Relational Aggression: A Review of the Current Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the current literature on relational aggression, including what schools can do about it and ideas for professional school counselors. By reviewing a number of articles, each was evaluated for practicality, applications, and how it addressed gaps in the current literature. Research indicates that relational aggression is typically used by girls, and is considered a problem by many adolescents. Longitudinal studies on the results of early intervention (fifth grade and younger) have not been done; however, peer counseling and a systemic program that encompasses teacher and parent education seem to have been met with the most success. Future studies will need to address success rates of specific programs in order to better guide implementation.

2010 was a year of several tragic "bully-cides," where young people fell victim to the cruelty of their peers and committed suicide. As a result, significant pressure is being placed upon schools to take action against bullying. Many school districts are experimenting with prevention and intervention techniques aimed at tackling bullying, with varying degrees of success. An abundance of research about physical bullying exists; and an increasing amount of attention is now paid to relational aggression. This study reviews the current literature on relational aggression and identifies successful evidence-based practices employed in schools at this point in time. Gaps in the literature are also considered, and implications for future research.

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What is relational aggression?

It is important to define both bullying and relational aggression. For behavior to be considered bullying, it must consist of three parts: intent to harm, repetitious in nature and manipulative of a power differential (Jacobsen & Baumen, 2007). There are considered to be two types of bullying, direct and indirect. This study focuses upon relational aggression, or indirect bullying. Relational aggression can best be defined as "harm within relationships caused by covert bullying or manipulative behavior: (Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton & Young, 2011), p. 25). Relational aggression does not have the overt symptoms of physical violence or direct verbal abuse, making this much harder to witness and report.

Relational aggression has traditionally been associated with girls (for example, the movie *Mean Girls*); however, research appears divided on whether this is a phenomenon for both boys and girls (Leadbeter, Hellner, Allen & Aber (1989).; Coyne & Archer, 2008). It has been considered an appropriate outlet for female aggression, whereas physical aggression is not (Coyne & Archer, 2008). Boys may be less likely to discuss their victimization, due to gender expectations (Leadbeter et al 1989). Studies have demonstrated that relational aggression evolves with age, as tactics become more vindictive and manipulative. This can be especially intense during adolescence, as time spent with a peer group increases (Sullivan & Helms, 2010). However, relational aggression has been detected in children as young as three (Leff, Waasdorp, Paskewich, Gullan, Jawad, MacEvoy, Feinberg & Power, 2010), and arguments do exist that starting a relational aggression prevention program beginning in kindergarten has its merits (Verlaan & Turmel, 2010).

The results of relational aggression for both victims and perpetrators can be widespread. Teacher/student conflict, lack of school engagement and mood and eating disorders are some of the consequences which have been reported (Leff et al., 2010). The 2010 bully-cides are indicators that this problem can have long-lasting, harmful consequences, and the need for increased research is clear.

Victims and Perpetrators

Increasing amounts of research on relational aggression is exploring those most likely to be the victims and perpetrators of relational aggression. Research showed that an adolescent's peer group self-identification affects their tendency to use relational aggression (Pokhrel, Sussman, Black & Sun, 2010). Aggressive adolescents typically surround themselves with other aggressive adolescents, which is of concern due to high levels of social modeling occurring as students enter adolescence and seek out role models (Pokhrelet et al., 2010). Pokhrel et al. (2010) examined this issue in their article by asking students to self-identify to a group (i.e. "Goths," "druggies," "normal/regular," "jock," etc.) and then used a questionnaire to ask questions relating to relational aggression. Their study found that high-risk youths are deemed to rely more upon physical aggression than other youth, while "elite (popular)" youth were deemed to have slightly elevated physical aggression and significantly greater relational aggression. These results can help target students who could benefit from education about relational aggression and alternative solutions to aggressive emotions. Many youths in these groups or those aspiring to be a part of these groups may find themselves using relational aggression in order to "climb the social ladder" (Pokhrel et al., 2010, p. 253). This study provides ample information regarding possible prevention goals for relational aggression. To further contribute to the existing research, they could implement a school guidance program designed to combat relational aggression and then assess the results. This study provides information regarding the sort of needs assessment which would indicate students at risk of being both victims and perpetrators of relational aggression.

Little research was found that discussed the context of relational aggression. Neal (2009) was one of the first to examine the social network surrounding both bullies and victims. Using a social network analysis, she examined the centrality (proportion of relationships a student has with peers) and density (degree to which student's peers are connected to each other) in order to see to what extent popularity impacts relational aggression. By surveying 3rd-8th grades in an urban Midwestern community, she found

that girls were 36% more likely to be relationally aggressive than boys, and that a positive relationship exists between centrality, density and relational aggression. This indicated that the greater level of social context of a student, meaning the more popular they are, the more likely they are to be victims and perpetrators of relational aggression (Neal, 2009). This provides valuable information in regards with directing interventions to students who may be likely to use relational aggression.

Sullivan, Helms, Kliewer and Goodman (2010) explored the relationship between self-reported sadness, anger regulation coping and relational aggression. Research has indicated a positive relationship exists between aggression, psycho-social maladjustment and difficulty managing sadness. Identifying students who are developmentally delayed in this area and providing coping skills and alternative behaviors can help to prevent relational aggression (Sullivan et al, 2010). By designing an assessment that evaluates student's emotional regulation, target groups for intervention can be identified. This study has significance for predicting students who may be bullies, or heading towards bullying behavior, and further research could demonstrate effectiveness in interventions with such students.

Mathieson and Crick (2010) examined the type of relational aggression occurring, and determined different forms could indicate the psycho-social level of perpetrators. They identified four types of aggression including direct, indirect, proactive and reactive. According to Mathieson and Crick (2010), students who displayed reactive relational aggression also had poor emotional regulation, while students who displayed proactive relational aggression had "callous-unemotional traits and positive expectations for outcomes of aggression" (p. 604). One can infer that students who display proactive relational aggression are "socially skilled individuals who have learned how to use relational aggression to achieve social goals" (p.609). Their findings suggest that by identifying the type of aggression, one can design better interventions by knowing more about the psycho-social skills of the perpetrator. Curriculum aimed at remedying deficiencies in these skills could prevent relational aggression.

School Interventions

A significant portion of the literature on relational aggression revolves around the role which schools can play in combating this. Second to families, schools see children almost every day, which puts them in a powerful position to help these students. Hernandez and Seem (2004) stressed the need for a systemic approach, stressing that a school counselor alone cannot deal with this issue. By involving teachers, cafeteria staff, community members and business leaders, the entire system becomes invested in the process. This can create a school climate and community in which students feel safe. The relevance of school climate to academic performance is vital, and "school climate consists of the related factors of attitude, feeling and behavior of individuals within a school system" (Hernandez & Seem, 2004, p. 256). This system-wide approach removes the brunt of responsibility from the school counselor's shoulders, and invokes a team-player atmosphere that research thus far has demonstrated to be successful. A safe school climate consists of context (how school members treat each other), psychosocial variables and school behaviors. School counselors often have to be the leaders of change, and research shows that comprehensive school counseling programs have been shown to positively affect school climate. Hernandez and Seem (2004) promote character education programs and value statements released by the entire school district in order to positively affect the school climate, and in so doing, prevent relational aggression.

Bradshaw, O'Brennan and Sawyer (2008) offered an in depth study of both victims and perpetrators of bullying and their perspective on school belongingness and safety. Their study showed that both groups of students do feel less connected and less safe within their school environment (Bradshaw et al., 2008). This highlights the importance of school climate in preventing relational aggression, which promotes Hernandez's arguments as well. A significant part of a safe school culture is the absence of bullying. As academic expectations of students increase, a student's safety and feeling of security while at school can be deemed vital to their academic success.

A survey of school counselors indicated that counselors with background training in relational aggression recognize it to be as serious as physical bullying, while other school counselors without this training viewed physical bullying as more serious. This represents an important fact. Education around bullying is important for educators as well. Along with this lack of education, relational aggression can be difficult to identify; many students do not report it, and it can be invisible to staff (Jacobson & Baumen, 2007). Including teachers and administrators in this battle against relational aggression will require an education component that will help them to recognize the signs and ways to manage this behavior when it manifests in classrooms and at home. Several articles discussed the phenomenon of teachers not taking action against relational aggression. Verlaan and Turmel (2010) explore possible institutional forces that are in play that prevent adults from taking an active role in combating relational aggression, including an attitude that it happens to everyone, thus students must accept it.

Verlaan and Turmel (2010) participatory action research demonstrates the effectiveness of an integrated program that seeks to educate teachers as well as students. They used a two phase method. The first phase consisted of raising awareness of teachers, parents and students about relational aggression. The second phase revolved around providing alternative behavior responses to relational aggression for all stakeholders involved. Their argument is that teachers need to combat this as well; the battle cannot fall solely on the student's shoulders. While this study did not display significant changes in relational aggression in this elementary school, it did lay the groundwork for future evaluation. Future studies could focus upon longitudinal effects of such a curriculum, and for greater accuracy be based upon observational data rather than self-report. Developing a guidance curriculum that speaks to this issue and teaches students how to respond to relational aggression can help empower students to take a stand.

Leff, Waasdorp and Crick (2010) provide a cursory examination of various relational aggression intervention programs. By breaking down each program and describing the implementation methods and parties involved, they provide excellent

information that one may use at their school. Evaluating six different programs provides the reader with several options from which to choose when deciding which to use in his or her district. This research could stand to benefit from longitudinal studies showing the impact of these programs on victims and perpetrators, and the success rates as they relate to demographics of different schools.

Peer support has been used frequently as a method of coping with both direct and indirect aggression which are the "activities and systems within which children and young people's potential to help one another can be fostered through appropriate training" (Houlston & Smith, 2009, p.75). However, there is a dearth of information on success of such programs. A peer counseling program used in England was found to increase peer support when relational aggression occurred, although the incidents of relational aggression did not decrease. This could be a way to increase adolescent girl's self-esteem, which can serve as a protective factor from using relational aggression in the future. While peer counseling has not been shown to reduce bullying, it did seem to increase the support system which victims of relational aggression had access to, thus creating better coping skills and alleviating some of the emotional damage relational aggression can cause (Houlston & Smith, 2009).

Scarce amounts of literature discussed the need for consequences for perpetrators of relational aggression. Some authors suggest contacting perpetrator's parents, although there was no research on success rates of continued bullying after this attempt (Hemphill, Kotevski, Herrenkohl, Bond, Kim, Toumbourou & Catalano, 2011). Additionally, informing victim's parents and reporting instances of relational aggression to higher authority, such as police, administration, etc. has been demonstrated to have a greater effect at combating relational aggression (Jacobson & Baumen, 2007).   Further investigation into consequences for bullies which succeed in reducing future bullying would be beneficial to this field of study.

Cyber-Bullying

An upcoming issue, and one we are bound to see more research revolving around, is the role which cyber-bullying plays in relational aggression. Cyber-bullying, which uses technologies including e-mail, texting and social networking to harm others is an increasing problem as technology becomes more widespread (Chibarro, 2007). Chibarro (2007) indicates that cyber-bullying is the leading form of harassment found in 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. This method of bullying can take the form of direct and indirect, and the difficulty for schools is identifying when this is occurring. Research indicates that schools ought to develop a policy involving cyber-bullying. Franek (2006) describes one that forbids any form of cyber-bullying which occurs during and after school hours. Cyber-bullying has been found to occur more frequently with girls than with boys; however, with both genders it is deemed to be an increasing threat (Bradshaw et al., 2008).

Parents and Relational Aggression

Several of the articles discussed how parent's perceptions of relational aggression can affect their children's attitudes towards being both victims and perpetrators. Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2009) examined the relationship between parent's beliefs of relational aggression and their child's subsequent coping skills. These authors believe that there is a relationship, and that parents can model healthy interpersonal connections. Adults can often minimize responses to relational aggression, believing it is a common occurrence for adolescents to experience (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2009). Adults tend to take physical violence more seriously than relational aggression, which can have implications in combating this event (Werner & Grant, 2009). There is little research available on the impact that families can have as protective factors in coping with relational aggression, and is an area in which future research could lead.

Negative Side Effects

Many of the authors cite examples of the negative effects of relational aggression. Some authors stressed immediate concerns, such as attendance

problems, school transfers, bulimia, acting out, and a decrease in school performance in addition to long term effects (Hemphill et al., 2011). Bullying has been shown to cause a decrease in academic performance, thus the importance of combating relational aggression becomes even more important (Young et al., 2011). When considering implementing a guidance curriculum that addresses relational aggression, one must determine the most effective program available. Many researchers suggest a systemic approach to combating bullying, one that involves teachers, students, counselors, parents and community members (Young, Hardy, Hamilton, Biernesser, Sun & Niebergall, 2009). The role which school counselors can play is that of a leader, counselor and educator. The need for guidance curriculum addressing what constitutes bullying and relational aggression and how to combat these is clear. Young et al., (2009) studied a middle school in Northern Virginia, and data collected during one year indicated that 94% of seventh graders and 48% of eighth graders had been bullies, and 95% of seventh graders and 72% of eighth graders responded not knowing how to handle both direct and indirect aggression. What is perhaps even more alarming is that 56% of teachers at this school believed bullying was not a problem (Young, Hardy et al., 2009). School counselors at this school put together a guidance curriculum educating students about relational aggression, and steps they may take to cope with it. An anonymous website was set up for students to report bullying, as often students do not want to report it for fear of retaliation. This program had the greatest success rate of the literature surveyed, showing a 43% decrease in bullying behavior as a result of this program.

Multiculturalism and Relational Aggression

There was limited research on multicultural relational aggression. Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2009) use a sample group of African-American students in their study about relational aggression and parents. Research has demonstrated that minority students are more apt to be both victims and perpetrators of bullying in general; however, they do have increased odds of reporting that rumors/lies had been spread about them.

Minority students do report similarly to white students in regards to feeling as though they are safe and belong at their school (Bradshaw et al., 2008).

The research concerning gay and lesbian youth and relational aggression was quite limited. Kelley and Robertson (2008) conducted a study to determine if a relationship exists between internalized homophobia and relational aggression in gay male peer relationships, and results indicated a positive relationship exists. The greater implications this has on gay youth have not been studied, and longitudinal data was lacking.

Conclusion

Overall, research indicates that a system-wide approach to relational aggression is key; however, challenges manifest in a lack of parent and educator knowledge about this type of bullying. Interventions which address educating not only students but other stakeholders as well have been met with the most success in reducing relational aggression incidents. Further research ought to involve assessing the success of specific programs; this would be the most helpful to educators in order to determine which programs might match their populations. Additionally, the designing of programs which assess students at a younger age for their risk level of using relational aggression can help to further alleviate this problem. At this point, much of the research discussed characteristics of those who might use relational aggression, and designing survey instruments to identify these students younger would help to combat this form of bullying.

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