Some Predictors of Relational Aggression in College-Aged Females

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Relational aggression is a ubiquitous part of social behavior. It is generally defined as a behavior that is meant to hurt others by damaging their reputation, friendships, and inclusion into social groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relationally aggressive behavior includes purposely excluding people from a peer group to retaliate against them, ending a friendship with others to gain power, and spreading rumors about others intentionally to ruin their friendships and social connections. Due to the implicitness and ambiguity of the construct, historically relational aggression had been studied much less than other more overt and explicit forms of aggression. However, a recent rise in suicides among school-aged children who were targets of gossip has sparked an increase in the research of relational aggression.

One consistent result in previous research is that females generally use relational aggression more than males and also more than any other form of aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005). From the time this has been established, researchers have been interested in finding out exactly what biological, psychological, and social conditions were most closely involved with females’ relationally aggressive behavior. A wide range of constructs have been measured in association with relational aggression (Murray-Close, Ostrov, Nelson, Crick, Coccaro, 2010). One common explanation for relationally aggressive behavior among females deals with gender role identity. Bem (1974) theorized that societies have a gender schema which is a set of social and behavioral norms within a specific culture that are widely considered to be appropriate for individuals of a specific gender. Research suggests that at a very young age, children are socialized to think that masculinity is traditionally related to independence and being instrumental (getting the job done) while femininity is traditionally related to nurturance and maintaining strong social relationships (Bem, 1981). Bem (1976) believed that people vary on how much they identify with traditional traits of masculinity and femininity; for example, girls who see themselves
as being traditionally feminine match their preferences, opinions, behaviors, and personal attributes with their societies’ traditional feminine gender schema more so than girls who identify themselves as being masculine or androgynous. Therefore, gender identity may play a significant role in determining people’s behavior.

Gender role theorists suggest that it is not a traditionally accepted norm for girls to overtly show signs of anger and physical confrontation because they are “expected to maintain harmonious relationships with others” (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005, p. 349). Thus, girls with traditional feminine gender identities are more likely to use more covert forms of aggression. In order to test this theory, in the past, researchers have virtually all used the same correlational design. However, the results of these studies have been inconsistent. Crothers et al. gave 52 ninth and tenth-grade girls the Relational Aggression Scale (RAS), the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), and conducted individual/group interviews. The researchers found that the girls that followed a more traditional female gender role were more likely to use relational aggression than the girls that followed a more nontraditional gender role. This finding was consistent with the researchers’ hypothesis although it contradicted the results found in other related research (Dickinson, 2007). Therefore Kolbert, Field, Crothers, and Schrieber (2010) conducted a similar correlational study with a larger sample in order to gain some insight on whether femininity does, in fact, positively relate to relational aggression. The researchers gave 697 college girls the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the BSRI, and the Young Adult Social Behavior Scale (YASB). The researchers found no significant correlation between feminine gender identity and amount of relational aggression. Clearly, due to the inconsistency of the current research, more research is needed to help clarify the relationship between femininity and gender roles.

One possible explanation for the inconsistent data involving femininity and relational aggression is that since femininity is associated with maintaining close social relationships, highly feminine girls
would oppose the use of relational aggression which aims to destroy others’ social relationships. This hypothesis is supported by previous research that shows that men and women both rate relational aggression by females as being less acceptable and more harmful than relational aggression by males (Basow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2007). Overall, the above research indicates that high levels of femininity may encourage the use of relational aggression in some girls and discourage the use of relational aggression in others. Some other variable may, consequently, play a significant role in the use of relational aggression among girls.

One major aspect missing from the research involving gender roles and relational aggression is the measurement of social desirability. Social desirability deals with people’s need to be viewed favorably by others (Marlow & Crowne, 1961). People who are high in social desirability often misrepresent themselves on self-report measures through an exaggeration of good behaviors and attributes while understating bad behaviors and attributes. None of the studies involving femininity and relational aggression take social desirability into account. This could significantly affect the external validity of the previous research. Specifically, it is possible that girls who are high in femininity and high in social desirability underreport their use of relational aggression in order to be viewed by the researchers as unaggressive, feminine girls.

Research on the correlation between femininity and social desirability has yielded contradicting results. McCann, Stewin, and Short (1991) studied the correlations between sex differences, social desirability, masculinity, and femininity. The researchers gave 145 university students the Crowne-Marlow Social Desirability Scale, the BSRI, the Trait Anxiety Scale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and a demographic survey. The researchers found no significant correlation between social desirability and femininity. This contradicts the results found by Marsh, Antill, and Cunningham (1987), which examined how femininity and masculinity were related to self-esteem and social desirability. They gave
133 women and 104 men who were students at a university, five Masculinity/Femininity surveys, two self-esteem surveys, and two social desirability surveys. The researchers found that, overall, social desirability was more strongly correlated to femininity than masculinity.

The inconsistency in the previous literature warrants further research. The inclusion of a social desirability measure in a study involving femininity and relational aggression could help explain the connections between these two constructs. The measurement of social desirability may also clarify the association between two other related constructs: depression and childhood maltreatment. Previous research has shown that relationally aggressive actions may predict depressive symptoms (Crick & Grotspeter, 1995; Storch, Bagner, Geffken, and Baumeister (2004). Crick et al. (1995) found that girls who used relational aggression were more likely to be depressed than were relationally aggressive boys. Storch et al. (2004) tested the relationship between overt and relational aggression, social anxiety, loneliness, depressive symptoms, and substance use/abuse in a sample of 287 undergraduate college students. For women, overt aggression predicted social anxiety, loneliness, and depressive symptoms. Relational aggression was a significant predictor of social anxiety, loneliness, depression, alcohol use, and drug problems. Both types of aggression were found to be significant predictors of depressive symptoms in college women. However, it is possible that high levels of femininity could potentially have an indirect effect upon depression by predisposing highly feminine girls to relationally aggressive behavior. It is unclear whether femininity, relational aggression, or some extraneous variable plays a greater role in depression rates among females. Relational aggression, femininity, and depression have often been studied together in the past; however a separate measurement of social desirability has virtually never been included in the previous research. The inclusion of a social desirability measure could potentially help clarify the interaction between these variables.
A limited amount of research has been conducted on the relationship between childhood maltreatment and relational aggression in adulthood. Murray-Close, Han, Chicchetto, Crick, and Rogosch (2008) studied the relationship between circadian rhythms of cortisol levels and physical and relational aggression. They found that the experience of early stress such as childhood maltreatment produced negative effects on psychobiological development. This stress restricted ways in which individuals dealt with and approached complicated situations such as relational and physical aggression in adulthood. This finding is similar to research done by Cullerton-Sen et al. (2008) and Cummings et al. (1994). Thornberry, Henry, Ireland, & Smith (2010) found that childhood maltreatment was a risk factor for internalizing problems which often predicted drug use, suicidal thoughts, and depressive symptoms in early adult development. One major problem with the previous studies involving childhood maltreatment and relational aggression is that most of the participants have been recruited through clinics and prevention centers rather than from colleges or high schools (i.e. the general public). The proposed study will add to the generalizability of the prior research on relational aggression and childhood maltreatment through the use of college-aged female participants with no apparent, documented cases of childhood abuse.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationships between femininity, social desirability, depression, childhood maltreatment, and relationally aggressive behavior. We predict that females who are the highest in femininity and lowest in social desirability will be the most likely to partake in relationally aggressive behavior. We also hypothesize that females high in relational aggression will report higher levels of depression. Lastly, we hypothesize that females who have been maltreated in childhood will be more likely to be relationally aggressive in adulthood compared to females who were not maltreated as children.
Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 238 female students at the University of Michigan, Flint who were 18 years of age or older. Because previous literature consistently indicates that females are more likely to use relational aggression than males, we were primarily focused on female behavior. Therefore all males were excluded from participating in our study. Since each participant was asked to provide informed consent, anyone under the age of 18 was excluded so that parental consent was not necessary.

Every female student at the university received a recruitment script through the university’s email account. The recruitment script explained who the researchers are, what the purpose of the research was, and what the inclusion/exclusion criteria was for participating in our study. Also, we emphasized the anonymous nature of our study and explained that each female will be compensated with $5 for participating. All participants were treated in accord with APA ethical standards.

Design and Procedure

To test the proposed hypotheses, the researchers conducted a correlational study. Five self-report measures were administered to each qualified participant through an online survey program called Qualtrics. Once each student had confirmed that they met all three inclusion criterions (female, 18 years or older, University of Michigan student) and anonymously agreed to the Informed Consent form, they began taking the surveys. The surveys were programmed together in Qualtrics so that they were able to be taken as one continuous test.

Measures

To measure social desirability, the researchers used the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale. This scale has 33 statements that have each been deemed either socially desirable or socially undesirable but are true for virtually no human being. Sample items include, “No matter who I am talking
to, I am always a good listener,” and “I am always willing to admit when I have made a mistake.” The participants are asked to answer True or False to each of these items. The Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale is a very commonly used measure in psychological research that has shown high levels of internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity (Crowne & Marlowe, 1961).

In order to test for femininity, the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) was used. The BSRI is a 60 item survey that measures how closely people follow gender roles. The survey lists 60 items: 20 that are stereotypically feminine (gentle, warm); 20 that are masculine (aggressive, independent); and 20 that are neutral (jealous, adaptable). Each participant rates how they view themselves on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1= never or almost never to 7= always or almost always. The BSRI is the most commonly used survey by researchers interested in assessing gender roles. The BSRI has been established as having high levels of test-retest reliability and internal consistency (Bem, 1981).

The Young Adult Social Behavior Scale (YASB) was administered to measure the relationally aggressive behavior of the participants. The YASB consists of 69 items used to measure healthy/maladaptive behaviors in relationships or friendships. Fourteen of those items specifically represent relational aggression including, “When I am angry with someone, that person is often last to know,” and “I intentionally exclude friends from activities to make a point to them.” The YASB has been found to yield good internal consistency of at least .70 (Kolbert et al., 2010).

The Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS) is a self-report inventory developed for student populations. It measures maladaptive beliefs and cognitive distortions in order to test levels of depression. The DAS consists of 40 items with each item ranging on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = fully agree; 1 = fully disagree). The total score is the sum of the 40-items with a range of 40–280.

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire is a 28-item self-report retrospective inventory intended to measure abuse and neglect for people ages 12 and older. The CTQ contains five subscales, three assessing
abuse (Emotional, Physical, and Sexual) and two assessing neglect (Emotional and Physical). It is ranked on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) never true, (2) rarely true, (3) sometimes true, (4) often true, and (5) very often true. We operationally defined childhood maltreatment as scores ranging from 75-125 on the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire.

Results

Analysis of the individual correlation coefficients showed that social desirability was positively correlated with femininity ($B = .384$) and negatively correlated with relational aggression ($B = -.292$). Additionally, femininity was not significantly correlated relational aggression ($p = .189$). However, relational aggression was positively correlated with depression scores ($B = .226$). Based on the theoretical constructs of the past research, multiple linear regressions were conducted in order to analyze the dataset. In the first regression, femininity and social desirability were entered as the predictor variables and relational aggression was entered as the outcome variable. The full model showed that the results of femininity and social desirability analyzed together did not significantly predict relational aggression scores ($R^2 = 0.08$). In a follow-up regression, none of the sex-role variables (femininity, masculinity, androgyny) showed to be significantly related to relational aggression ($p = .304, .509, .442$ respectively and $R^2 = .023$). That being said, social desirability alone was significantly negatively correlated with relational aggression ($B = -0.532$). The last regression model involved entering childhood maltreatment and depression as predictors of relational aggression. The correlation between childhood maltreatment and depression was statistically significant with relational aggression ($p = .022, .001$ respectively).

Discussion

The results of the study were varied with some of the hypotheses being only partially supported. First, our hypothesis that females highest in femininity and lowest in social desirability would be the most likely to participate in relational aggression was not fully supported. Femininity was not significantly
correlated with relational aggression. In fact, none of the sex-role variables significantly correlated with relational aggression. Therefore, it is possible that gender roles have no consequences as far as relationally aggressive behavior. However, it is also possible that the BSRI does a poor job of distinguishing between femininity, masculinity, and androgyny. The BSRI was created in 1971 and, therefore, may have items that are inconsistent with the gender socialization of today’s American culture. For example, the BSRI considers independence a masculine characteristic. Although that may have been accurate 40 years ago, today many people may consider independence a gender-neutral trait. Thus, future research should be conscious of these cultural changes and use a more updated measure of gender roles.

That being said, the researchers’ first hypothesis was partially supported by finding that social desirability was negatively correlated with relational aggression. Since femininity did not significantly predict relationally aggressive behavior in any way, the results support the notion that social desirability plays a significant role in females’ relationally aggressive behavior. This finding warrants future research on relational aggression in which social desirability is studied as a separate construct in combination with other variables.

The researchers’ second hypothesis which stated that higher levels of relational aggression would positively correlate with higher levels of depression was supported. Femininity, on the other hand, did not significantly correlate with relational aggression. Thus it is possible that low levels of social desirability predict high levels of relational aggression, which predicts high levels of depression among females. Again, this inference excludes the interaction of sex-role variables. As was stated earlier, though, sex-role variables may have been scored on an outdated survey. Therefore, future research should study relational aggression, depression, and femininity with a more updated scale for sex-roles.

The final hypothesis that stated that high levels of childhood maltreatment would predict relational aggression was not supported. No significant correlation between childhood maltreatment and
relational aggression existed. Since the researchers sampled participants from a university population, it is possible that a very small number of participants experienced childhood maltreatment in their lives. Future research should include a survey to collect demographic information which could help inform researchers on exactly what types of participants are taking part in the study as far as racial, educational, and socio-economic status. Such demographic information could help clarify which of the interacting variables are the most prominent for predicting relationally aggression among certain types of people.

One major limitation is that the data consisted entirely of results from self-report measures. These measures may not be totally valid even with the inclusion of social desirability. Multiple sources of data, such as peer ratings, could help add confidence to the results of the research by creating concurrent and criterion-related validity between various measures. However, social desirability would still need to be accounted for because people may describe their peers in socially favorable ways in order to reflect their own character. Finally, an experimental design would yield very specific results in terms of exactly who, how, and why females gossip. However an experimental design is suggested with caution since people are not likely to partake in relational aggression if they know they are being observed. In this case, it would be absolutely imperative that social desirability is measured along with the other constructs.

Studying relational aggression is not an easy task. This is because relational aggression is, by definition, done in a covert manner. This is also because, within our society, children are socialized to think that relational aggression is inherently bad. Therefore, even people that are high in relationally aggressive behavior will probably not readily admit it. However, it is important that we continue to study relational aggression in terms of social desirability so that we can eventually identify people who are at risk for being, specifically, either perpetrators or victims. This could potentially be effective in lowering the bullying and/or suicide rates among children in this country, especially young girls.


