Relational aggression in adolescents: A review of theoretical and empirical research

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ABSTRACT

The need for an integrated approach to studying relationally aggressive behavior is evident, considering the growing though scattered and fragmentary research documenting the predictors and outcomes of this behavior. In the current paper a comprehensive review of the extant literature concerning relationally aggressive behavior of adolescents is presented, taking into account the conclusive evidence supporting the prevalence of relational aggression during this developmental stage. It opens with a conceptual clarification of the term and discussion of the theoretical approaches to the study of this aggressive form of behavior. It focuses on the main findings of the relevant theory and empirical research providing insight into both individual and contextual antecedents as well as the correlates of relationally aggressive behavior. Assessment methods for identifying relational aggression in children and adolescents are described, with an emphasis on measurement techniques most sustainable for capturing this sometimes-intangible construct. The article concludes with a discussion of proposed best practices for effectively preventing and responding to incidents of relational aggression within the context of social and emotional learning, positive behavioral or family-based interventions. Recommendations for future investigations with reference to the current theoretical conceptualizations and empirical findings on relational aggression are advanced.

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1. Introduction

During the last couple of decades, the study of relational aggression has burgeoned (Murray-Close, Ostrov, & Crick, 2007). Researchers in the field of aggression have increasingly devoted their attention to a wider range of aggressive tactics and developed a broadened conceptualization of aggression to include nonphysical behaviors that are more covert

or indirect in nature (Crick, Ostrov, & Kawabata, 2007; Underwood, Beron, & Rosen, 2009). Indeed, although previously physical behaviors have been the focus of the majority of research efforts on aggression, recent interest in the constructs of nonphysical forms has urged a reexamination of the forms and functions of aggressive behavior (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Kuppens, Grietens, Onghena, Michiels, & Subramanian, 2008; Leff, Waasdorp, & Crick, 2010). The dramatic increase of interest in relational aggression is evident not only from the large number of research findings that have been published in developmental and educational psychology journals but also from the mainstreaming of the topic into books, films and television programs

(Merrel, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006). These nonphysical aggressive acts have been given various names, such as *indirect*, *social* and *relational* aggression. As research on these forms of aggressive behavior has substantially expanded, theorists have noted the conceptual confusion characterizing work in this area (Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008). Therefore, it may be instructive to begin by clarifying the underlying differences in constructs referred to as social, relational, an indirect aggression.

Corroborating evidence suggests that relational aggression first signs emerge around 3 years old and continue to become more sophisticated throughout the early childhood period (Crick et al., 2007; Crick et al., 2006a). Despite the scarce empirical findings for developmental trends in relational aggression (Baillargeon et al., 2007), many researchers (e.g., Björkqvist, 1994; Crick et al., 2007; Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004; Zimmer-Gembeck, Trevaskis, Nesdale, & Downey, 2014) claim that indirect aggression peaks during later childhood and adolescence, due to the developmental milestones (i.e., the development of greater verbal abilities, social sophistication) experienced during this period. The current review focuses on adolescents for two different reasons.

First, social changes emerging in adolescence may provide fertile ground for the use of relational aggression (Murray-Close et al., 2007). Indeed, as adolescents begin to individuate and develop a sense of self separate from their parents, peer relationships and social standing take on greater significance. Adolescents' social relationships become more emotionally close and intimate as well as their social status and acceptance from same-sex and opposite-sex peers become important element of self-identity (Yoon et al., 2004). Moretti, Holland, and McKay (2001) hypothesized that during this time period, girls may view themselves as inadequate and in an effort to meet their relational needs they may seek to control and manipulate peer relationships in order to achieve social success. One unique feature of relational aggression during adolescence is that, as the establishment of romantic relationships becomes an important focus of development, this context provides an important opportunity for the exhibition of relational aggression (Crick et al., 2007). Similarly, according to Card et al. (2008) engaging in forms of aggression that are developmentally less appropriate (i.e., direct aggression during adolescence) may elicit harsher consequences by parents and teachers and more rejection by peers.

Second, research suggests that relationally aggressive behavior, as a more sophisticated way of manipulation, requires an understanding of others' mental states (Card et al., 2008). Adolescence brings an enhanced understanding of social situations, including a better understanding of the emotions and motives of others, perspective taking, and emotion regulation (Eccles, Wigfield, & Byrnes, 2003). As adolescents progress in their social-cognitive abilities, they better perceive the manipulative and harmful methods of interacting and use more sophisticated or covert aggressive behaviors to withdraw specific relationship information in reply to behaviors occurred in the past (Prinstein et al., 2001; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999).

The need for an integrated approach to studying relationally aggressive behavior is evident, considering the growing though scattered and fragmentary research documenting the predictors and outcomes of this behavior. In an attempt to provide insight in the understanding of relational aggression in the current paper, a comprehensive review of the extant literature concerning relationally aggressive behavior of adolescents is presented, taking into account the conclusive evidence supporting the prevalence of relational aggression during this developmental stage. The main part of the review begins with a conceptual clarification of the term and discussion of the theoretical approaches to the study of this aggressive form. It focuses on the main findings of the relevant theory and empirical research by providing insight into both individual and contextual antecedents as well as the correlates of relationally aggressive behavior. Furthermore, several assessment methods for detecting relational aggression in children and adolescents are described, with an emphasis on measurement techniques most sustainable for capturing this sometimes-intangible construct. Finally, the

article concludes with a discussion of proposed best practices for effectively preventing and responding to incidents of relational aggression within the context of social and emotional learning, positive behavioral or family-based interventions.

2. Conceptual clarification

Several researchers having studied and contributed to a growing body of literature on relational aggression support that there is still a lack of agreement on common terminology (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Leff et al., 2010; Merrel et al., 2006). Specifically, there is currently a debate in the field regarding which term is most appropriate to use when discussing nonphysical types of behaviors: *indirect* aggression (Björkqvist, 2001), defined as a way to harm the target by rejection or exclusion (Archer & Coyne, 2005), *social* aggression (Underwood, Gaelnand, & Paquette, 2001), used to describe manipulations in group acceptance aimed at damaging the victim's self-esteem or social status (Card et al., 2008), and *relational* aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) referring to behaviors carried out in a covert way, such as peer group exclusion or rejection, rumor spreading and embarrassment in a social setting (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

Although Crick and Grotpeter first introduced the term relational aggression in 1995, similar behavior had been studied for years by researchers using the term indirect aggression, which as Björkqvist (2001) claimed was in use prior to the term social aggression. Underwood et al. (2001) argued in favor of using the term social aggression, not only because it is one of the earlier terms but also because it is a comprehensive term, including behaviors encountered in relational aggression and indirect aggression while being the only term that specifically incorporated nonverbal behaviors.

Indirect aggression broadly refers to behaviors that may be covert (i.e., the aggressor does not intend to be known to the victim), such as ignoring, avoiding, or excluding others from social interactions (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). This term was first introduced by Feshbach (1969) to define the behavior of individuals who snubbed a newcomer during a laboratory observation session. Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Peltonen (1988) later used this term to refer to behaviors such as gossiping, befriending others, and exclusion that do not directly confront the victim. To date, indirect aggression definition involves behaviors that are done "behind their back", such as spreading stories and lies about them (Gentile, Coyne, & Walsh, 2011). Possibly because of this rather limiting definition, indirect aggression is the least frequently studied of the three forms (Merrell et al., 2006).

Shortly thereafter, the term social aggression was used by Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, and Gariepy (1989) to refer to behaviors that intentionally damage interpersonal relationships and social status through non-confrontational and generally covert methods (Underwood, 2003). This term refers to children's descriptions of manipulations in group acceptance through ostracism or character attacks (Card et al., 2008). These behaviors require the involvement of members of the social community (e.g., gossip, social exclusion, ostracism, negative facial expressions; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008). Indirect aggression differs from social aggression because the perpetrator does not necessary employ other members in the aggressive act (Xie et al., 2005). This broad definition of social aggression is designed to include both direct and indirect behaviors, verbal and nonverbal social exclusion, malicious gossip, and friendship manipulation (Underwood, 2003).

Though similar to social aggression, the construct of relational aggression has subtle, but weighty differences. It includes behaviors that damage or threaten to harm relationships, acceptance and inclusion through manipulation of peer relationships (Crick, 1996; Crick et al., 2007). Relationally aggressive behavior primarily involves the direct manipulation of peer relationships and does not include negative facial expressions or gestures (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). These behaviors may