Relational Aggression, Gender, and the Developmental Process

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TOPIC: *Defining and exploring the concept of relational aggression, or the purposeful intent to inflict harm on another through a social relationship.*

PURPOSE: *This study aims to describe the concept of relational aggression as it has been shaped through recent research, to contrast relational aggression with other types of aggression, and to explore the influence of gender and the formation of a self-concept in the development of relational aggression.*

SOURCES: *A review of the literature from 1969 to 2005 from selected nursing, child development, women's studies, and psychology publications.*

CONCLUSIONS: *Some degree of relational aggression seems to be a normal response to conflict for many girls, from preschool through adolescence; however, more research needs to be conducted to determine at what level, or what subtypes, of relational aggression are predictive of future deviant behavior.*

Search terms: *Relational aggression, indirect aggression, aggression, social aggression, gender socialization*

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Introduction

Although the concept of relational aggression was identified as early as 1969 (Fleshbach, 1969), it was not until fairly recently that relevant research was conducted on measuring, defining, and distinguishing relational aggression from other types of aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). As several authors have stated (Block, 1983; Crick & Grotpeter; Hadley, 2004), studies on aggression in children and adolescents prior to this time focused on overt or physical aggression, primarily in males. Relational aggression, or the purposeful intent to inflict harm on another through a social relationship, has been identified as a form of aggression that is most often exhibited by females, yet researchers lack decisive evidence as to why.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the concept of relational aggression as it has been shaped through recent research, to contrast relational aggression with other types of aggression, and to explore the influence of gender in the development of relational aggression. In addition, the influence of the broader social context on the development and use of relational aggression will be explored and the rationale behind this form of aggression, found predominantly among the female gender, will be proposed.

Relational Aggression as a Concept

Currently, aggression is typically defined in the literature as a purposeful attempt to harm others, either through physical means such as hitting or pushing or through the manipulation of a social relationship (Crick, 1997; Roecker Phelps, 2001). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) assert that when children are attempting to harm a peer, they choose a method that they perceive will cause harm to the goals which are most valued by that particular peer group. Studies have found that relational aggression is significantly higher in

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girls than in boys (Crick & Grotpeter; Crick & Rose, 2000; Fleshbach, 1969). Boys are generally more concerned with physical dominance, and the more important values for girls typically center around social interactions and interpersonal relationships (Crick & Grotpeter). Examples of relational aggression include withholding friendship, exclusion from social activities, and telling tales or gossiping about a peer; each of these behaviors executed with the purpose of inflicting punishment or retaliation. When Fleshbach first described the concept of relational aggression in an observational study, she found that first-grade girls were significantly more likely than boys to respond to an unfamiliar peer with social exclusion from the peer group. Nearly 20 years later, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, and Peltonen (1988) continued to explore whether relational, or indirect aggression as these researchers called this behavior, was typical of middle-school-aged girls. Lagerspetz et al. used a peer rating scale to identify types of aggressive behavior children were likely to employ when angry with a classmate. The researchers found that there were significant differences between boys and girls in the use of direct and indirect aggression. While boys became angry more often than girls, girls were significantly more likely to use indirect aggression when angry, such as persuading the peer group not to be friends with a child, or telling lies about another child (Lagerspetz et al.).

Although Lagerspetz et al. (1988) differentiated between indirect aggression and nonverbal aggression in their study description, their measurement instrument confounded the two concepts. Nonverbal aggression is quite often indirect or relational in nature, such as shunning a peer; however, this behavior can also include physical aggression, such as destroying a classmate's personal property. In the early 1990s, Crick and Grotpeter developed and tested an instrument, which reliably tested and separated relational aggression from overt aggression (1995). The researchers demonstrated that although relational and overt aggressions are related, they are also distinct concepts. As a result of this research, Crick and Grotpeter (1995)

emphasized that because relational aggression is not always visible, such as a physically aggressive act of pushing another child, assessing the presence of relational aggression is a more complex task. The researchers assert that obtaining information solely from a teacher or other outside observer may not provide reliable information. In other words, only the peers themselves may know whether they or a classmate are excluded from an activity.

In reviewing the literature on relational aggression studies, it is interesting to note that the concept was first identified and studied in Finland (Fleshbach, 1969; Lagerspetz et al., 1988), and later further defined and conceptualized in the United States (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The idea that relational aggression is not a specific country's cultural phenomenon but can be observed across cultural boundaries was tested then presented in 1998 by Österman et al. Österman et al. conducted a large international study, which included samples not only from Finland, Israel, and Poland, but from different ethnic groups from within two of the three countries. Consistent with previous studies, female subjects, ages 8, 11, and 15 years, were found to use indirect aggression significantly more than male subjects of the same age, across all three age groups. Indirect aggression was defined as "social manipulation, attacking the target in circuitous ways" (Österman et al., p. 1).

Because researchers have historically focused on measuring overt aggression, it was mistakenly thought that girls did not exhibit the same levels of aggression as boys within peer relationships (Conway, 2005; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Hadley, 2004; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). However, when relational aggression is measured in addition to overt aggression, levels of aggression are more or less equal between the genders (Crick & Grotpeter; Crick & Rose, 2000). The fact that girls are not only capable of using aggression to purposefully harm another, but do so on a regular basis, may be a startling revelation to those who believe that in general, girls are not aggressive. There are two plausible reasons for why this misnomer has persisted: lack of

accurate measurements of relational aggression, and the failure to account for gender socialization.

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Measuring Aggression

Aggression has been defined as behavior that is harmful to another person, which on the surface would seem to be broad enough to include relational aggression. However, historically, most research methods for measuring aggression have focused on physical displays of aggression, such as hitting or pushing, or acts of violent crime (Coie & Dodge, 1998). These overt acts can be easily measured through observation, teacher or peer reports, or on juvenile crime reports. Gender differences in aggression are reported to be much higher for boys than girls when measurements such as delinquent acts or violent offenses are used (Coie & Dodge). For example, gender differences in aggressive acts are typically reported to be fourfold for boys versus girls by the age of 13 years, and sixfold at age 18 years (Coie & Dodge).

When Fleshbach (1969) initially observed first-grade girls' responses to new peers and labeled it as indirect aggression, she was defining a new phenomenon that needed further study. Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, and Gariepy (1989) further developed the concept of indirect aggression by asking fourth through ninth graders to describe peer conflicts. Themes identified from same-gender conflicts among girls revolved around manipulation of relationships and social alienation. After consulting with Cairns and Cairns, Lagerspetz et al. (1988) developed a measurement scale for indirect aggression. The researchers used open-ended questions asking 11- and 12-year-old boys and girls to describe what their peers do when angry with another peer, as well as close-ended answers. The close-ended answers included both overt acts of aggression, such as striking or pushing, and indirect aggression, such as spreading untrue rumors about a peer. Lagerspetz et al. used a peer measurement strategy as they felt that an individual who used indirect aggression would "probably deny being aggressive" if asked directly (p. 404).

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) developed measurements for relational aggression based not only on prior research, but also on the concept that girls are more concerned with relationships and will therefore use methods to manipulate or damage relationships as a means of aggression. The Peer Assessment of Relational Aggression and Other Aspects of Social Adjustment included such items as, "When mad, gets even by keeping the person from being in their group of friends" and "Tells friends they will stop liking them unless friends do what they say" (Crick & Grotpeter, p. 713). The scale also included items for measuring overt aggression, prosocial behavior, and isolation. For the first time, Crick and Grotpeter were able to measure relational aggression reliably, as well as assess the degree to which relational aggression is distinct from overt aggression. In summary, it was not until researchers redefined measurements for aggression that we learned that girls demonstrate an equivalent prevalence of aggression when compared to boys.

The Socialization of Gender Characteristics

Because gender is strongly associated with relational aggression, a discussion of variables that influence gender development is now presented. Gender refers

to characteristics that are generally learned through social experiences rather than those characteristics that are biologically based and refer to a person's sex (Galambos, 2004). Experiences with parents, teachers, peers, siblings, and the mass media shape a person's gender development through role modeling, teaching, reinforcement, and even punishment of specific gender behaviors (Galambos). For example, when a father comes home from work to find his 4-year-old son wearing nail polish, the father may react negatively and tell his son that boys do not wear nail polish. Through such experiences, the boy learns which behaviors are viewed as masculine and therefore acceptable within his current cultural environment. Zahn-Waxler and Pajer (2004) note that in general, boys are more likely than girls to receive rewards or be ignored altogether for aggressive behavior than girls, who are more likely to receive firm directives for the same aggressive behavior. Girls are often oversocialized with regard to expectations for aggressive behavior in that mothers and teachers frequently give girls verbal rationale for not engaging in overt aggression. As a result of this reinforcement, Zahn-Waxler and Pajer conclude that girls are more likely to mask their anger and to anticipate negative consequences for aggressive behavior.

Stories and the media also play a strong role in the construction of gender. Nicolopoulou (1997) observed preschool children in the classroom for several months where story reading to children was a routine part of the day. Although the teachers felt that they consciously worked to make the classroom a gender-neutral environment, when the children were asked to write their own stories, the boys were much more likely to include themes of conflict, danger, heroism, and aggressive violence than the girls (Nicolopoulou). Conversely, Nicolopoulou found that girls were more likely to tell stories with romantic and family-oriented themes.

The average American grade-school-age child watches 3.5 hr of television each day and over 60% of television programs include violent interactions between characters, the majority of which are male (Roberts,

Henriksen, & Feohr, 2004). A full analysis of the effects of media exposure to violence and aggression is beyond the scope of this paper; however, several studies have demonstrated a strong link between exposure to media violence and subsequent aggressive behavior. The role models who are portrayed in the media using overt aggression are most often male (Roberts et al.).

How does the media portray the female gender and the expression of aggression? Although there has been extensive research on the role of the media and its effects on sexuality as well as body image of female adolescents (Roberts et al., 2004), little can be found in the literature on the portrayal of relational aggression in the media and possible effects on behavior. Only one study, by Coyne and Archer (2005), appears in the literature where relational aggression is identified in the media as a possible predictor of subsequent behavior. Coyne and Archer examined television content for both indirect and direct aggression and its relationship to the levels of physical and indirect aggression reported by peers. They found a significant relationship between the amount of televised indirect aggression girls viewed and the amounts of indirect aggression girls were reported to display.

Peer groups can also be instrumental in shaping a child's self-concept of gender. For example, peers react more favorably to assertive behavior when demonstrated by boys than to the same behavior by girls (Fagot & Hagan, 1985). Peers also tend to segregate themselves into same-sex groups, which further contributes to gender socialization (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987). Similar to the earlier stated parental negative reinforcement example, Fagot (1984) also found that peers reacted negatively toward boys who exhibited feminine behavior.

While physically aggressive children are often rejected by their peers, continued association with aggressive peers can increase a child's level of aggressive behavior (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Similarly, Werner and Crick (2004) found that girls who associated with relationally aggressive girls demonstrated higher levels of relational aggression 1 year later. Crick,

Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen, and Casas (2004) state that the development of gender roles may be an important part of the development of relational aggression. The researchers state that it is possible "relational aggression increases among girls as they develop a firmer understanding of female gender roles" (Crick et al., p. 82).

It can be said then that experiences with teachers, parents, peers, and the media influence not only the conceptualization of gender in the developing child and adolescent, but also expectations of acceptable gender roles and behavior. In contrast to girls, boys receive encouragement and reinforcement for assertiveness and physical aggression, whereas girls receive reinforcement for masking their anger and building relationships. In the next section of this paper, a closer examination of developmental tasks for girls and boys, including the construct of self and the acquisition of language, will be described.

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Developmental Trajectories

The Concept of Self

Establishing a sense of independence and autonomy is generally agreed to be an important developmental task that begins during a child's toddler years and continues throughout adolescence (Steinberg, 2002). Crick and Rose (2000), however, question whether the goal of autonomy is as relevant to women as it is to men. In general, women place more importance on establishing close, interpersonal relationships with others rather than independence. For example, women are more likely than men to describe themselves in terms of their relationships with others rather than their own individual accomplishments (Cross & Madson, 1997). When describing their ideal self, women are also more likely to include interpersonal relationships in their descriptions (Boggiano & Barrett, 1991). Beliefs we hold as most important in forming our own self-concept are what drive our information processing and behavior (Cross & Madson). Self-construal profoundly affects the way we approach and manage our relationships with others. People who place high importance on interdependent relationships develop the ability to form and nurture intimate relationships with others. Conversely, people who place high importance on autonomy of self may be more inclined to sabotage a relationship to enhance themselves (Cross & Madson). Therefore, as girls develop their own model of the self as an interdependent being, they also develop the skills to forge, protect, and enhance intimate relationships.

How then does the development of a model of an interdependent self affect the type of aggression a child may use with his or her peers? Relational aggression is a form of aggression used to inflict damage on a person's social relationships or social status. Xie, Swift, Cairns, and Cairns (2002) identified two dimensions of relational aggression: direct social aggression and nonconfrontational social aggression. In direct social aggression, the identity of the perpetrator is known, as the aggression is confrontational in nature such as openly insulting a peer. Nonconfrontational aggression is executed indirectly as in telling tales about a peer to others. Cross and Madson (1997) suggest that more women than men engage in nonconfrontational aggression as it allows them to release aggressive feelings without endangering their existing relationships.

Therefore, as girls are socialized in the expectations of the female gender, they are also socialized in acceptable approaches and management of their relationships with others and a part of this process includes the management of aggression.

The Acquisition and Use of Language

Although there are individual differences in language acquisition and performance in early development, girls consistently outperform boys across general measures of language (Bornstein, Hahn, & Haynes, 2004). Because the use of language is essential for executing most forms of relational aggression, it could be argued that this is the primary reason that relational aggression is more prevalent among girls than boys. And, indeed, there have been studies that have demonstrated a significant relationship between language skills and relational aggression. In their study of 145 preschool children age 3 to 5 years, Bonica, Arnold, Fisher, and Zeljo (2003) found a significant positive association between language development and relational aggression. This relationship remained significant when controlling for socioeconomic status and age. Interestingly, when the researchers examined whether gender interacted with language development in predicting relational aggression, the association was stronger for boys than for girls. The researchers speculated that since girls are exposed (or socialized) to more relational aggression strategies, language development might be less relevant for girls than for boys.

In a recent study on the effect of language skills and gender on relational and physical aggression among preschoolers, Estrem (2005) separated receptive language skills from expressive language skills. Estrem hypothesized that children with higher expressive language skills would demonstrate greater relational aggression; her findings did not support this prediction. Physical aggression scores were affected more significantly by language skills than relational aggression, where poor receptive language skills were a better predictor for physical aggression. In contrast to

Bonica et al. (2003), Estrem found that for girls, relational aggression increased as expressive language decreased. Estrem speculated that when a child is less skilled in expressing herself, she may resort to using relationally aggressive behaviors such as posturing or using common verbal phrases such as, "I won't play with you if you . . ." It is also possible that at the preschool age, girls have not yet developed sufficient expressive language skills to use verbal relational aggression effectively.

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It appears from these studies that the acquisition of language is not a clear predicator of relational aggression, but may interact with other variables to predict the type of aggression young children demonstrate. The ability to recognize social cues and react in a socially acceptable manner has been established as a reliable predictor of physical aggression by several researchers (Dodge et al., 1986; Eisenberg et al., 1997; Erdley & Asher, 1999). Dodge (1991) breaks down human interactions into a series of steps that require us to first notice a social cue, then interpret the cue, evaluate potential responses to the cue, and, finally, to enact the response. Those children who do not possess the skills to accurately interpret social cues are at increased risk for reacting in a socially unacceptable manner, including using physical aggression. Estrem's

findings that decreased receptive language skills are a predictor of greater use of physical aggression further supports this predictive relationship (2005). The aggressive response a child employs when she is unable to interpret a social cue accurately may also be partially dependent upon her age and, thus, her gender socialization as well as language acquisition.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

Relational aggression has been well established by researchers as a separate form of aggression used across cultures and predominately by girls. Factors that contribute to the development of this phenomenon include (a) gender socialization through parents, teachers, peer groups, and the media, and (b) the construct of self among girls as predominantly interdependent persons who place a high value on the development and nurturing of relationships. A logical assumption is that the acquisition of language skills is a strong predictor for the use of relational aggression; however, research results have been mixed with regard to language skills.

At least some form of relational aggression is a normal response by the majority of girls to social interactions where there is a degree of conflict. But at what level is relational aggression considered to be outside normally accepted parameters of social interactions or perhaps predictive of deviant behaviors? We know that if physical aggression continues throughout childhood, a child's peer group will eventually reject the child and deviant peer group membership is then likely (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). If relational aggression is defined in terms of direct social aggression and nonconfrontational social aggression as Xie et al. (2002) propose, then would responding to conflict with nonconfrontational aggression be more prevalent among the majority of girls who, as a group, are socialized to nurture relationships? And, in turn, would research show a predictive relationship between direct social aggression (a confrontational and reactive form of social aggression), peer rejection, and future deviant behavior? Although several researchers have

found that relationally aggressive preschoolers, children, and adolescents are disliked by their peers (Crick, 1997; Rys & Bear, 1997; Tomada & Schneider, 1997; Werner & Crick, 2004), Xie, Cairns, and Cairns (2004) found that both fourth and seventh graders who were considered by their peers to be central players in a peer social network were also more likely to use nonconfrontational social aggression. Xie et al. (2004) also found that physical aggression was not related to network centrality but was linked to future maladjustment. The researchers did not measure direct social aggression in this study, and one has to wonder if network centrality would also be associated with direct social aggression, which. like physical aggression, is a more confrontational behavior. Or, rather, is direct social aggression, like physical aggression, linked to future maladjustment?

An additional area which needs further research is the ability to accurately interpret social cues and its effect on specific types of aggression. For example, are girls who are unable to accurately interpret social cues more likely to use direct social aggression, similar to other research that has demonstrated the prediction of physical aggression from a deficit in social competencies? An area of research that has not been explored in this paper is emotional regulation, or the processes a person uses to monitor his or her emotional responses, as well as the subsequent behavioral reaction, to a given situation (Walden & Smith, 1997). Emotional phenomena are a critical piece of processing information during each human interaction and experience (Dodge, 1991). In other words, some level of emotion is a part of every human interaction that we experience. Children who are unable to regulate their physiologic emotional reactions to stimuli in their environment are at risk for misinterpreting social cues as threatening and may react in an aggressive manner (Dodge; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Past research has found that emotional dysregulation typically results in extrinsic behaviors for boys such as overt aggression, and oppositional disorder and intrinsic behaviors for girls such as depression and anxiety (Garber & Dodge, 1991; Leadbeater, Kupermine, Hertzog, & Blatt, 1999).

However, by using traditional measures of overt aggression, researchers may not have identified episodes of direct relational aggression as aggressive behaviors. In their study on gender appropriateness of symptom criteria for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional-defiant disorder (ODD), and conduct disorder (CD), Ohan and Johnston (2005) found that when female-sensitive measures were added, constructs related to the *DSM-IV* symptoms for ADHD, ODD, and CD were identified significantly more often in 7- to 14-year-old girls.

> **It is possible that an emotionally dysregulated girl may react to a social interaction using direct relational aggression if she interprets the cues from the interaction to be threatening.**

Xie et al. (2002) state that social aggression (nonconfrontational) requires a social network, while direct relational aggression (confrontational) is didactic in nature. The social responses of direct relational aggression that Xie et al. describe also appear to be reactive in nature, as well as confrontational. It is possible that an emotionally dysregulated girl may react to a social interaction using direct relational aggression if she interprets the cues from the interaction to be threatening. If so, additional research that measures emotional regulation and both social aggression and direct relational aggression in children needs to be performed to gain a deeper understanding of these complex relations. In summary, before we can develop effective nursing interventions to prevent relational aggression, we need to more fully understand the concept of relational aggression and its psychopathology.

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