

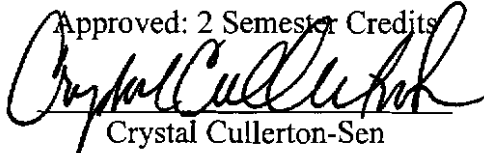
The Connection between Relational
Aggression and Popularity

by

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A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master of Science in Education Degree
in

School Psychology

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

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August, 2007

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Title: *The Connection between Relational Aggression and Popularity*

Graduate Degree/ Major: Master of Science in Education/School Psychology

Research Adviser: Crystal Cullerton-Sen, Ph.D.

Month/Year: August, 2007

Number of Pages: 25

Style Manual Used: American Psychological Association, 5th edition

ABSTRACT

This research project reviewed the relevant literature on relational aggression among adolescents and school-age children and its connection with popularity as well as other contributing factors. The research in the area of relational aggression is new, so all of the components and mechanisms that contribute to relational aggression are just beginning to be understood and studied. At this point, the research does yield findings that suggest a high prevalence rate of relational aggression among adolescents and long-term physical adjustment and emotional problems caused by being the aggressor and the victim of relational aggression. The research also demonstrates that adolescents who are well-liked by their peers are less likely to use relational aggression than adolescents who are rated as well-known or popular by their peers. The research is not conclusive in many areas, but the current research showed profound negative affects of relational aggression for children and adolescents, which is the reason that further research needs to be conducted in this area.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Crystal Cullerton-Sen for all of her hard work, insight, and dedication in helping me write this literature review and expand my knowledge and increase my passion in the area of relational aggression.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Children are the most important part of many people's lives. One of the worst things that a parent or guardian can experience is to witness their child's pain. Today, bullying is a far too common event that occurs in schools and it can have damaging effects on children (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Physical aggression is a form of bullying that can usually be more easily and consistently identified because it involves overt behaviors such as hitting and kicking. On the other hand, relational aggression is typically more difficult to identify because many of the behaviors that are encompassed under the concept of relational aggression are covert. Some of these behaviors include rumor spreading and gossiping (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). Unlike the bruising or scars that are caused by physical aggression, the absence of those marks can make relational aggression harder to detect and identify. Therefore, the scars that are typically left by relational aggression may be harder to detect at face value. Relational aggression can also be more difficult to identify because researchers and practitioners use different definitions and names, to describe relational aggression. For example, although the term relational aggression shares similar features with the terms indirect and social aggression, they are not synonymous. Therefore, school-based practitioners may be confused about what constitutes relationally aggressive behavior.

In this literature review, relational bullying will be used to describe the relationally aggressive behaviors that occur repeatedly over a period of time. Relational bullying involves an imbalance of power in which one student or a group of students bullies another student who is unable to effectively defend him/herself (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). The negative behaviors that are incorporated in relational aggression can be

verbal or nonverbal, and exhibited directly or indirectly, and include damaging intimate and social relationships to hurt one another. These acts can include malevolent gossip, social exclusion (Nixon & Werner, 2005), and can be one in which relational bullying occurs. Research on both relational bullying and relational aggression are necessarily incorporated in this review.

The research on relational aggression is relatively new. The specific factors that predict and contribute to relational aggression are not well understood. Further research is needed in this area because relational aggression happens more often than most people may think. An alarmingly large number of children are bullied and this form of aggression can have damaging effects on its victims. In fact, it is estimated that approximately seventy-five percent of adolescents in the United States have been bullied, either relationally or physically, at one point in time during their education (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). The literature indicates that the effects of relational aggression are negative and hurtful to those who are both aggressors and victims (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005). Relational aggressors are often rejected by their peers and have poorer quality friendships than non-aggressive children (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Victims of relational aggression tend to have more problems with social and psychological adjustment throughout their lifetime than those who do not experience bullying (Nixon & Werner, 2005). Furthermore, relationally aggressive behaviors are absent from most teacher and peer assessment instruments. This has resulted in the failure to identify 60% of aggressive girls and 7% of aggressive boys (Cavell, Henington, Hughes, & Thompson, 1998). Therefore, this issue cannot be ignored and interventions need to take place.

Research also shows an association between relational aggression and popularity (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). In order to understand the relationship between relational aggression and popularity, one must first understand the differences between popularity and social acceptance. Although perceived popularity and social acceptance are very similar, they are not the same. Children perceived as popular are not necessarily well-liked by their peers. Perceived popularity is synonymous with peers identifying a student as being well-known, being in social groups with other students who are well-known, being attractive, athletic, and affluent (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Social acceptance or sociometric popularity is a measure of how well a student is liked by his/her peers. Social acceptance is determined by having peers nominate who their most-liked peers are. Sociometric popularity is different than perceived popularity because sociometrically popular students are always well-liked by their peers, but not always perceived as popular (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

The distinction between sociometric and perceived popularity is important in order to understand children's use of relational aggression and it may be useful in helping school-based practitioners identify which children will be the most likely to use relational aggression. The research suggests that being sociometrically popular is associated with demonstrating positive behaviors toward others, while being perceived as popular has an increased association with both prosocial and aggressive behaviors (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Students who are perceived to be popular are more likely to behave in ways that overpower their peers in order to maintain, achieve, or demonstrate their social status. Interestingly, both physical and relational aggression are commonly associated

with the power and control strategies used by many adolescents who are perceived as popular (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Understanding the associations between popularity and relational aggression is critical because different forms of popularity (i.e., sociometric and perceived popularity) have different implications for children's social development. Whereas children who are sociometrically popular tend to be well-liked and exhibit prosocial behaviors, children who are believed to be popular by peers are well-known for their materialistic possessions that others may be envious of, and they may not always behave in socially appropriate ways. Furthermore, research indicates that relationally aggressive children tend to have higher levels of perceived, but not sociometric popularity (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). It may be that students who uses relational aggression can avoid being identified by their victims, and this anonymity allows a student to maintain his/her social status while using peer relationships to hurt others (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). This form of social manipulation may become viewed by the aggressor as vital in order to maintain the leadership of a popular group.

As children move from childhood to adolescence, they show increases in their use of relational aggression. This is especially true for girls. Furthermore, there appears to be a corresponding increase in children's perceived popularity, but not social acceptance, among children who increasingly use relational aggression among their peers (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). This raises several important questions, such as: What are the developmental changes that occur in adolescence that allow teenagers to become more skillful at manipulating their peers? Why do girls appear to show a higher use of

relational aggression than boys? And, what is it about relational aggression that perhaps controls others or makes them afraid to challenge someone who victimizes them?

Since relational aggression requires aggressors to socially manipulate peer relationships, there appears to be the presence of advanced manipulative and controlling social skills by relational aggressors. Initial research demonstrates a positive association between language development and relational aggression (Biovin, Brendgen, Dionne, & Girard, 2005). This means that as children gain complex language skills, they also may show an increase in the amount of relational aggressive activity in which they participate. Physical aggression, on the other hand, was negatively associated with language development in this study. This means that as language skills and development increase, the amount of physically aggressive acts that students participate in will most likely decrease. However, the connection between relational aggression and language development needs to be further explored.

Statement of the Problem

In schools and within children's friendships, there is an alarming amount of bullying occurring. Specifically, the prevalence of relational aggression is increasing in adolescent youth (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). There is evidence that children who are the victims of relational aggression suffer lasting and harmful effects. However, the exact components and warning signs of relational aggression are not known. Therefore, this literature review will explore several factors related to children's use of relational aggression, specifically prevalence rates, damaging effects, increased use during adolescence, and the connection between popularity. It is hoped that the information provided in this review will help parents, teachers, and school-based practitioners

understand and be better able to identify and decrease the occurrence of relational aggression in schools.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this review is to explore the connections between relational aggression and perceived and sociometric popularity status through a comprehensive literature review. The review of literature will be focused on the research of adolescent children in schools.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this literature review include:

1. Are there benefits for aggressors to using relational rather than physical aggression with their peers?
2. What is the relationship between relational aggression and popularity in adolescence?

Definitions of Terms

A list of frequently used terms throughout the literature review that needed to be explicitly understood in order to fully comprehend the research is included.

Language development is the ability to use words in a manner that conveys meaning and understanding to the intended audiences.

Perceived popularity is the identification by peers of students who are well-known, in social groups with other students whom are well-known, attractive, athletic, and/or affluent.

Sociometric popularity is the identification by peers of how well-liked a student is according to his/her peers.

Relational aggression is direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal acts that intentionally damage intimate and social relationships to hurt others. These acts include malevolent gossip, social exclusion, and social isolation.

Relational bullying is any negative behavior, in which an individual uses the relationship as the vehicle of harm, occurs repeatedly over a period of time, and usually involves an imbalance of power in which one student or a group of students bullies another student who is unable to effectively defend him/herself.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Particular attention will be paid to the connection between children's use of relational aggression and their popularity among peers. Large numbers of children are bullied each year, and those experiences can have long-term, negative effects, in terms of children's emotional and physical health and development. Relational aggression is one form of bullying experienced by many children. Relational aggression is direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal acts that intentionally damage intimate and social relationships to hurt others. These acts include malevolent gossip, social exclusion, and social isolation. Research suggests inconsistent findings regarding issues of dominance within relationships during the occurrence of relational aggression. However, there is evidence that children begin to practice using relational aggression with their siblings before they use it with their friends. Relational aggression has also been shown to occur in highly intimate relationships and is related to one's perceived popularity. This chapter includes a discussion about what is currently known about relational aggression in adolescence.

Prevalence Rates, Damaging Effects, and Who uses Relational Aggression

Prevalence rates. It is estimated that approximately 75% of adolescents have been victims of some form of bullying during their schooling. Also, almost 30% of early adolescents experience more frequent and intense bullying in school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004).

To understand the types of bullying experienced by many adolescents, Juvonen and Nishina (2005) distributed questionnaires to sixth-grade students in Los Angeles-

based schools. The students were randomly selected and were asked to rate their feelings before they were questioned about peer aggression. Research showed that 46% of students reported personally experiencing peer harassment and 42% of the students reported having witnessed peer bullying. Fifty-two percent of the total incidents reported included some form of verbal bullying such as name-calling, rumor spreading, or social exclusion. Only 23% of the incidents included some form of physical aggression (Juvonen & Nishina, 2005). The findings from Juvonen and Nishina also suggested that more than half of the students in their study reported personal encounters with peer bullying and the most frequent form of bullying involved verbal aggression. The verbal aggression category included commonly associated behaviors of relational aggression such as rumor spreading.

Damaging effects. The alarming occurrence of relational aggression indicated by previous studies (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004) raises great concern. The harmful effects of aggression, particularly relational aggression, have been highlighted by the media to be on the rise during recent years (Horn, 2004). Victimization by bullies is associated with numerous adjustment problems throughout a victim's lifespan (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). The findings from DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) also suggested that children and adolescents who are victims or perpetrators of relational aggression are at significant risk for experiencing social and psychological adjustment problems throughout their lifespan.

The findings from Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) suggested that effects of relational victimization included: headaches, stomachaches, loss of appetite, disruption in the sleep cycle, depression, and possible regression to childhood behaviors such as anxiety when meeting strangers and bed-wetting. Research also showed that a little more

than 20% of children reported feeling physically sick after having experienced an episode of bullying, which included relational bullying. They also concluded that school nurses can and should help identify what children experience after they are bullied in order to help meet the psychological needs of these students (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004).

Not only has research demonstrated that relational aggression can cause physical and adjustment problems, but the findings from Loeber, McReynolds, Miller, Tiet, and Wasserman (2001) also suggested that the use of relational aggression in childhood predicts social adjustment problems later on in school for girls, but not for boys.

For some children, witnessing bullying among peers may be as harmful as experiencing it themselves. Juvonen and Nishina (2005) found that the negative effects of witnessing bullying behaviors among children, including relational forms, included: experiencing social withdrawal, feelings of loneliness, depression, and lower self-esteem.

Gender differences. The research that has been conducted on the prevalence rates and harmful effects of relational aggression has been far more conclusive than the findings on which gender, male or female, uses relational aggression more often. The work conducted by Juvonen and Nishina (2005) illustrated that girls reported more incidents of verbal aggression and boys reported more acts of physical aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (1996) also found evidence that showed that relationally aggressive behaviors were more often shown among girls than boys. However, the findings from DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) indicated that the relationally aggressive behaviors appeared to occur at the same rate in both males and females (DeHart & Stauffacher, 2006). The research thus far is inconsistent regarding a gender difference in the use of relational aggression.

To further complicate the research findings on the use of relational aggression according to gender, Loeber et al. (2001) suggested that different forms of aggression were used by males and females. Loeber et al. (2001) conducted a longitudinal study with 109 families at Columbia University. The families were selected for children who were at risk for developing antisocial behavior according to their family history. The mothers of the families were asked to give behavioral reports on their children using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). The children who were rated ranged in age from four to 18 years. The items on the CBCL included questions related to conduct problems and were ranked from zero to two with zero corresponding with not true and two associated with very true. The conduct problems included the following categories of antisocial behaviors: stealing, lying, physical aggression, relational aggression, impulsivity, and substance use. The results showed that boys were rated as significantly more physically aggressive than girls. The results also indicated that there was not a significant difference in the occurrence of stealing, lying, relational aggression, and substance use for girls compared to boys. Conduct problems were found to be more frequent in boys, but more pervasive in girls. This means that although conduct problems may be identified more often in boys, for girls who display conduct problems, these behaviors are more all-encompassing, invasive, and persistent. The lack of gender differences may be due, in part, to the ways in which relational aggression was assessed by the CBCL.

Being able to identify. Given that the use of relational aggression has such profound and damaging effect on its victims and that it occurs too frequently, it is important for adults and students to be able to identify relational aggression accurately. Victims of bullying are not always easily identified and sometimes these students are

embarrassed to tell adults about their experiences (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) suggested that school nurses may be likely to be the most accurate at identifying students who are bullied. Specifically, Raskauskas and Stoltz proposed that school nurses would be in the best position to recognize victims of relational aggression. School nurses may be the first to identify some of the warning signs of relational aggression such as increased absences from school. To examine the extent to which students realized that they are victims of relational aggression, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) conducted a pilot study. A survey was given to 116 eighth-grade girls. The surveys contained four vignettes which portrayed instances of social exclusion, rumor spreading, gossiping, or other forms of relational aggression. The students then indicated whether the girl in the vignette was or was not a relational bully. The results showed there was confusion among the girls as to which forms of relational aggression they considered to be bullying. More than 80% of the girls did not believe that social exclusion was a form of bullying. However, almost 95% of the participants believed that rumor spreading and gossip were forms of bullying and had long-lasting negative effects on self-esteem and reputation. The study by Raskauskas and Stoltz (2004) suggests that relational aggression can be confusing and undetectable to students. If students have difficulties identifying relational aggression, then the adults that interact with students may also have the same difficulties.

Relational aggression, links to development, and sibling and peer relationships.

During adolescence, peers become increasingly important to youth. As a result, adolescents may engage in behaviors that help them establish and maintain friendships. However the means children use to maintain friendships may not always be positive. In

fact, some studies suggest that children use relational aggression as a means to control their friendships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). This results in different types of relationships, such as controlling friendships that foster negative or harmful behaviors. In order to have the ability to use relational aggression in friendships, children may need to master these behaviors first in childhood.

Before it is possible to understand why adolescents use relational aggression, it is important to learn how children develop the skills necessary to utilize relational aggression. Evidence suggests that children may practice using many different skills, such as bullying, within the family context in order to perfect those skills before they use them with peers. DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) suggested that children often practiced using and developing relationally aggressive techniques in sibling relationships before they applied it to their peers in a social context. In order to explore the developmental changes in children and the use of relational aggression, DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) conducted a longitudinal study with 63 middle to upper-class families in New York. They videotaped the children of these families playing together once per week and then they videotaped one of the siblings playing with a friend. The videotaped play sessions were then reviewed and the interactions were recorded as either falling into a cooperative or relationally aggressive category. DeHart and Stauffacher (2006) found that children's use of relational aggression changed with age and with the type of playing partner. The results showed that during early childhood, children rarely used relational aggression with their friends, but displayed high levels of this form of aggression with their siblings. However, as children developed into middle childhood, their skill in using relational

aggression grew and they increasingly portrayed this type of aggression with their friends.

Findings on children's increased use of relational aggression amongst peers have been demonstrated elsewhere. For example, some researchers have found that children's reliance on relationally manipulative behaviors increases over the school year (Crick, Murray-Close, & Ostrov, 2007). Furthermore, unlike children's use of physical aggression, children's use of relational aggression appears to continue to increase from middle childhood into adolescence (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

In order to help teachers and school-based practitioners accurately identify relational aggression, it may be helpful to understand why this form of aggression is appealing to adolescent children. The advantage of using relational aggression, as opposed to other forms, is that it may allow the adolescents who use it to keep out of trouble and maintain their social relationships, whereas physical aggression makes it difficult for students to do either (Nixon & Werner, 2005). Compared to physical aggression, relational aggression can be delivered indirectly, such as through spreading rumors over instant messaging to the targets' friends, but not the target. Therefore, the use of relational aggression may allow adolescents to gain power or hurt a peer and avoid getting immediately caught or damaging their social reputation.

Holding beliefs that aggression is an acceptable response to others' behaviors may lead to adolescents' continued use of aggressive behavior. Indeed, researchers have found that children's beliefs about aggression and the manner in which they processed social information predicted their aggressive behavior as rated by themselves, their peers, and their teachers (Nixon & Werner, 2005). The authors suggested that when children

personally believed that aggression was acceptable, they were more likely to interpret responses from others as hostile and negative, and they responded in an aggressive manner. This process of negatively interpreting incoming information from others as hostile was referred to as deviant social information processing. Nixon and Werner (2005) examined the relationship between such beliefs about the use of aggression and relational aggression in adolescents. Nixon and Werner (2005) assessed adolescent's beliefs about the acceptability of, as well as, their own use of relational aggression among 122 seventh and eighth-grade girls in the northeastern region of the United States. The results showed that students who viewed relational aggression as an acceptable form of aggression reported themselves as using relational aggression more frequently than those who did not believe that the use of relational aggression was acceptable. Taken together, relational aggression has been shown to escalate during adolescence, and peer status, peer approval, and a sense of belonging were all important issues for children at that age.

Another important finding that aids in the understanding of the problem of aggression is the type of friendships associated with overt and relational aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (1996) studied 315 12 year-olds' peer relationships and assessed these relationships in terms of the quality of those friendships. Specifically, the use of relational aggression within friendships, the level of intimacy, and the importance of the quality of best friendships were assessed using self-report instruments. Crick and Grotpeter (1996) used an assessment instrument called the Friendship Qualities Measure (FQM) to evaluate peer relationships in their study. The results showed that children who used relational aggression in their peer relationships did not differ from their peers who were not aggressive on the following friendship qualities: validation, caring,

companionship, and recreation. However, results showed that relationally aggressive children were more likely than non-relationally aggressive peers to have very intimate and exclusive friendships. That is, friendships in which there is a combination of both high levels of self-disclosure and jealousy may allow these children to easily use this type of aggression within their intimate peer group. Interestingly, the results also showed that children who used relational aggression did not use a large amount of self-disclosure with their friends, but they reported receiving a lot of self-disclosure from them. The results for children who engaged in overt aggression were much different. The findings from Crick and Grotpeter (1996) suggested that physically aggressive children used their aggression to hurt their peers outside of their friendships but not within them like relationally aggressive children did. In addition, the friendships of physically aggressive children were not characterized as having high levels of intimacy, a finding that is in contrast to the high levels of intimacy found in relationally aggressive relationships.

Relational Aggression and Popularity

Although the literature yields some contradictory evidence regarding a gender-dominant use of relational aggression, there does seem to be an increased use of relational aggression by adolescent girls. The findings from Nixon and Werner (2005) and Talbott (1997) indicate that girls showed an increased use of relational aggression during adolescence, whereas boys did not exhibit this pattern. In fact, by seventh grade, the early stages of adolescence, there is almost a disappearance of physical aggression in girls (Talbott, 1997). One possible explanation for adolescent girls' increase in the use of relational aggression is that, compared to boys, they may be motivated to obtain peer acceptance and approval within their social relationships. Thus, girls may use relational

aggression as a means of making greater social connections with others and thereby attempt to meet their needs for intimacy and closeness (Rose & Rudolf, 2006).

Closely related to adolescent girls' desire to gain and maintain peer acceptance is the importance of social networks (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Therefore, the relationship between relational aggression and popularity has been explored. The findings from Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) indicated that some aggressive youths were viewed as popular by their peers. Perceived popularity is defined as being well-known by peers, viewed as attractive, and having monetary possessions that are desired by peers (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). Adolescents can behave in ways that intentionally hurt their peers in order to gain control of their peers and attain or maintain their perceived popularity. Findings also suggested that students who used relational aggression were more likely to remain unidentified as being a bully and increase their social reputation (Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004).

However, overt or physical aggression did not have the same effect as relational aggression on popularity. Physical aggression tended to harm social status, similar to sociometric popularity, which is how well a student is liked, not perceived. Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) suggested that in order for the use of relational aggression to positively affect peer relations, adolescent aggressors must use emotional control and have a deep understanding of social relationships. Six-hundred and seven third through ninth graders were asked to nominate peers who they felt were popular. The results showed that seventh and ninth-grade girls and boys who used both relational and physical aggression were more frequently nominated by their peers as being popular. The use of

relational aggression also predicted an increase in perceived popularity throughout late adolescent schooling.

In order to gain a further understanding about the relationship between relational aggression and popularity in adolescence, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) studied 905 children in fifth through ninth grades from northeastern cities. The students all completed sociometric assessments of their peers. The questions for the sociometric assessment measured whom students liked the most and who they liked the least. In this study, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) discriminated between sociometric and perceived popularity. Sociometric popularity was assessed by peer nominations of who was most and least liked. This provided an overall indication of how well liked a student was. Perceived popularity, on the other hand, did not always indicate how well liked a child was, but how well known that person was. Sociometrically popular children were characterized as being kind, trustworthy, cooperative, and displayed positive social skills (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). However, students who were perceived as being highly popular were viewed as dominant, arrogant, and physically and relationally aggressive. In summary, sociometrically popular students tended to behave in prosocial ways, whereas perceived popular students tended to behave antisocially.

Unfortunately, children who were perceived as being popular were the most influential and well-known throughout their grade, not the students who were sociometrically popular. The findings from Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) suggested that physical and relational aggression were linked with perceived popularity in adolescence. Both physical and relational aggressors indicated some form of dominance and manipulation. Students who had the ability to control their social relationships, even in

antisocial ways, were able to maintain the top position in their social group. The results also indicated that perceived popularity was more stable than sociometric popularity and that perceived popularity was more stable among girls than boys. The results also showed that relational aggression was consistently predictive of perceived popularity, especially for girls, but not predictive of sociometric popularity. Based on this work, it seems that adolescents tend to accept aggressive behaviors in peers who have high social status, which in turn, may reinforce the antisocial behaviors of those who are perceived as being popular.

Researchers have since examined the relationship between perceived and sociometric popularity, aggression, and performance in school (Gorman, McKay, Nakamoto, & Schwartz 2006). Gorman et al. (2006) studied 342 adolescents from Los Angeles. The popularity and social acceptance of these students was assessed through peer ratings. The peer nomination ratings included questions that indicated how popular each of the peers was on a scale that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very popular). The results showed that adolescents who displayed high levels of aggression had high ratings in popularity, had a decline in their grade point average (GPA), and an increase in unexplained absences from school. Students who showed low levels of aggression did not show the same correlation between popularity, increased absences from school, and a decline in GPA. Students who ranked high in sociometric popularity were also characterized as being high achieving. The authors also suggested that being socially accepted by peers in adolescence increased a student's motivation and interest in school. Sociometrically popular students were classified as being friendly, responsible, and skilled in the social domain. However, perceived popularity among adolescents was not

clearly related to the positive academic characteristics that sociometric popularity was. Perceived popularity was associated with both prosocial and aggressive behaviors. Gorman et al. (2006) indicated that the effects of being perceived as popular and being socially accepted were not the same. Popularity had risks associated with it such as an increase in relational and overt aggression, risky behaviors during adolescence, alcohol use, and academic difficulties. These findings replicated those of other studies which have also shown that students who were reported to be highly aggressive and rated as popular by their peers did not achieve as highly as their non aggressive peers.

Currently, there is only one known published study that has examined adolescents' use of relational aggression and language development. Initial research demonstrated a positive association between language development and relational aggression (Biovin, Brendgen, Dionne, & Girard, 2005). This means that as children gain complex language skills, they also may show an increase in the amount of relational aggressive activity in which they participate. Physical aggression, on the other hand, was negatively associated with language development in this study. This means that as language skills and development increase, the amount of physically aggressive acts that students participate in will most likely decrease. However, the connection between relational aggression and language development needs to be further explored.

Summary of the Current Literature

Accumulating evidence suggests that relational aggression is a problem among youth. Adolescents appear to be greatly affected by this form of aggression, in part, because of their increased concern with their social status. Using relational aggression with their peers apparently allows children to have power over and manipulate their

peers, as well as maintain their popularity and stay out of trouble. The literature suggested that advanced social and language skills were needed in order to be able to competently use relational aggression in a manner that yielded positive effects for the aggressors, in terms of their popularity, but may at the same time make them vulnerable to a host of social-emotional and academic difficulties.

Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature shows that relational aggression among students, and particularly among adolescents, is a problem. Adolescents are likely affected by this form of aggression because it can damage their status with their peers, which is of great importance to them. Using relational aggression with their peers may allow children to manipulate and control their peers while maintaining their popularity. Rose, Swenson, and Waller (2004) indicated that some students who are relational aggressors are also perceived as highly popular by their peers. The literature also indicates that advanced social skills are needed in order to be able to competently use relational aggression in a manner that yields positive effects for the aggressors. However, the association between language development skills and relational aggression needs to be further explored. Boivin, Brendgen, Dionne, and Girard (2005) suggested that language development and relational aggression are positively correlated.

Relational Aggression and Language Development

Research on the relation between relational aggression and popularity status indicated that adolescents who used relational aggression may do so to gain power or maintain a high social status. Some of the literature suggested that students needed to have a solid understanding of social skills, which includes having and using language skills that allow relationships to be easily established and maintained in a desirable way. Social competence is needed in order to use relational aggression. Although the association between language development and relational aggression has not been studied extensively, findings from Boivin, Brendgen, Dionne, and Girard (2005) suggested that

there was a positive relationship between language development and relational aggression. This means that the more developed language skills that children have, the more likely they would be to use relational aggression. In contrast, the less developed language skills, including receptive, expressive, and pragmatic skills, that children have, the less likely they would be to utilize relational aggression.

Critical Analysis of the Literature Review

The findings from this literature review provide an initial step in understanding some of the factors that relate to children's use of relational aggression. Specifically, it appears that in order to help adolescents, we must consider the social context in which relational aggression occurs, as well as the function it serves. It appears that for some children, particularly those who lack "true acceptance" by their peers and are viewed as dominant, relational aggression may serve to provide them with a form of social status that is only "skin deep." It would be important for future research to examine the extent to which perceived popular adolescents experience long-lasting, rewarding relationships.

Despite this knowledge, the exact causes and results of relational aggression cannot be stated or completely understood, so the findings that were given should be examined with that understanding. The research findings are also not conclusive to the list of factors that contribute to relational aggression, so some components, such as language development, may or may not play a pivotal role in relational aggression. Research needs to be further conducted to explore this topic to draw the most valid results possible.

The research also contains contradictions regarding the higher prevalence of relational aggression in girls or an equal rate of occurrence in both males and females.

For example, Crick and Grotpeter (1996) stated in their research that girls showed a higher rate of using relational aggression than boys. However, Loeber, McReynolds Miller, Tiet, and Wasserman (2001) found no sex differences for relational aggression. This confounding empirical evidence suggests that further research needs to be conducted in order to draw solid conclusions about the prevalence rate of relational aggression being higher in girls or being equal among both sexes. There is some evidence to suggest that the problems associated with relational aggression are more prevalent among girls than boys.

Recommendations from the Analysis

After analyzing the results of the research conducted thus far on relational aggression, it is recommended that further research be carried out to increase the understanding of the topic and its components since it has been shown to have negative and long-lasting damaging effects on children. Some of the questions regarding why relational aggression is appealing and used by some children and adolescents begs the question, what are the qualities of the typical peer relationship for children who use relational aggression? What skills do relational aggressors have in terms of being able to establish and maintain friendships that allow them to control and manipulate others? What interventions could be provided to adolescents who use relational aggression in order to help them establish more positive and emotionally healthy long-term friendships? What, if any, are the warning signs or “typical” characteristics that school-based practitioners can use to identify relational aggressors and their victims? These questions need to be answered so that children and adolescents who use relational aggression can be understood by school-based practitioners in order for these

professionals to provide interventions and skill training in areas that relational aggressors lack adequate competence in. School-based practitioners are limited in their understanding of relational aggression and need to use caution when making recommendations concerning relational aggression to other school-based practitioners, teachers, and students. However, school-based practitioners knowledgeable in the area of relational aggression can and should educate their colleagues about the difference between a student who is well-liked and one that is popular and the importance of this distinction regarding which students may be more likely to use relational aggression with their peers. Also, information can be passed to other school-based practitioners on the possible academic difficulties that research has linked to students who are viewed as popular. Again, the students who are viewed as popular by their peers are more likely to use relational aggression. Finally, school-based practitioners who are knowledgeable about relational aggression can and should educate students and staff about the negative effects associated with using relational aggression and being popular. All of this knowledge can and should be passed on to other school-based practitioners and students in hopes of being able to identify relational aggressors more quickly and easily and creating a more positive climate in the schools.

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