



Relational aggression, depressive symptoms, and interdependence among school-age children



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the moderating role of relational-interdependent self-construal (relational interdependence) in the association between relational aggression and depressive symptoms as well as gender differences in the effect. One hundred thirty-two, fourth graded children (50% boys, M age = 10.31) in Taipei, Taiwan participated in this study. A multi-informant approach was used to assess study variables. Relational and physical aggression and indices of sociometric status were assessed by peer nominations. Relational interdependence and friendship intimacy were evaluated by children, and children's depressive symptoms were rated by classroom teachers. Mixed linear models demonstrated that after gender and important covariates (i.e., peer acceptance, peer rejection, and friendship intimacy) were controlled, relational interdependence moderated the association between relational aggression (but not physical aggression) and depressive symptoms. Specifically, this association was stronger for children who displayed high levels of relational interdependence than their peers with moderate and low levels of relational interdependence. No gender differences in the effect were found. The findings suggest that relational aggression as a risk factor and relational interdependence as an additive vulnerability interact to influence the development of depression.

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Interest in examining correlates and consequences of relational aggression, which involves behaviors that hurt others through damaging relationships (spreading rumors, social exclusion, and ignoring) has flourished for some considerable time (Crick, Ostrov, & Kawabata, 2007). Whereas relational aggression can be linked to positive peer relationships (peer acceptance and popularity), it often leads to negative relational consequences (peer rejection, isolation from peer group, bullying/peer victimization; Crick et al., 2007). Relational aggression further predicts a wide range of mental health problems, particularly internalizing adjustment problems, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and social withdrawal among children and adolescents (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). In a comprehensive meta-analytic study, Card, Stucky, Sawalani, and Little (2008) revealed that relational aggression was predictive of internalizing adjustment problems uniquely above and beyond the contribution of physical aggression (hitting, kicking, and punching). Although these findings are promising, there are still individual differences that account for the effect of relational aggression. It leaves us a question about how and why some children who display relational aggression are more or less likely to exhibit depressive symptoms than their peers. The present study examined the moderating role of relational-interdependent self-construal (hereinafter called relational interdependence) in the link

between relational aggression and depressive symptoms as well as gender differences in the effect.

1. Relational interdependence in middle childhood

Relational interdependence is defined as a degree to which individuals view significant others in their self-construal or mental-representations of self and others (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Highly interdependent individuals place more emphasis on relationships and perceive them to be closer to, more intimate with, and more considerate about their partner than those with low levels of interdependence (Cross et al., 2000). They tend to think about their partner for a longer time, consider their needs, wishes, and expectations more seriously, and more fully satisfy the quality of their relationships (Cross et al., 2000). Similarly, interdependent college students exhibited greater levels of communal orientations (i.e., helping friends), goals to maintain harmonious friendships, and willingness to sacrifice in the friendships (Mattingly, Oswald, & Clark, 2011). Furthermore, relative to their peers, Chinese adolescents who endorsed collectivism (analogous to relational interdependence) or who denied individualism (similar to independence) were less likely to use physical and relational aggression in peer-oriented conflictual situations (Li, Wang, Wang, & Shi, 2010).

Although relational interdependence has not been explicitly examined among school-age children, a large body of literature has demonstrated the crucial role of self in social, cognitive, and emotional development (Harter, 1998). Developing the self in terms of social

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relationships is an important task for children's survival as it is a source for forming high-quality friendships and extending peer networks that facilitate their adaptation to the classroom. The self in part regulates the way in which children think, feel, and behave, which in turn guides them to respond to the environment aptly (Harter, 1998). When children develop a positive sense of self and others, they may think about their peers supportively and negate emotions that are psychologically harmful even in the peer-provocative and conflictual situations. In contrast, when they have a negative sense of self and others, they may perceive the social world antagonistically, overly react to even benign peer conflicts, and fail to develop sociability, secure attachment, and open-minded personality leading to healthy peer relationships. Relational interdependence, which is an important part of the self, may influence whether children are able to build constructive peer relationships and form excellent friendships. In the study of self-development among Taiwanese school-age children, Kawabata, Tseng, and Crick (2014) showed that greater relational interdependence was linked with positive outcomes, including higher levels of prosocial behavior, friendship intimacy, and peer acceptance. Although this is the only study which has examined children's relational interdependence explicitly, the finding suggests that interdependent children seem to be well acculturated to the classroom climate. That is, they are more prosocial toward peers, are viewed as being more liked by peers, and form friendships that are more intimate and emotionally closer.

2. Relational interdependence, relational aggression, and depressive symptoms

The literature indicates that relational interdependence seems to be an asset for children's social development. Interdependent children may be able to foster positive relationships and then show successful adaptation to the peer groups and friendships; that is, they may possess an ability to connect to others pleasantly, become close and friendly to their peers, and receive favorable evaluations from their peers (Kawabata et al., 2014). Yet, interdependent children do not always have optimal experiences with their peers. Some of them are socially rejected by their peers and become isolated from the peer group, developing high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Kawabata et al., 2014). Other children are engaged in the hostile peer interactions and tend to acquire aggressive behaviors through observational learning and exhibit social-psychological adjustment problems within the peer group (Crick et al., 2007). Although these views make valid points, we still do not know much about whether highly interdependent children are engaged in negative acts such as relational aggression and, if so, how they respond to the situation which produces such aggressive behavior.

The present study examined the validity of a relational-interdependent vulnerability model suggesting individual differences in the impact of relational aggression. This model posits that relational aggression serves as a contextual risk factor for and relational interdependence is an additive personal vulnerability for developing depressive symptoms. In this model, relative to children with low interdependence, highly interdependent children are thought to be more cognitively and emotionally vulnerable to relational aggression (but not physical aggression). Rudolph et al. (2000) discuss that negative interpersonal experiences are a major source of generating stress and depression for early adolescents. Relational aggression creates a relationally-oriented stressful situation which elicits negative emotions such as anger, hostility, and dejection (Crick et al., 2007). Assuming that the self of interdependent children is central to the peer relationships, it is conceivable that they may have a considerable amount of stress and anxiety when they enact relational aggression to their peers who are potentially very close. Hence, relational aggression and relational interdependence may be a double threat for developing depressive symptoms.

Researchers acknowledge that a cognitive and emotional vulnerability to negative interpersonal experiences may differ between females and males (Crick et al., 2007). Crick and Zahn-Waxler (2003) discuss that relative to males, females are more susceptible to relationally-oriented stressors, such as relational aggression, and are more at-risk for developing internalizing adjustment problems since they are more focused on interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Rose and Rudolph (2006) suggest that females are more likely to be concerned about relationships and find relational problems more stressful than males. Hence, relational aggression, which often elicits negative emotions, and relational interdependence, which serves as an additive vulnerability as discussed earlier, may be a risk factor for depression, particularly for girls. Namely, relational aggression, which is relationally aversive in nature, influences the development of depressive symptoms, and this effect may be more pronounced for girls who show high levels of relational interdependence.

3. Aims, problems, and hypotheses

A substantial body of studies have demonstrated that relational aggression is associated with greater depressive symptoms. However, relatively little is known about why this association occurs; why some relationally aggressive children show more depressive symptoms than others is still unclear. The purpose of the present study was to examine the moderating role of relational interdependence in the association between relational aggression and depressive symptoms as well as gender differences in the effect. It was hypothesized that greater relational aggression is associated with more depressive symptoms, and this association is stronger for children who exhibit higher levels of relational interdependence. Also, gender matters in relationships; that is, girls are thought to develop a stronger vulnerability to depression originated from interpersonal problems. It was hypothesized that the association between relational aggression and depressive symptoms is more robust for girls who are relationally interdependent than other girls and boys. Important covariates (peer acceptance, peer rejection, physical aggression, and friendship intimacy) were controlled in this study to find unique effects of relational aggression.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

A total of 132 (50.0% female; M age = 10.31) fourth graders were recruited from 3 classrooms in 2 public schools in Taipei (Taiwan). The letters explaining the goals of the study and study procedure were sent to schools in the school district. Two schools agreed to participate in the study. The socioeconomic status of the sample ranged from lower class to middle class based on parents' education levels and the household income. Paternal and maternal education levels were 11.4% and 58.3% for college and above, 50.8% and 15.9% for senior high school and vocational, and 14.2% and 2.3% for junior high and below, respectively. The household income of 50% of the participants was \$27,242.16 and above. The Institutional Review Board at the author's university approved the procedures and methods of the present study. Written informed consent was obtained from each of the study participants (consent rate = 85%), their parents, and their teachers.

5. Measures

5.1. Relational and physical aggression

Peer nominations were administered to assess children's relational aggression (5 items; e.g., social exclusion, rumor spreading, and silent treatment) and physical aggression (3 items; e.g., hitting, kicking, and threatening to beat up), using the Children's Social Behavior Scale — Peers (CSBS-P; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In the classroom session,

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