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Original article

The Relational aggression scale (RAS): Psychometric properties of a newly developed measure of relational aggression

L'Échelle d'agression relationnelle (EAR) : propriétés psychométriques d'une nouvelle mesure d'agression relationnelle les annexes A et B n'apparaissent pas dans le e-component



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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Relational aggression (RA) is a growing and worrisome problem, particularly among adolescents, that can result in negative psychological consequences for those involved. Therefore, it is important to develop instruments to detect these incidents and understand the problem so as to design effective intervention strategies.

Objective. – This study aims to construct a new self-report questionnaire, the Relational aggression scale (RAS), consisting of four subscales, namely direct, indirect, proactive and reactive RA, and to examine the factorial, convergent and criterion validity, the reliability (internal consistency and test-retest), and the measurement invariance of the instrument among Greek adolescents.

Method. – The study uses a cross-sectional design. The RAS was administered to 1231 youth aged between 10 to 16 years old along with three self-reports of RA and antisocial personality traits.

Results. – The findings confirmed the validity and reliability of two correlated two-factor models (i.e., direct and indirect RA, proactive and reactive RA) and a correlated four-factor model (i.e., proactive direct, proactive indirect, reactive direct, reactive indirect). Regarding convergent validity, the RAS scores were positively correlated with other RA measures, while concerning criterion validity, significantly positive associations emerged between RA and antisocial personality traits. The measurement invariance of the scale across both gender and grade level was also supported.

Conclusion. – The RAS is a valid and reliable assessment instrument of RA during adolescence. Implications for the use of the RAS to assess direct, indirect, proactive, reactive forms of RA and inform intervention decisions in samples of youth are discussed.

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R É S U M É

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Introduction. – L'agression relationnelle (AR) est un problème grandissant et inquiétant, en particulier chez les adolescents, qui peut entraîner des conséquences psychologiques négatives pour les personnes impliquées. Par conséquent, il est important de développer des instruments pour détecter ces incidents et comprendre le problème afin de concevoir des stratégies d'intervention efficaces.

Objectif. – Cette étude vise à construire un nouveau questionnaire d'autoévaluation, l'Échelle d'agression relationnelle (EAR), consistant en quatre sous-échelles, à savoir l'AR directe, indirecte, proactive et réactive, et d'examiner la validité factorielle, convergente et de critère, la fiabilité (cohérence interne et test-retest), et l'invariance de mesure de l'instrument chez les adolescents Grecs.

Méthode. – L'étude utilise une conception transversale. L'EAR a été administrée à 1231 jeunes âgés de 10 à 16 ans, ainsi que trois mesures d'autoévaluation d'AR et des traits de personnalité antisociale.

Résultats. – Les résultats ont confirmé la validité et la fiabilité d'un modèle à quatre facteurs corrélés (direct proactif, indirect proactif, réactif direct, indirect réactif). En ce qui concerne la validité convergente, les scores d'EAR sont corrélés positivement avec d'autres mesures d'AR. En ce qui concerne la validité de critère, des associations significativement positives ont émergé entre l'AR et les traits de personnalité antisociale. L'invariance de mesure de l'échelle est vérifiée quels que soient le sexe et le niveau scolaire.

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Conclusion. – L'EAR est un instrument d'évaluation valide et fiable de l'AR au cours de l'adolescence. Les implications de l'utilisation de l'EAR sont discutées, d'une part, pour évaluer les formes directes, indirectes, proactives et réactives de l'AR, et d'autre part, pour outiller les décisions d'intervention dans des populations de jeunes.

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Relational aggression (RA) refers to behaviors, such as spreading rumors, social exclusion and threatening to end a relationship that aim to hurt or harm others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Murray-Close, Nelson, Ostrov, Casas, & Crick, 2016; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). As RA could be the key to explaining adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems (Crick, 1996), reliable and valid assessment of the construct is essential both for research purposes as well as for the evaluation of the policies and the interventions designed to confront RA.

So far, the increased scientific interest for RA led to the application of numerous measurement strategies, such as the observation during the preschool age (e.g., Casas et al., 2006; Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009; Ostrov & Keating, 2004), and teacher reports during early and middle childhood (Crick, Ostrov, & Kawabata, 2007; Murray-Close et al., 2016; Ostrov & Bishop, 2008). While peer nomination appears to be among the effective ways of RA assessment during late childhood and adolescence, self-reports seem to be the most prevalent way of RA assessment (Murray-Close, Ostrov, Nelson, Crick, & Coccaro, 2010; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015) due to their advantage in providing direct access to the respondents' views about hidden or concealed behaviors not easily observed by authority figures (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). However, certain methodological issues regarding the self-report evaluation of RA should be considered during the selection of the appropriate instrument (i.e., construct definition, items' conceptual clarity and distinctions, psychometric characteristics). The dearth of a comprehensive and empirically validated measure of RA is of particular concern given the increasing scientific interest in the field. In light of the potential research and clinical utility of assessing RA, the primary goal of the study was to develop and initially validate a new RA measure in a sample of adolescents.

1. Dimensions of relational aggression

Two important issues have been raised in the study of relational aggression in youth. The first refers to the conceptual confusion of the items used to assess relational compared to social or indirect aggression (e.g., Archer & Coyne, 2005; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015), with some researchers using assessment tools designed to evaluate social or indirect aggression in RA research. Undeniably, some features of indirect aggression uniquely describe this construct, such as the case of indirect physical aggression (e.g., vandalizing a peer's school bag) (Goldstein, Tisak, & Boxer, 2002). Similarly, some aspects of social aggression including nonverbal acts (i.e., eye rolling) are not shared by RA. Thus, depending on their purpose, research measures designed to evaluate each construct may rely on distinct behavioral patterns, and accordingly vary in the number of items (Bowker & Etkin, 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck & Pronk, 2012). However, different approaches to assessing RA across studies and variations among these behaviors may be of great significance for some crucial developmental issues, as they have resulted in inconsistencies regarding the nature of possible predictors or protective factors, as well as in estimates of the RA prevalence (e.g., Marsee et al., 2014; Murray-Close et al., 2016).

The second crucial issue refers to whether RA can be further interpreted by exploring the way by which the harm is expressed, namely its forms, and the motivation behind the relationally

aggressive act, namely its functions. By definition, RA encompasses both the direct manipulation of interpersonal relationships (Crick et al., 2007), as well as indirect behaviors, such as verbal and non-verbal aggressive acts. Although the distinction of *direct* and *indirect* RA is theoretically supported by researchers (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Murray-Close et al., 2016; Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2008; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015), it is not reflected in the available measures, as shown by a comprehensive review of the existing RA instruments. Indirect RA is generally perceived as a far more frequent behavior among youth than direct RA. However, as noted by Nelson et al. (2008), direct RA may be the key to our understanding of relationship processes in opposite-sex dyads. Thus, it has been suggested that future studies should separately analyse the prevalence and correlates of direct and indirect RA in youth samples (Murray-Close et al., 2016). This study addresses this limitation by assessing RA in its two distinct forms (i.e., direct and indirect).

Recent studies have shown the importance of taking into account the functions of aggression (i.e., proactive and reactive) (e.g., Little, Henrich, Jones, & Hawley, 2003; Marsee et al., 2011; Ostrov & Houston, 2008; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). Proactive aggression is defined as the unprovoked and goal-directed aggressive conduct, while reactive aggression refers to a response to real or perceived threats and it is related to negative affect (Marsee et al., 2011; Marsee & Frick, 2007; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). Despite the confirmed overlap between these RA subtypes, previous research has shown that these two functions are distinguishable with different theoretical underpinnings (i.e., proactive aggression is derived from the social learning theory, while reactive is based on the frustration-aggression hypothesis; Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1962). Consequently, specific developmental indicators and social-psychological maladjustment outcomes are connected to these aggressive behavior functions (Card & Little, 2006). Thus, it has been proposed that further research is needed to employ more accurate assessment tools based on strong theoretical ground to better clarify the unique or shared developmental pathways that these functions of aggression point to for individuals in different contexts.

Within the proactive and reactive functions of RA, different ways of engaging in RA (i.e., direct and indirect) can also be assessed. Existing theoretical and empirical findings suggest that the consideration of the forms and functions together may be important for understanding RA. Thus, an approach in which the two forms (i.e., direct and indirect) and the two functions (i.e., reactive and proactive) are crossed, yielding four subtypes of RA: proactive indirect, proactive direct, reactive indirect, and reactive direct RA is explored in the present study for the first time to the best of our knowledge. This approach is purported to be ecologically valid, and to disclose the potential unique correlates of the subtypes of RA among youths. Overall this study, by examining three theoretically and empirically supported models of the RA construct, aims to clarify whether the best structure of RA is either a two-factor (i.e., proactive and reactive or direct and indirect RA) or a four-factor structure (i.e., proactive direct, proactive indirect, reactive direct, reactive indirect).

The distinction between proactive and reactive RA has been explored in youth pointing to divergent correlates of the two RA functions. Several researchers claimed that callous-unemotional (CU) traits (e.g., poverty of emotions, lack of empathy and guilt,

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