



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp)



## Brief Report

# Is popularity associated with aggression toward socially preferred or marginalized targets?



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 26 April 2014

### Keywords:

Aggression  
Rejection  
Social preference  
Popularity  
Social status  
Early adolescence

## ABSTRACT

This study was designed to test whether aggression toward easy or challenging targets is more likely to be associated with popularity. More specifically, we tested two alternative hypotheses with a sample of 224 adolescents (12- and 13-year-olds): (a) whether aggression toward highly disliked peers is associated with popularity (the easy target hypothesis) or (b) whether aggression toward highly liked peers is associated with popularity (the challenging target hypothesis). Support was found only for the challenging target hypothesis. In particular, our results indicate that aggressiveness toward peers who are liked by many others has social benefits in the form of greater popularity (particularly for highly preferred adolescents) without social costs (i.e., is unrelated to social preference). In contrast, aggressiveness toward peers who are disliked by many others is associated with lower social preference but bears no association with popularity. These results highlight the importance of studying contextualized aggression in order to understand the conditions under which aggression is most, and least, likely to be associated with social power and dominance.

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## Introduction

Some adolescents are liked by the majority of their peers (*socially preferred* or *socially accepted* individuals), whereas other adolescents are viewed as dominant, visible, and powerful by others (*popular* individuals; e.g., Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Although preference and popularity are often moderately correlated, socially preferred versus popular adolescents usually differ in the kinds of behaviors they engage in. For example, aggressive adolescents are typically least preferred by their peers, but they are often perceived as popular and cool and also possess centrality in their peer groups (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Despite considerable evidence indicating that aggression is positively related to popularity, one limitation of prior studies on aggression and social status is that aggressive behavior is typically assessed in a decontextualized manner without specifying toward whom aggression is directed. The current study was conducted to overcome this shortcoming by assessing aggression toward peers that were either most or least preferred by their classmates. More specifically, we tested two alternative hypotheses. On the basis of the extant literature on aggression, we hypothesized that the peer group is more likely to ascribe popularity to adolescents who are aggressive toward the least preferred members of the peer group. However, we also envisioned an alternative—namely, that the peer group is more likely to reward those adolescents with popularity who are aggressive toward the most preferred members of the peer group. We tested our hypotheses with a sample of sixth graders because this is an age at which the positive association between popularity and aggression peaks (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). In younger age groups, aggression is unrelated, or is even negatively linked, to popularity (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004).

Aggression is still mostly conceptualized and assessed in a trait-like manner. It is often assumed that aggressive individuals show hostile behaviors across different situations and relationship types. Yet, there is evidence that aggression is more likely to occur in certain relationships than in others (Card & Hodges, 2010; Dodge, Price, Coie, & Christopoulos, 1990). For instance, when relationship partners or targets have been identified on the basis of personal liking and disliking, aggression is more likely to occur toward personally disliked targets (Card & Hodges, 2007; Peets, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2008). These findings on contextual differences show that individuals are highly discriminative in their aggressive behavior across different targets. However, these findings fail to address the kinds of contexts, or targets, in which aggression is most or least likely to be associated with social benefits such as popularity. For instance, the greater frequency of aggressive behavior displayed in the context of negative versus positive affiliative relationships does not necessarily mean that aggression in anti-pathetic relationships is also most likely to yield status benefits. Thus, the current study was conducted to extend prior research on the aggression–popularity association by taking a contextualized approach to the research on aggression. Such an approach allows for the unveiling of the types of targets toward whom aggression is more, or less, likely to be associated with popularity. Rather than focusing on personally liked or disliked targets, we derived our hypotheses from existing theoretical and empirical research on aggression and social status and focused on targets who were highly liked versus disliked by the members of the peer group.

Prior research has suggested that aggressive individuals gain or maintain popularity by targeting low-status members of the group (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). For instance, researchers using a goal-framing approach (e.g., Sijtsema et al., 2009; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munniksma, & Dijkstra, 2010) argue that aggressors target the weakest members not just to receive a boost to their own status but also to avoid loss of affection from others who are important to them. Sijtsema and colleagues (2009) explicitly stated that individuals who use aggression because they want to dominate should choose targets who exhibit different weaknesses (p. 58). Although aggressors are in fact more likely to place importance on status goals (Ojanen, Grönroos, & Salmivalli, 2005; Sijtsema et al., 2009) and are often popular among their peers (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Rodkin et al., 2000; Sijtsema et al., 2009; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006), these studies did not identify the targets of children's aggression and, thus, failed to elucidate whether aggression that is primarily delivered toward easy or weak targets is also most likely to be socially rewarded. Thus, we put this assumption to test; we examined whether aggression toward marginalized or highly

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