

The Effects of a Drama-Based Intervention on Relational Aggression 1

Running head: DRAMA-BASED INTERVENTION FOR RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Dani DeVincentis

Hanover College

8 April 2010

Abstract

Relational aggression is the manipulation of or damage to peer relationships or social standing as a means of bullying. Relational aggression research has primarily focused on its effects, finding it to be positively correlated with withdrawn behavior, victimization, and rejection (Tan, 2009). When examining relational aggression and other forms of bullying in students, one third of participants reported experiencing panic, impaired concentration, and recurring memories of bullying incidences (Sharp, 1995). Others (e.g., Gastic, 2008) found negative effects on school performance and disciplinary issues. Interventions to reduce this behavior are less common in research, with successful interventions even rarer. In the present study, the researcher hoped to reduce relational aggression in a middle school population, utilizing a drama-based intervention designed to increase empathy for relational aggression victims. This study examined if, following the performance, students would engage in fewer relationally aggressive behaviors. Drama-based interventions focused on increasing empathy have been successful in previous research (Ostrov, et. al, 2009). One class from the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades from a small mid-western town participated in the intervention; control groups from each grade were also assessed. The Young Adult Social Behavior Scale was used to measure relational aggression. Significant gender differences were found, such that girls relationally aggress more. Boys' aggression reduced from pre to post-test, though not due to the intervention. It is proposed that this gender difference is due to girls' drive for belonging and inclusion overriding feelings of empathy for peers, whereas boys may be less affected by such drives.

The Effects of a Drama-Based Intervention on
Relational Aggression in Middle School Students

“No, I’m sorry, you can’t sit with us today. The table is full.” A lunch table of yesterday’s friends immediately spread their things out to fill empty space, leaving no room for argument.

“You will never guess what I heard about Adam today,” a boy says as several of his friends head out to the field for sports practice.

“I don’t know what I did wrong! It must’ve been something, because I went all day at school and nobody said *a single word* to me.”

While fictional, the above examples have happened to countless victims of relational aggression. This form of aggression is far less obvious than physical aggression and as such often flies under the radar of teachers, parents, coaches, and other authority figures that might otherwise intervene in more overt cases of meanness or aggression. While there is some tendency toward writing such things off as simply a part of growing up, the truth is that these behaviors are much more serious and much more harmful than that.

Relational aggression, as exemplified above, involves harming others through purposeful manipulation of or damage to peer relationships (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006). Examples of this aggression can include rumor spreading with the intent to damage reputation, popularity or peer standing; gossiping; giving the silent treatment; intentional exclusion from activities or events; and explicit or implied threats to a relationship if the threatened party does not comply with the aggressor’s wishes (Gomes,

2007). Relational aggression is more common in girls than boys, at least at a younger age (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995); however, there is evidence that, as boys age, relational aggression becomes more common, possibly because overt and physical aggression becomes less socially acceptable (Verona, et. al, 2008).

Being a victim of relational aggression has several negative effects. Relational aggression is a powerful predictor of social-psychological adjustment (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). It is positively correlated with withdrawn behavior, victimization, and rejection (Tan, 2009). In a study which examined relational aggression, along with the effects of bullying in general, in 13 to 16 year old students, one third of the participants, all victims of bullying, reported feeling panicky or nervous in school, experienced recurring memories of bullying incidences, and reported impaired concentration in school (Sharp, 1995). Being bullied is also found to be positively correlated with increased risk of frequent absences from school, getting into trouble at school, and being more likely to be subject to formal school disciplinary actions, such as in-school suspensions, detentions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsion (Gastic, 2008). Additionally, in the book *Odd Girl Out*, author Rachel Simmons interviews several adult women who, as adolescents, were victims of relational aggression, and now admit to still struggling to trust women in friendships, years or even decades after the bullying occurred (Simmons, 2002). Given these negative effects, one can see why ignoring this behavior or treating it as symptomatic of growing up is especially problematic.

Interventions designed to reduce relational aggression have had mixed results. A study conducted in Japan followed a program that had extensive framework in place with

hopes of reducing relational aggression and other forms of bullying: there was a bullying prevention committee made up of parents, teachers, and students; students attended a weekly class on bullying; a bullying prevention forum met bi-weekly; and the schools published newsletters and other materials for students and parents. Despite the complexity of the program, the dedication of all those involved, and the awareness of bullying that it caused among parents, teachers, and students alike, when the program was evaluated after one year, researchers found that there had been no reduction in bullying behavior among students (Okayasu & Takayama, 2004). However, there was a similar program undertaken in the United States, called Second Step, which featured many of the same elements. It was evaluated at a number of middle and high schools several years after the program had been implemented, and was found to be effective at significantly reducing bullying behavior (Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey & Beland, 2002).

Another study focused on reducing relational aggression in preschoolers. The study utilized a puppet show and other interactive activities, and it produced a significant decrease in relationally aggressive behaviors. This study shows that a drama-based intervention has been demonstrated to be effective in reducing relational aggression in pre-school students. For the present study, the same principle will be applied to middle school students, with a more age-appropriate performance, which will hopefully yield similar results.

Emotional elements have also been targeted in other research in order to reduce relationally aggressive behaviors. Feshbach and Feshbach (1982) found that empathy training in elementary school aged children increased positive social behaviors in both aggressive and nonaggressive students. Similarly, Richardson, Hammock, Smith and

Gardner (1994) found empathy to be associated with constructive and nonaggressive responses to conflict among college students. Finally, Loudin, Loukas, and Robinson (2003) found that students who reported higher levels of perspective-taking also tended to report lower levels of relational aggression.

Influenced largely by the Ostrov, et. al., study and the studies on the effects of empathy, the researcher developed the idea of an age-appropriate drama-based intervention—a live skit, with participatory elements—which would emphasize elements such as empathy, with the hypothesis that if a group of middle school aged students were presented with such an interactive skit that was specifically designed to humanize and engender empathy for the victims of relational aggression, those students will engage in fewer behaviors that are relationally aggressive.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were two classes from each the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classes at Southwestern Junior High School in Hanover, Indiana. One class from each grade served as the experimental group; the other served as the control. Of eighty-six participants total, 59% were female, 41% male, with a mean age of 12.4 years. Participants were almost exclusively white. Nine other students were originally included in the sample but were removed due to absences during some part of the study.

These students already participate in the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. The program's goals are to reduce and prevent bullying problems among school children and to improve peer relations at school. It focuses on physical, indirect, and relational aggression. All students in the Southwestern school system, from elementary to high

school, take part in the Olweus Program. The middle school students have a daily enrichment class, in which they focus on the Olweus curriculum, as well as other grade-specific areas such as adjusting to the middle school, in the case of the sixth graders, or, in the case of the eighth graders, preparing for high school. The students' involvement in this curriculum was a main reason for the addition of the control group, in addition to simply strengthening power in any conclusions drawn from the results of this study.

Materials

The Young Adult Social Behavior Scale, or YASB, (Crothers 2009) was used to measure participants' level of relational aggression. The 14-item questionnaire contains statements such as "When I am angry with someone, that person is often the last person to know. I will talk to others first." Participants rank these statements based on how accurate they feel they are, on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher numbers indicating agreement and thus higher levels of relational aggression. Some items (e.g., "If my friend tells me a secret, I won't tell anybody, for any reason") were reverse-scored. At pre-test, this scale was found to have a reliability of $\alpha=.876$; at post-test, $\alpha=.854$.

The drama-based intervention involved students being presented with a short skit written by the researcher, depicting several scenes of mixed-gender relational aggression, followed by a talk-back session with the actors, first as the characters and later as themselves. The whole performance was designed to encompass and reflect several instances of relational aggression, to humanize the victims of the relational aggression, and to engender empathy for the victims. The skit was presented by a small team of actors recruited from Hanover College, two male, two female.

Participants also completed a standard demographic questionnaire.

Procedure

Informed consent forms describing the study in general terms (“studying peer interactions”) were sent home with middle school students during the week of December 7th through the 11th, the semester before the onset of data collection. The signatures of the student and the student’s parent or guardian were required in order for the student to participate in the study. Alternate arrangements, such as an extra study hall period, were made for those students who opt out of the study or who did not return the signed form.

Students were coded alphabetically by grade and by class roster by the teacher. The researcher remained blind to participants’ identifying information. In that way, students’ anonymity was assured and the repeated use of the same participant number was also guaranteed.

At the onset of data collection on January 29th, each student completed the Young Adult Social Behavior Scale, designed to gauge their involvement in incidences of relational aggression. The following week, on February 4th, the students in the experimental condition were presented with the skit about relational aggression. After the performance, the actors presenting the skit interacted with the students first in character, asking the students to reflect on the actions of the characters, the impact of the characters’ actions, and how it felt to be in each character’s position. Later, the actors, as themselves, shared some of their own personal experiences with relational aggression and the students were encouraged to ask them questions or to share their own experiences. The school’s guidance counselor was on hand for this and all interactions with the students to aid in dealing with any emotional consequences of the experience, though this service was not needed or utilized.

Two and a half weeks later, on February 21st, participants completed the YASB a second time. Upon their completion of the YASB, debriefing forms were distributed. The form briefly explained the study for the students to take home to their parents, and the researcher explained the study in detail to the students. Ample time was allowed for the students to ask any questions and express any concerns that they may have had. Students in the control group completed all aspects of the study except viewing the skit.

Results

A 2x2 repeated-measures ANOVA was performed to analyze the variables of the two conditions from pre to post-test. A significant gender difference was found ($F(1,82)=7.512, p=.008$), such that girls were more relationally aggressive than boys, confirming past research on this topic (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). A gender by condition interaction was approaching significance ($F(1,82)=3.084, p=.083$), but no other statistically significant effects were found. The boys' relational aggression did decrease significantly from pre- to post-test, which is depicted in Figure 1, but it also decreased by approximately the same amount in the control group, therefore implying that the change occurred for a reason other than the intervention, perhaps as a result of something from within the school's anti-bullying curriculum. Absolutely no change whatsoever occurred for the girls, as shown in Figure 2. Figure 3 compares the change in males' relational aggression to the stable level of relational aggression in females.

Discussion

To compare the results of this study to the hypothesis, there was no overall reduction. The boys' scores did decrease, though not as a result of the intervention.

Somewhat interestingly, this study also supported previous research in the finding that girls in this age group practice more relational aggression than boys.

Several factors may have contributed to the lack of significant results from the intervention. The main factor to consider is that, overall, the students had a very low relational aggression score to begin with, at a mean of only 2.11. This may have been attributable to the anti-bullying curriculum already in place in the school, or as a result of a number of other factors. Regardless, this did not leave much room for their relational aggression to decrease further. However, it seemed that, in interactions with the students, they did have a higher level of relational aggression than this. Indeed, at debriefing, they were told the pre-test value and expressed disbelief; one student even commented “Are you sure you measured the same school?” This raises the issue of training; it is possible that, perhaps also as a result of their involvement in an anti-bullying program, they have learned how to answer such surveys in order to present themselves in a favorable manner.

A more minor point to consider is that there was a significant delay in collecting post-test data; this data wound up being collected over two weeks later than planned due to snow days. It may be possible that, due to being out of school almost immediately following the intervention until the day before the post-test data was collected, the experience of the intervention may have been pushed aside by other things and not remained active in the students’ memories.

Even so, the fact that the boys’ score changed and the girls’ stayed absolutely the same is a matter of some interest. One wonders why is it that boys were able to change their level of relational aggression, whether it was a result of this intervention, the

Olweus anti-bullying curriculum, or some other factor, and that the girls remain so constant.

In order to address this question, the researcher has developed a theory to address what differences exist between genders that may lead to this effect. Past research has indicated that girls' relationships are driven largely by a need for belonging and inclusion and that girls place much more importance on belonging to a group than do boys (Newman, 2003). It is proposed that this instinctive drive for inclusion can override a girl's other instincts and even a generally sweet nature, which would account for the common phenomenon of girls standing wordlessly by while "the popular crowd" victimizes a friend. For a girl whose main concern socially is belonging to a group, it is a safer bet to identify with an aggressor or even become an aggressor herself, rather than to stand up for a victim or practice less aggressive behavior, as these behaviors may then cause her to be targeted next for exclusion. If this is the case, it is hardly surprising that interventions such as this one which emphasize feeling empathy for the victim of this aggression are not successful with girls; empathy is a common trait in girls, but it may be that this need for belonging overrides any sense of empathy that a girl has, so that even if she feels sorry for a victim of bullying, she must still protect herself and her own status within the group.

Boys, on the other hand, have less of a drive for belonging to or inclusion in a group (Newman, 2003). This may free them up more than girls to follow feelings such as empathy and then to stand up for victims of aggression and to practice less relational aggression themselves, without fear of losing their status within their clique. If this hypothesis were to be supported, then it would have implications for any further

interventions to reduce relationally aggressive behavior, as girls' belonging instinct would have to first be addressed before anything else could be targeted. Future research should examine whether or not there is an association between girls' need for belonging and their involvement in relational aggression.

Other directions for further research include studying relational aggression in boys. Boys have long been neglected in relational aggression literature, with it being commonly deemed a girl's way of aggressing. While it is true that among middle school students, relational aggression is more common in girls than in boys, research has shown that by late high school and college age, the genders have evened out in terms of their engagement in relational aggression (Verona, et. al, 2008; Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003). If boys are generally more amenable to intervention as described in the above hypothesis, future research might focus on what topics other than empathy may be emphasized in order to effectively decrease relationally aggressive behaviors for them.

Finally, past research has shown that drama-based interventions have been effective tools for encouraging behavior modification. Ferinden (1971) used behaviorist psychodrama techniques to facilitate behavior modification in aggressive schoolchildren. Similarly, Bell and Ledford (1978) utilized what they call "sociodrama" in participatory sessions to engender more pro-social behavior in elementary school boys. These studies, combined with the Ostrov, et. al. (2009) puppet show intervention with pre-schoolers, demonstrate definite potential for performance as a medium through which to reach students and to encourage them in changing their behaviors. Future research in this direction might emphasize elements other than empathy or may feature different material,

such as demonstrating positive outcomes of standing up to an aggressor, or a girl stepping out of her group to stand up for a victim, within the performance to garner a better result.

Research has shown that experiencing relational aggression has negative outcomes for those involved (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Sharp, 1995; Tan, 2009). While a consistently effective intervention has yet to be found, drama-based interventions have merit and deserve further study as a means to reduce relational aggression.

References

- Bell, S., & Ledford, T. (1978). The effects of sociodrama on the behaviors and attitudes of elementary school boys. *Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama & Sociometry*, 3/117-135.
- Coyne, S., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2006). 'We're Not Friends Anymore! Unless...!': The Frequency and Harmfulness of Indirect, Relational, and Social Aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32(4), 294-307.
- Crick, N., & Grotpeter, J. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, 66(3), 710-722.
- Crothers, L., Schreiber, J., Field, J., & Kolbert, J. (2009). Development and measurement through confirmatory factor analysis of the Young Adult Social Behavior Scale (YASB): An assessment of relational aggression in adolescence and young adulthood. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 27(1), 17-28.
- Ferinden, W. (1971). Behavioristic psychodrama: A technique for modifying aggressive behavior in children. *Group Psychotherapy & Psychodrama*, 24(3-4), 101-106.
- Feshbach, N., & Feshbach, S. (1982). Empathy training and the regulation of aggression: Potentialities and limitations. *Academic Psychology Bulletin*, 4(3), 399-413.
- Gastic, B. (2008). School truancy and the disciplinary problems of bullying victims. *Educational Review*, 60(4), 391-404.
- Gomes, M. (2007). A concept analysis of relational aggression. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 14(5), 510-515.

- Loudin, J., Loukas, A., & Robinson, S. (2003). Relational Aggression in College Students: Examining the Roles of Social Anxiety and Empathy. *Aggressive Behavior, 29*(5), 430-439.
- Okayasu, T., & Takayama, I. (2004). Implementation and Evaluation of a Bullying Prevention Program Focused on Educational Movements in Junior High School. *Japanese Journal of Counseling Science, 37*(2), 155-167.
- Ostrov, J., Massetti, G., Stauffacher, K., Godleski, S., Hart, K., Karch, K., et al. (2009). An intervention for relational and physical aggression in early childhood: A preliminary study. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 24*(1), 15-28.
- Prinstein, M., Boergers, J., & Vernberg, E. (2001). Overt and relational aggression in adolescents: Social-psychological adjustment of aggressors and victims. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 30*(4), 479-491.
- Richardson, D., Hammock, G., Smith, S., & Gardner, W. (1994). Empathy as a cognitive inhibitor of interpersonal aggression. *Aggressive Behavior, 20*(4), 275-289.
- Simmons, Rachel. 2002. *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc.
- Sharp, S. (1995). How much does bullying hurt? The effects of bullying on the personal wellbeing and educational progress of secondary aged students. *Educational and Child Psychology, 12*(2), 81-88.
- Tan, X. (2009). Effects of relational aggression on children's social-psychological adjustment. *Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology, 17*(1), 101-103.

- Van Schoiack-Edstrom, L., Frey, K., & Beland, K. (2002). Changing adolescents' attitudes about relational and physical aggression: An early evaluation of a school-based intervention. *School Psychology Review, 31*(2), 201-216.
- Verona, E., Sadeh, N., Case, S., Reed, A., & Bhattacharjee, A. (2008). Self-reported use of different forms of aggression in late adolescence and emerging adulthood. *Assessment, 15*(4), 493-510.