



Differential effects of the KiVa anti-bullying program on popular and unpopular bullies



Claire F. Garandeau^{a,*}, Ihno A. Lee^b, Christina Salmivalli^{c,d}

^a University of Turku, Department of Psychology, Assistentinkatu 7, 20014 Turku, Finland

^b Stanford University, Department of Psychology, Stanford University, 450 Serra Mall, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

^c University of Turku, Department of Psychology, Assistentinkatu 7, 20014 Turku, Finland

^d Center for Behavioral Research, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study utilized data from the evaluation of the Finnish KiVa program in testing the prediction that school bullies' high perceived popularity would impede the success of anti-bullying interventions. Multiple-group structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses were conducted on a subsample of 911 third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders identified as perpetrators of bullying. They belonged to 77 Finnish schools, including 39 schools implementing the KiVa program and 38 control schools. Data on peer-reported bullying and perceived popularity were collected before program implementation and one year later. Controlling for sex, age, and initial levels of bullying, KiVa participation resulted in lower rates of bullying (indicated by fewer peer nominations) after one year for bullies of low and medium popularity. However, there was no significant effect for those high in popularity, suggesting that popular bullies are less responsive to anti-bullying interventions than less popular bullies.

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School bullying – the repetition of intentional, aggressive behaviors that involve an abuse of power – is a pervasive phenomenon in many countries (Currie et al., 2008) and has long-lasting damaging consequences on the mental and physical health of victims (e.g., Isaacs, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2008; Rigby, 2003). However, attempts to reduce levels of bullying in schools have been met with mixed success. Meta-analyses on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs have shown that approximately half of them have no or limited effect (Baldry & Farrington, 2007; Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburg, & Sanchez, 2007; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008). Recognizing that bullying can be highly rewarding, several theorists have proposed that bullies' high popularity in the peer group accounts for anti-bullying programs' mitigated success (see Volk, Camilleri, Dane, & Marini, 2012). To our knowledge however, this assumption has never been tested.

Bullying incidents generally take place in a group context where the perpetrators are socially powerful (e.g., Salmivalli, 2010). A large body of research shows that many aggressive children enjoy high status among their peers. Although young bullies tend to be low in social preference – an indicator of peers' personal liking usually associated with desirable traits such as kindness and cooperativeness – they often have high levels of perceived popularity (Caravita, Di Blasio, &

Salmivalli, 2009; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004), which reflects social power, or visibility, and is linked to antisocial tendencies (e.g., Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002).

Anti-bullying interventions should be less effective for popular bullies compared to their unpopular counterparts for three reasons: 1) popular bullying perpetrators reap valued social rewards for their behavior, 2) a position of power in the peer group facilitates bullying behaviors in various ways, 3) bystanders should be more motivated to join in the bullying and less motivated to intervene against it when it is initiated by popular classmates. This positive reinforcement may encourage bullies to pursue their actions.

The present study tests whether the effects of KiVa, a nationwide anti-bullying program in Finland, vary depending on the perceived popularity status of bullying students. Despite consistent findings of a positive association between bullying and perceived popularity, bullies do not form a uniformly popular group (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). We expected that KiVa-related decreases in bullying behaviors would be significantly smaller for popular bullies, compared to bullies lower in popularity.

Bullying brings coveted status rewards

Gaining social power among peers appears to be children's main motivation for bullying others (Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, & van der Meulen, 2011). Interviews of early adolescents who had been excluded from school for causing bullying incidents reveal that initial

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, 20014 Turku, Finland. Tel.: +358 466247116; fax: +358 23335060.

E-mail addresses: garandeauclaire@hotmail.com (C.F. Garandeau), ihno@stanford.edu (I.A. Lee), tiina.salmivalli@utu.fi (C. Salmivalli).

bullying is a deliberate choice aimed at gaining recognition and respect, and subsequent bullying behaviors are then perpetuated to promote and maintain the reputation (Houghton, Nathan, & Taylor, 2012). Similarly, studies investigating social goals show that aggressive youth are more likely than their non-aggressive counterparts to endorse agentic goals, which aim towards power, mastery and status (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012; Ojanen, Gronroos, & Salmivalli, 2005; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Young bullies are highly interested in being popular or socially dominant among peers, and bullying proves effective in reaching this goal: not only do cross-sectional studies document positive correlations between bullying and popularity among children and youth (Berger & Rodkin, 2012; Caravita et al., 2009; de Bruyn, Cillessen, & Wissink, 2010), but also longitudinal studies further demonstrate that aggression and bullying allow young students to increase their popularity over time (Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

As many popular bullies obtain highly coveted social rewards for their negative conduct, they should have little motivation to curb their behavior. Conversely, bullying students who are lower in perceived popularity should find it easier to alter their behavior as they have little to lose in terms of social standing. In addition, becoming less aggressive could allow them to improve their likeability, which is also an important goal for children (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munnikma, & Dijkstra, 2010).

High popularity facilitates aggression

There is evidence of a bi-directional association between popularity and aggression: aggression positively predicts future popularity, but the achievement of high popularity status also promotes aggression (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Popular bullies may feel increased pressure to maintain their rank and thus resort to coercive means. Being in a powerful position in the peer group may also lead to a sense of entitlement causing school bullies to abuse their power without any fear of negative consequences. Experimental studies with adults indicate that holding a position of power may significantly affect individuals' attitudes and behaviors in a way that facilitates aggressive conduct: it can reduce people's distress in response to others' suffering (Van Kleef et al., 2008) and their ability to take the perspective of others (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006); it can also lead them to objectify others (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008).

Furthermore, being socially powerful makes it easier to engage in relational forms of bullying, such as rumor spreading or social exclusion. Ethnographic studies of children and adolescent peer groups have shown that carrying out such forms of bullying requires a central and powerful position in that group (e.g., Merten, 1997). This was further demonstrated by research on social network centrality, another indicator of peer status. Faris and Felmlee (2011) found that most adolescents tend to become more aggressive as their position in the peer network becomes more central. Having numerous connections to multiple peer groups puts highly central individuals in an ideal position to exclude others as well as diffuse information and thus spread malicious rumors. As suggested by Garandeau and Cillessen (2006), indirect aggression also involves the skillful manipulation of the whole peer group and the capacity to exert influence on one's peers. High popularity indeed confers students the ability to influence peers' aggressive attitudes and conduct (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006). Therefore, anti-bullying interventions may be less likely to succeed among popular bullies, because these students are already in a position that fosters bullying.

Bullies' popularity and bystanders' behaviors

The perpetuation of bullying heavily depends on the behavior of bystanders in bullying situations: self-reported frequency of bullying was found to be lower in classrooms where children tend to defend the victim and avoid reinforcing the bully, as reflected by proportions of peer

nominations for these two behaviors (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). High classroom rates of bully reinforcement and low rates of victim defending also increase the likelihood that anxious and rejected children will become bullied (Kärnä et al., 2010). Both defending and reinforcing behaviors may be influenced by the popularity of the lead bully, primarily because of the contagious nature of popularity (Marks, Cillessen, & Crick, 2012). Studies show that being closely affiliated with highly popular peers is associated with high popularity for oneself, both concurrently (Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010) and longitudinally (Marks et al., 2012). As popularity is highly valued by students, especially in early adolescence (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), one might expect most youth to attempt to befriend popular peers in order to "bask in reflected glory" (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980), or at least maintain these relationships in order to preserve their own status.

These preferences should have important implications for their behaviors in bullying situations. Defending a victimized peer is a risky behavior that implies a confrontation with a bully and sometimes his or her supporters (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Opposing a popular bully may be perceived by potential defenders as even riskier, as it is more likely to result in rejection from the peer group and a loss in status. A recent study suggests that defending, as indicated by proportions of peer nominations, is indeed less frequent in classrooms where bullies are more popular (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, Peets, & Salmivalli, 2013). On the other hand, openly supporting a popular bully may be particularly tempting as a way to enhance one's own popularity. Therefore, popular bullies may be more resistant to anti-bullying interventions, not only because their negative behaviors enable them to satisfy their need for dominance, but also because their peers are less likely to counteract the bullying.

The KiVa anti-bullying program

KiVa is a nationwide anti-bullying program in Finland. It was developed in 2006 at the request of the Finnish Ministry of Education, following the release of a World Health Organization (WHO) report revealing Finnish children's low liking of school. After an evaluation phase in 2007 and 2008 with a sample of 78 intervention and 78 control schools, the program was disseminated across the country in 2009. KiVa is based on the notion that the behavior of bystanders – reinforcing bullies, defending victimized peers, or remaining a passive observer – is essential in the continuation or cessation of bullying, and therefore intervention efforts should focus on all students, and not only the perpetrators and targets of bullying. The program includes *universal actions* directed at all students. The main components of these actions are lessons about the mechanisms of bullying, which consist of lectures as well as practical exercises and group discussions. A total of ten 90-minute lessons are delivered throughout the school year. Universal actions also include a computer game designed to match the themes raised during the lessons. The aim is to increase empathy for victims, raise awareness of the role played by the group in bullying incidents and of the various strategies that any child can adopt to thwart bullying. In addition to these components designed for every student, KiVa includes *indicated actions* directed at bullies and victims when a case of bullying comes to the attention of the school staff. These actions consist of a series of separate discussions with both bullies and victims aimed at stopping the bullying immediately.

The evaluation of the program as a whole has shown it to be effective at reducing self- and peer-reported victimization as well as self-reported bullying among fourth- to sixth-graders (Kärnä et al., 2011). During the nine months of implementation evaluated by randomized controlled trial, the implementation rate was high (see Haataja et al., 2013): the dose of tasks (i.e., the proportion of classroom activities delivered to the students), which included interactive exercises and coverage of the discussion topics described in the teacher manual, was almost 70%. This rate was equal or higher than 60% for 74% of the teachers in the sample. On average, teachers spent 79 min delivering the lessons and found the KiVa material easy to implement.

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