aggression.

The study found that perceived-popular females use more indirect aggression in both middle and high school. However, perceived-unpopular females were also found to use more indirect aggression in both samples. Perceived-unpopular females in both the middle and high school samples did not use significantly more direct aggression.

The findings of this study add additional support to the well-established research findings that females aggress in an indirect way (Conway, 2000). Perceived popularity in this study was not a factor in the use of aggression with both perceived-popular and perceived-unpopular females in middle and high school using more indirect aggression. Results were consistent with the Kantz (2006) study which found that eighth grade perceived-popular females used more indirect aggression. However, this study had a finding inconsistent with the previous study in that unpopular females aggress indirectly as well. Perceived-unpopular females in the Kantz (2006) study were not found to use more direct aggression, a finding this study supports. However, inconsistencies with the original study reflect the fact that the participation in the

current study was small. The popular females of a very small group may not be the most popular females in the school. Therefore, this study may have excluded the most popular and least popular females which in turn limited peer ratings to females who may actually be neither popular nor unpopular. Therefore, the current study does not prove or disprove anything. Findings could only be generalized to a sample size of this nature in a school of this type.

The effects of indirect aggression are not noticed in the short-term but are noticed in the long-term (Puckett et al., 2008). The results from this study would suggest that even in the long-term (high school) indirect aggression can still be a sign of popularity. However, indirect aggression cannot be the only indicator of popularity if this form of aggression is common and preferred in perceived-unpopular students as well. Many factors contribute to popularity, and research has supported that social status is correlated with self-efficacy and leadership (as well as indirect aggression). It is clear that pro-social behaviors and implementing indirect aggression correctly play a role in establishing who is the most popular in a group of students (Puckett et al., 2008).

This study has several limitations. Participation in this study was low and it was difficult to get parental permission as parents were hesitant to let their daughters rate someone as popular or unpopular. Although multiple ratings were used in this study, there were a limited number of participants. Also, when examining perceived popularity it was impossible to ensure that all the popular females were included for nomination (and also the most unpopular students). Therefore, subjects could only choose who was popular or unpopular based upon the number of participants. Because of this, the current study's sample was biased as it is difficult to include everyone in a study that requires consent.

In a combined middle/high school in a rural area, indirect aggression still occurs. Although transitions in a combined school are minimal, friendships have been in place longer, and student teacher relationships are better developed; both types of aggression are still found and this study found that indirect aggression is the most prevalent (Alspauhg, 1998). The current findings cannot confirm that aggression increased during transition periods. It is unclear if females in a school of this type are more or less aggressive than students who are from a separate and distinct middle school. Future studies could investigate this topic. Because it is important to include the most popular students in the research sample, future research needs to ensure that all popular students will participate. This may be accomplished by allowing females to rate everyone in the class but only allow the females with parental consent to do the ratings.

Because indirect aggression was found to occur more than direct aggression in both perceived-popular and perceived-unpopular students, prevention activities could focus on relational aggression instead of physical aggression for females. Prevention activities could be directed at popular groups as well as unpopular groups at both the middle and high school level. It is important that awareness at the high school level continues, because indirect aggression (as found in this study) does not decline. Because teachers do not often recognize the forms of indirect bullying until it has been occurring for long periods of time, and given the recent attention in the media that involve serious effects of indirect bullying, awareness for teachers (focusing on indirect aggression) should also be provided at both the middle and high school levels (Owens et al., 2000).

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**Table 1***Middle and High School Perceived Popular and Unpopular Aggression Scores*

	<u>Middle School</u>		<u>High School</u>	
	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect
Popular	6.82 (7.21)	13.22** (12.26)	4.27 (6.11)	12.27* (12.65)
Unpopular	4.79 (7.45)	8.57* (9.49)	13.27 (10.15)	20.1* (12.59)

*Note: \*\*p < .001, \*p < .05; SD in ( )*

*Note: n = 16 for the middle school sample; 14 for the high school sample*