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Relational Aggression in Adolescents

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A qualitative study focusing on causes of relational aggression in high school female adolescents was conducted. Through qualitative analysis of structured interviews girls discussed multiple reasons for using relationally aggressive behaviors, including conflict avoidance, emotion management, competition, social order/norm setting, and the need for belonging. Secondary questions about relational aggression were also explored, including what were believed to be effective and ineffective strategies for handling such behaviors. Additionally, participants were asked to discuss both positive and negative consequences of participating in relational aggression, whether as an initiator or recipient. Out of these data a model for understanding and coping with relational aggression was developed.

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RELATIONAL AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENTS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF

SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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BY

JUSTINE O’DONNELL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF

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Abstract

A qualitative study focusing on causes of relational aggression in high school female adolescents was conducted. Through qualitative analysis of structured interviews girls discussed multiple reasons for using relationally aggressive behaviors, including conflict avoidance, emotion management, competition, social order/norm setting, and the need for belonging. Secondary questions about relational aggression were also explored, including what were believed to be effective and ineffective strategies for handling such behaviors. Additionally, participants were asked to discuss both positive and negative consequences of participating in relational aggression, whether as an initiator or recipient. Out of these data a model for understanding and coping with relational aggression was developed.
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INTRODUCTION

The topic of aggression has been researched in both children and adults in order to learn more about the characteristics of individuals committing aggressive acts, the nature of the acts themselves, and the impact of aggressive acts on recipients. Early research on aggression was primarily focused on overt types of aggression, such as physical violence and direct verbal aggression (e.g., name calling), found to be more common in males (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Fry & Gabriel, 1994). Links between aggressive behaviors and future adjustment difficulties, substance abuse, and delinquency became clear in such research (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1980; White, Moffitt, Earls, Robins, & Silva, 1990).

Recently, researchers have been studying gender differences in the expression of aggression. Among females, more covert types of aggression have been observed, such as rumor-spreading and social exclusion. Such expressions of anger are less directly observable, yet have been shown to still be harmful to the recipients (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Werner & Crick, 2004). Research on relational aggression has provided evidence that it is a separate and distinct construct from physical aggression and that these covert acts of aggression negatively impact both aggressor and victim (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Phelps, 2001). Children victimized by relational aggression are potentially at risk for withdrawing from important social interactions as well as internalizing their frustration and loneliness (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). They may also externalize, or act out, their frustration and
react inappropriately to peers, growing increasingly hostile (Crick, 1997). Both internalizing and externalizing behaviors can possibly lead to ongoing social and/or emotional behavior patterns, the implications of which are not yet understood given the recent emergence of research on this topic and lack of longitudinal studies.

Definition of Relational Aggression

The term relational aggression has been defined by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) as “behaviors that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion” (p. 711). Behaviors that fall under the construct of relational aggression consist of using “silent treatment,” alienating a friend to punish or control his or her behaviors, intentionally excluding someone who would otherwise be included, and spreading rumors or talking about someone behind his or her back (Crick et al., 1999). Verbal aggression (e.g., name-calling) has been excluded from the construct of relationally aggressive behaviors because it is considered a direct form of aggression (Crick, 1996).

Relational aggression has often been confused with the slightly different yet overlapping terms of indirect aggression and social aggression. Indirect aggression also includes aggressive acts that are covert in nature, such as talking to a third party about someone else behind his or her back (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukianen, 1992). Indirect aggression is considered relationally aggressive, in that a meaningful relationship is used as a vehicle to harm another (Crick, 1996). By definition, indirect aggression does not include any forms of direct communication, such as telling someone you will not be her friend unless she does something you want.
Social aggression is a broader category than either relational or indirect aggression. Social aggression may be any behavior aimed at damaging another’s feelings, including physical or verbal aggression. Socially aggressive behaviors are, again, primarily focused on damaging another’s reputation or social status (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Ignoring someone and/or influencing a group to ignore that person, name calling, or bullying are examples of social aggression. The constructs of social, relational, and indirect aggression overlap, yet they have distinct features. They are sometimes used interchangeably in literature on relational aggression.

Two subtypes of relational aggression have been distinguished by researchers: reactive or hostile aggression and proactive or instrumental aggression (Dodge, 1980; Dodge & Coie, 1987). Reactive or hostile aggression includes behaviors that are defensive; that is, they are committed in reaction to some type of provocation by another. Reactive aggression may include talking negatively about an individual to a third party after hearing that the individual had been talking behind one’s back. Proactive or instrumental aggression consists of acts that use the relationship as a vehicle to achieve some desired goal, which may not necessarily be directly related to harming another. An example may be threatening to end a friendship unless the friend allows the aggressor to cheat from her paper on an exam. Instrumentally aggressive acts can also constitute a type of offensive strategy, such as responding to feeling threatened by a new peer at school by spreading rumors about that person before she has the opportunity to develop friendships with others.
Purpose of the Current Study

Research on children’s perceptions of relational aggression has shown that children do indeed perceive relational aggression as hurtful (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). The aim of the current study was to explore females’ perceptions of why such social behaviors are utilized. Understanding more about the reasons underlying the use of relationally aggressive behaviors could potentially inform development of interventions as well as psychoeducation about developing positive social behaviors. This study is focused on the middle school and high school population, the reasons for which will be briefly described here.

Aggression in preschool tends to consist primarily of direct acts (Crick et al., 1999), such as the following verbal threat: “You won’t be invited to my party unless you let me go first on the slide.” During middle school years, however, social dynamics become more sophisticated, and children begin engaging third parties in order to get back at a target for transgressions instead of overtly reacting to a peer (Azmitia, Kamprath, & Linnet, 1998). The anonymity of the perpetrator makes it increasingly difficult for children to directly resolve conflicts. Additionally, the time frame for reacting to conflicts may be lengthened (Azmitia et al., 1998). A peer may react to a slight from a friend weeks or months after its occurrence; therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult to predict or determine from whom or what slight hostility is arising.

Likely because of these changes in social dynamics and in the nature of aggression, the bulk of the research conducted to date in the area of relational aggression consists of studies with middle school children and adolescents (i.e., 9 to 16 years of age). Developmental changes during middle school and high school impact both the
importance placed upon interpersonal relationships and the dynamics of these relationships. Children begin to establish stronger emotional bonds in their friendships and begin to seek independence from their parents (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). Empirical research has demonstrated that as children mature socially and cognitively the relationally aggressive strategies they employ become more covert and advanced (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996). Thus, social relationships become a vehicle for acting out aggressive impulses and attempts to harm others through social manipulation (Crick, 1995). The importance placed upon social relationships throughout this developmental trajectory make relationally aggressive acts particularly salient and damaging to the victims. For all these reasons, in the current study I chose to focus on the middle and high school population.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Relational aggression is a swiftly growing area of study. Research focusing on relational aggression in middle- and high-school populations has been conducted in the following areas: the relationship between gender and relational aggression (Crick et al., 1996), the impact of relational aggression on social-psychological functioning (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), assessment of relational aggression (Crick & Bigbee, 1998), children’s perceptions of relational aggression (Crick et al., 1996), the relationship between relational aggression and social status (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004), relational aggression within the sibling relationship (Stauffacher & DeHart, 2006), the parent-child relationship and relational aggression (Goldstein & Tisak, 2006; Werner, Senich, & Przepyszny, 2006), educational implications of relational aggression (Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004), and the relevance of the social-information processing model (an explanatory model of steps leading up to physical aggression) for relational aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

For the current purposes, four topics are reviewed at length: assessment of relational aggression, and the relationships between relational aggression and social-psychological functioning, social status, and gender. These specific areas of study have been selected for a few reasons. First, assessing relational aggression is a vital area to critique and refine. In order to gauge the validity of the research findings it is important to explore the research methods used to date to study relational aggression. Additionally, understanding the methods used to research this topic will clarify research procedures used in the rest of the studies reviewed. Second, the relationship between relational aggression and social-psychological functioning provides an important basis for
supporting continued research of relational aggression. If relational aggression negatively impacts people, such findings support the development of interventions. Because there are mixed findings in terms of the impact of relational aggression on social life, research on relational aggression and social status is also reviewed. Finally, the study of relational aggression arose from the question of whether females engage in a different type of aggression than do males. A brief overview of the findings on gender is therefore pertinent to the ongoing study of relational aggression, particularly as it relates to female expressions of aggression.

Assessing and Measuring Relational Aggression

Assessment of relational aggression is difficult due to the covert nature of many of the behaviors included in this construct. Relational aggression often involves subtle, discrete acts that are difficult to observe and measure, such as quick glances at another or eye rolling. In addition, it sometimes occurs over long periods of time, making it difficult to thoroughly study within a brief time frame (Crick et al., 1999). The dynamics of relational aggression are complex in nature (Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002), and tracking incidents of relational aggression differs from gathering data on incidents of physical aggression, which can be identified as a specific occurrence taking place within a specific time frame. Despite the difficulties inherent in assessment of relational aggression, researchers have used a number of methods to collect information about relational aggression: self-report, peer report, teacher report, parent report, observation, and the narrative method. Detailed below are explanations of each type of assessment along with identification of its strengths and weaknesses. Following the description of the
different measurement tools is a discussion of methodological difficulties inherent in attempting to measure the construct of relational aggression.

*Self-Report Measures*

Self-report measures use the direct report of participants responding to specific questions on a questionnaire or assessment measure. There are several benefits to such self-report measures. First and foremost, they allow children to report instances of relational aggression that no one else may have known about or witnessed. Second, self-reports are easy and quick to administer. Finally, self-reports can be used in a variety of settings outside of the school to gather information about a child’s social experiences (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

The main drawback to self-report measures is that it is unknown whether children are reliable reporters of relational aggression. Some authors have argued that because relational aggression is often a hidden, indirect type of aggression (not unlike lying), it is less likely that perpetrators would report engaging in this behavior (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). Due to the subjectivity involved in self-reports, it has been hypothesized that children may under- or over-report relationally aggressive behaviors (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1998), but there is no conclusive research on their validity to date.

*Peer-Report Measures*

Peer-report measures also involve children reporting behaviors; however, in this case they are asked to indicate how they observe their peers behaving. For example, in some studies, children have been asked to rate peers in their classroom with respect to the following behavioral categories: relationally aggressive, overtly aggressive, or prosocial
(e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Typically, children are given a class roster and asked to nominate three peers who fit the description of each particular behavior. To complete peer reports, children must be in a stable setting, such as a classroom, where they have been around peers long enough to be familiar with their patterns of behavior and interaction styles.

Peer reports are advantageous because reports are gathered from an entire classroom of children regarding other children’s social behavior. Multiple reports from peers, as opposed to one report from a parent or teacher, may potentially increase validity and reliability of the results due to the high number of responses (Crick et al., 1999). Like self-reports, peer reports also enable children to report on instances of relational aggression that no one else may have observed.

The drawbacks of using peer reports are similar to those of self-report measures. There is ongoing debate about the legitimacy of child reports in general and whether children are reliable reporters of their own experience (Perry et al., 1998). Additionally, researchers have not yet found a way to reliably and directly measure relationally aggressive behaviors, a criterion measure, so there is no way of assessing the accuracy of peer reports (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Another negative aspect of this type of measure is that children are asked to nominate peers who fit into specific categories (e.g., Who hits other kids?), and they may feel pressure to nominate someone into a category even if they do not have someone in mind. Students may also be biased towards peers they like or do not like. Finally, peer reports are only useful when administered to a large group of children who know each other relatively well; therefore, their applicability is primarily limited to the classroom setting.
Teacher-Report Measures

A teacher-report measure is an instrument used to gather teachers’ reports of relational aggression, overt aggression, or prosocial behaviors observed in their classroom (Crick, 1996). Students are nominated into one of the categories based on specific descriptions of behaviors given in the measure. Again, children must be in a stable setting, such as a classroom, so that teachers are familiar with their patterns of behavior and interaction styles.

One strength of teacher reports is that teachers can complete report forms relatively quickly. In addition, such a method may not engender stress in parents who are concerned about their child(ren) being evaluated negatively by peers on peer nomination measures (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Power, 1999). The drawback of this type of measure is that teachers may not observe all the behavioral dynamics that take place within their classroom and, consequently, may potentially be less likely to report aggressive behaviors accurately. Many interactions take place between students, such as in the bathroom or when a teacher’s back is turned, that teachers do not witness. Finally, teachers may be biased towards students they like or dislike.

There appears to be inconsistency between teacher reports both across studies and between teacher reports and other measures. For example, in one study on bullying, a direct aggressive behavior, teachers’ reports of bullying differed significantly from students’ reports (de Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004). The teachers reported more favorable social relations among the students than the students themselves reported. The authors hypothesized that teachers may be too busy to take note of all the peer dynamics occurring within a classroom. In another example, teacher reports on students’ behaviors
and symptoms that affect their school work, such as those exhibited in Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder, were consistent across multiple teachers in one study (Molina, Smith, & Pelham, 2001), and yet teacher reports of ADHD for a given student were found to vary across classrooms in another study (Molina, Pelham, Blumenthal, & Galiszewski, 1998).

It is noteworthy to mention that, in one study where teacher reports were used to assess relational aggression, the highest level of gender differences was found between males and females in relational aggression (Crick et al., 1999), with males reported as being more relationally aggressive than females. This difference may reflect real gender discrepancies, or teachers may be more stereotypically biased in how they view aggressive behaviors. Teachers may tend to view males as being more relationally aggressive and females as being more nonaggressive and therefore potentially overlook aggressive behaviors in females. The finding may also be accounted for by the possibility that teachers simply do not witness many acts of female relational aggression due to their covert nature. Because so little is known about the reliability of teacher reports, no determination has been made as to whether or not they are valid at this point (Crick et al., 1999).

*Parent-Report Measures*

Parent-report measures have been used in the study of relational aggression to gather data from parents on how often their child engages in relational aggression, overt aggression, or prosocial behaviors. One benefit to using a parent reports may be that parents witness additional incidents of aggression in the home, such as hearing their child talk negatively about another child on the telephone. Children may behave differently
(more or less aggressively) at home, providing parents with a unique perspective on their child’s behavior; therefore, their accounts may be more or less accurate. On the other hand, similar to concerns noted with respect to self reports, parents may be biased and therefore less willing to identify aggression in their child. To date, parent reports have been infrequently utilized in the research on relational aggression; therefore, less is known about their strengths and/or limitations.

Observations

Direct observation, although ideal for gathering data that may reduce bias associated with parents, teachers, or students reporting incidents of aggression, is time-consuming and expensive (Crick et al., 1999). Only one set of researchers to date have used observation for gathering data on relational aggression in preschoolers (McNeily-Choque, Hart, Robinson, Nelson, & Olsen, 1996). The researchers concluded that obtaining valid observations of relationally aggressive behaviors required more sophisticated techniques than just observation at school in order to hear all the verbal dialogue occurring among children. Additionally, difficulty arises because researchers often need to have insider information about peer dynamics in order to comprehend the nuances of social interactions taking place in participant groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Many of the relationally aggressive dynamics take place outside of the classroom or playground, such as in the bathroom, on the bus, or with friends after school. Finally, the presence of an observer may alter the peer dynamics and behaviors of the students being observed. All of these factors make relational aggression very difficult to observe with accuracy.

Narrative Method
The narrative method, a form of qualitative research, is a methodology that involves using a one-on-one interview format, asking select open-ended questions, audio-taping the responses, and transcribing the interview as a means of gathering data about the subject being studied. The questions involved in this type of research have been typically geared toward participants’ accounts of specific aggressive incidents they have witnessed or experienced. The accounts given are then coded in terms of specific content, which are then condensed into research themes.

In her seminal book on relational aggression, *Odd Girl Out*, Rachel Simmons (2002) wrote about the phenomenon of relational aggression, exposing the “hidden culture of aggression” (p. 1) in females. Simmons interviewed teenage females about relational aggression utilizing the narrative approach. Using the data she gathered, she exposed and illustrated the phenomenon itself, outlining behaviors and consequences of relational aggression. She theorized that relational aggression is caused primarily because females are socialized to hide anger, thus they learn to express anger indirectly. Simmons focused on popular girls and how they operate socially, making her results applicable mainly to that particular social group. Simmons additionally discussed parents’ and teachers’ difficulties in addressing relational aggression. Her study did not address other possible causes and/or different degrees to which some girls are relationally aggressive, nor did it focus on relational aggression within other social groups.

In another qualitative study conducted by Xie et al. (2002), participant narratives were used to explore both the function and interaction of social aggression, relational aggression, physical aggression, and verbal aggression in a sample of 475 children aged 13 to 14 years. This study yielded several findings. First, instances of social aggression
were reported to generally be initiated by two or more individuals. Second, behaviors such as gossiping about someone to a third party were perceived by participants as being used to initiate interpersonal conflicts, whereas behaviors such as threatening to withdraw a friendship were reported as a defensive, or reactive, form of aggression. Thus, different types of relationally aggressive behaviors were reportedly used for different functions. Finally, increased social status was associated with socially aggressive behavior.

Based upon their findings, Xie et al. (2002) concluded that narrative strategies “could become an important avenue to study interactive properties of disguised aggressive behaviors” (p. 220). One potential problem with narrative studies may be similar to the potential problem of social desirability in self-reports; that is, the interviewee, wanting to make a favorable impression, may be unwilling to admit being aggressive to the person conducting the research. For example, in the same study by Xie et al., 93.6% of participants blamed others for the conflicts they reported, possibly being unaware of and/or unwilling to disclose their own use of relationally aggressive behaviors. Children may be more willing to blame others than to examine their own participation in relationally aggressive behaviors. However, the potential for participant bias should not lead researchers to rule out the usefulness of narrative studies, as they are a means to learn more about these behaviors.

In another study combining both self-report measures with qualitative methodologies (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005), the relationship between gender identities and relational aggression was examined. The authors hypothesized that girls with a stronger feminine gender identity schema would more frequently use relationally aggressive strategies. They based their hypothesis on the idea that females are socialized
to be “nice” (p. 353) and that girls who viewed themselves as “nice” were more apt to hide anger and use covert behaviors to address conflict. The sample consisted of 52 females from the mid-Atlantic United States. The average participant age was 15 years old. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) and qualitative interviews were used to gather data. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory was reported to be the measure most frequently used to measure gender role orientation (Beere, 1990). The authors’ hypothesis was validated, in that the females with a stronger feminine gender identity were reported to use relationally aggressive strategies more frequently. Qualitative analysis revealed three themes regarding relational aggression: fear of abandonment, involvement of a third person in a conflict, and females having negative perceptions of their female peers. The qualitative portion of this study began to reveal female’s perceptions of each other and their use of relational aggression; however, this study only touched on themes underlying relational aggression and did not explore them in depth.

Conclusion

To date, there is no gold standard for measuring and assessing relational aggression. Relational aggression, not unlike lying, is difficult to observe and measure. Even when direct observation is used in research, there may be whispered comments or nonverbal cues that observers fail to note. Additionally, observation is rarely used in research on relational aggression because it is time-consuming and expensive. Therefore, although the reliability of measures used in research on relational aggression has been established, the construct validity of the measures has not been established. Ultimately, researchers cannot know with complete certainty that the reports are accurately measuring aggressive behaviors.
Given the current methodologies and the early stage of research on relational aggression, it is unclear what type of methodology is most effective at this time. Currently, peer reports and self-reports are the most frequently utilized measurement instruments in the research on relational aggression. It is questionable whether gathering measures from parents and/or teachers would serve to increase the reliability of results or to skew them, given that parents and teachers may have fewer opportunities to observe aggressive behaviors than peers might. Most pertinent to having reliable means of measuring relational aggression is being able to draw conclusions about the impact of such behaviors. Given the limitations of self, peer, teacher, parent-reports, and observation, qualitative research may present a unique opportunity for gathering more thorough data, provided that the participants are honest about their experiences.

The Impact of Relational Aggression on Social-Psychological Adjustment

The relationship between aggressive behaviors and social-psychological adjustment problems was first identified in research on physical aggression (Olweus, 1993). For example, in Olweus’s study, a high positive correlation was found between physical aggression and rates of depression in adult males. In terms of studying overt aggression, males were found to be more physically aggressive than females, and thus it was assumed that females were not aggressive. As researchers began exploring what males and females did when they wanted to be hurtful, the construct of relational aggression began to emerge (Crick et al., 1999) because females identified indirect aggressive strategies they used when angry. Much of the research on relational aggression has been conducted by Crick and her colleagues exploring the hypothesis that
both victims and perpetrators of relational aggression experience social and/or psychological difficulties.

In one of the earlier studies on relational aggression in the middle school population, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) assessed the relationship between relational aggression and social-psychological adjustment in those who were reported to initiate the aggressive acts. Methods of assessment included peer reports as well as a variety of self-report measures for assessing different aspects of social-psychological adjustment. Students were identified as being relationally aggressive if the level of nomination by peers was one standard deviation above the mean.

Of the 491 students in the study, 46 were identified as being relationally aggressive. The females who were identified as relationally aggressive reported significantly higher levels of loneliness and isolation than did either the males identified as relationally aggressive or the females who were not identified as relationally aggressive. Those identified as relationally aggressive were reported to experience more distress both personally and interpersonally, as measured by self-reports of increased distress and unhappiness. Further, females who were nominated by their peers as being relationally aggressive were also reported as being less well-liked by their peers, as indicated by both peer reports and self-reports of low social acceptance. This finding was not true of the males reported as being relationally aggressive, whose reports of peer acceptance on the peer nomination measure were similar to those of nonaggressive participants.

It remains unclear in the research what the nature of the relationship might be between relational aggression and increased distress. That is, relationally aggressive
behaviors might have caused this distress or resulted from the distress; alternatively, both
the relationally aggressive behaviors and the stress may be by-products of other
difficulties the students may have been experiencing. In general, this study provided
initial evidence supporting the hypothesis that a significant degree of internal and
external distress exists in children who are also relationally aggressive. The differences
between male and female reports on the impact of relational aggression will be reviewed
further in the section on gender.

In a second study using the same sample just described, Crick and Grotpeter
(1996) again assessed social-psychological adjustment and relational aggression, this
time in reported victims. In this study, middle-school males and females who reported
being victims of relational aggression also reported significantly higher levels of
loneliness and isolation than did their peers who did not report being victims of
relationally aggressive acts. Similar to their results regarding aggressors, Crick and
Grotpeter (1996) found a significant relationship between reported victims of relational
aggression and decreased social and psychological functioning. Additionally, no
significant gender difference was found in terms of the amount that males and females
reported experiencing relational victimization. Thus, in both studies, relational aggression
was associated with symptoms of social and psychological distress in both the aggressors
and the victims of such behaviors.

In another similar study, Crick and Bigbee (1998) assessed the social-
psychological adjustment of middle-school males and females identified as victims of
relational aggression through both self- and peer-report. Those who were identified by
self- and peer-reports to be victims of relational aggression again reported significant
adjustment problems related to their social and psychological functioning. More females than males reported being the recipients of relationally aggressive behaviors in this study.

Across all three studies, children reported to be either aggressors or victims of relationally aggressive behavior consistently reported increased distress in the following areas: depressive symptoms, social isolation, social anxiety, and loneliness. Both acting out aggressive impulses relationally and being the recipient of such acts were reported to create negative social and psychological consequences. Taking this relationship one step further, Olweus (1993) found that students in both middle school and high school populations who overtly demonstrated emotional and internalizing difficulties were more vulnerable to relational aggression from their peers. His findings indicated that the students’ involvement in relationally aggressive behaviors was somewhat bidirectional, in that the students who reacted to it the most were the ones most likely to wind up getting involved in such dynamics.

Although additional research is necessary to draw more solid conclusions about the impact of relational aggression, research to date does provide initial evidence that relational aggression is experienced along with increased distress in females and is a topic worthy of continued research and discussion. Making the relationship between relational aggression and its social impact all the more confusing, however, more recent research has yielded findings that being relationally aggressive may actually increase one’s social status. These studies are reviewed in the following section.

The Impact of Relational Aggression on Social Status

Although there is evidence of negative social and psychological implications for victims of relational aggression, there is also evidence indicating that relational
aggression can be a successful social strategy leading to increased social status for the aggressors. Those who utilize relationally aggressive behaviors may do so instrumentally in order to secure a more powerful position within their peer group (Rose, Swenson, & Carlson, 2004), though this does not necessarily mean they are well-liked by their peers. Outlined below are two studies examining the relationship between the use of relationally aggressive behaviors and the social status of aggressors.

Studying different forms of aggression (social, relational, physical, and verbal) and the impact they had, in general, on social interactions, Xie et al. (2002) collected data from 475 seventh-grade participants in the Carolina Longitudinal Study (Cairns & Cairns, 1994), which took place over 5 years. A semi-structured interview, peer reports, and teacher reports were used to measure relational aggression. School dropout rates, teen parenthood, and criminal arrest rates were also gathered as measures of social adjustment. In this study, students who were identified as relationally aggressive by their peers were not found to have increased risk of maladjustment through early adulthood. Further, relational aggression was associated with higher popularity.

Taking this research one step further, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) conducted a longitudinal study over 5 years examining the effects of relational and physical aggression on two types of popularity: (a) being popular and well liked by peers, or sociometric popularity (as measured by peer nominations and acceptance rates, respectively); and (b) being considered popular and not being liked by peers, or perceived popularity (Cairns, 1983). Beginning with students in the fifth grade, data were collected from 905 children one time yearly, using peer reports. The children were asked to identify peers they liked most, peers they liked least, peers who were popular, and peers
who were not popular. The participants received identical questions and measures across all 5 years of the study.

The results showed significant correlations among individuals who were perceived as popular, individuals who were identified by their peers as being relationally aggressive, and individuals who were identified as being disliked by their peers (as measured by low peer acceptance rates). Individuals who were identified as popular also had lower peer acceptance rates. This trend was found to increase with age. Thus, low peer acceptance rates, one method used to identify social maladjustment in studies reviewed previously (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, 1996), may not necessarily indicate that a student is perceived as unpopular. The authors hypothesized that relational aggression increased in females due to reinforcement from their increased popularity and status. They also suggested that it may be more important to some girls to have social status than to be well liked. Perceived popularity was shown to remain moderately stable over time and remained more stable in females than in males. Both genders were found to engage equally in relational aggression; however, relationally aggressive strategies increased perceived popularity for girls more than it did for boys. In this study, relational aggression was found to be more effective for girls in establishing social prominence.

Although Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) found that relational aggression had a positive impact on social status, the use of physical aggression was positively correlated with maladjustment. However, the measurements used in this study to gauge maladjustment included relatively serious behavioral issues, such as school dropout and criminal arrest. In earlier research assessing the relationship between psychological distress and relational aggression, maladjustment was measured though self-reports of
internal experiences, such as loneliness and distress. Had such forms of measurement been used in this study, students reported to be relationally aggressive may have been found to have problems with maladjustment as well. These longitudinal studies took place over 5 years, making them somewhat more reliable than research collected within a brief time frame, given that the data were collected five times over 5 years instead of one time within a brief time frame.

**Conclusion**

Studies have shown mixed results regarding the impact of relational aggression on social status. In earlier research, correlations were found between relational aggression and personal distress; however, more recent research suggests there may be social benefits for being relationally aggressive. In general, research has demonstrated both negative and positive social implications for aggressors. Although relational aggression correlates highly with popularity, this does not mean that aggressors are necessarily well-liked by their peers. It has been hypothesized that relationally aggressive behaviors are reinforced socially, which then perpetuates the behavioral pattern (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). The complexity of the results provides some rationale for continuing research on this topic. The more that is known about the impact of relational aggression, the more adults in children’s lives can understand how to assess its implications and intervene when necessary.

Evidence has also suggested that females may be more impacted by relational aggression than males because they receive greater rewards for this behavior than do males, specifically in terms of increased popularity (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) hypothesized that, although both females and males use relationally
aggressive strategies, females may be more affected by these behaviors due to their increased valuing of social ties and connectedness. In the following section, the relationship between relational aggression and gender is further explored.

Relational Aggression and Gender

Research on the relationship between gender and relational aggression has yielded inconsistent results (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996). Some researchers have found that females are more involved in relational aggression than males (Crick et al., 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1998), whereas other findings suggest that males and females are equally involved in relationally aggressive dynamics (Crick & Grottpeter, 1996; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Overall, however, it has been theorized that females are more affected by relational aggression than males. A potential reason for the greater impact of this behavior on females is the increased importance of emotional intimacy in girls’ friendships (Maccoby, 1990).

For example, in a study conducted by Crick and Grottpeter (1995), females were reported to be more relationally aggressive than males. The females who were identified as relationally aggressive reported significantly higher levels of loneliness and isolation than did either the males identified as relationally aggressive or the females who were not identified as relationally aggressive. It is additionally noteworthy that the females in that study experienced greater ramifications (e.g., being disliked) for using relationally aggressive behaviors than did males. The reasons for this were not clear. Nevertheless, females seemed to be more impacted by relational aggression than males, both in terms of their own reactions to it and in how they responded to each other.
Following this line of thought, in Cillessen and Mayeux’s (2004) study, females reported to be relationally aggressive were also reported to have increased social status. In their study, being popular did not equal being well liked by peers. Yet those reported to engage in relationally aggressive behaviors were also reported as having increased social status. Again, this finding supports the idea that females’ involvement in such behaviors is more significant for them than for males, at least in terms of the greater social ramifications.

In their study on gender and relational aggression, Crick et al. (1999) collected data via peer reports regarding how students themselves perceived aggressive acts. The students were asked what they thought people did when they wanted to be mean to someone. Whereas the males in the study reported using verbally insulting and physically aggressive behaviors, females reported using verbally insulting and relationally aggressive behaviors. The authors believed the students’ responses provided evidence that females may be more impacted by relational aggression than males because they perceived relational aggression as more hurtful than males perceived it to be, and additionally may be more likely to use such behaviors than males. This study provided additional evidence that females may perceive or interpret relationally aggressive acts as more threatening than do males, again highlighting a difference between the sexes in the significance of such acts.

As noted previously, relational aggression was originally studied in order to identify whether females were aggressive in ways that differed from forms of aggression common in males. Prior to research on relational aggression, females were not thought of as aggressive, but research on this subject has challenged that conception. Although it
appears that males use relationally aggressive strategies as well as females, they report less distress about such behaviors. Males may also underreport relational aggression due to being less bothered by it (Leadbeater, Blatt, & Quinlan, 1995). Studying males and females independently may provide useful information about their similarities or differences when employing or being the target of relationally aggressive acts. Qualitative research studies additionally may yield information regarding males’ and females’ cognitive processes and reasoning about relational aggression.

Conclusion

Based upon the research to date on relational aggression, the construct of relational aggression appears to have been well established, as well as the negative impact of relational aggression on females; indeed, females perceive relationally aggressive acts as malicious (Crick, 1995). There are conflicting reports about whether or not females engage in relationally aggressive acts more frequently than males do (Crick & Grotpeeter, 1995, 1996), but overall there is evidence that females may be more distressed by these behaviors than are males (Crick & Grotpeeter, 1996). If females are more engaged than males are in relationally aggressive dynamics or attribute more significance to them than do males, this raises the question as to why this is the case.

Purpose of the Current Study

Research on relational aggression is still in its early stages and has covered a variety of topics, with none being explored in depth. In addition, researchers have used a variety of research methodologies and focused on multiple different aspects of relational aggression. At this point, it seems important to understand more about the function of relational aggression in order to achieve a deeper understanding of why children use
these behaviors. To date, little is known about why relational aggression is used. As noted by Underwood, Galen, and Paquette (2001), “It might be worthwhile to learn more about children’s perceptions of the harm inflicted and the goals served by different types of aggressive behaviors” (p. 254).

Xie et al. (2002) began to examine the functions of different types of aggressive behavior, yet they looked at overt aggressive behaviors as well, thereby limiting the amount of information gathered on relational aggression specifically. If it is true that girls use relationally aggressive strategies to initiate and respond to conflict, then it is important to ask why they are employing covertly aggressive strategies. In the following study the primary research question was as follows: What do adolescent females perceive to be the function of relational aggression? That is, why do they believe these behaviors occur? Secondary topics explored were the contexts in which relational aggression is learned and displayed (e.g., family, school, and peer relationships), as well as coping strategies for handling such behaviors.

With a greater understanding of adolescent perceptions of the function and purpose of relationally aggressive behaviors, interventions may be targeted more effectively. For example, if relationally aggressive strategies are used to approach conflicts, teaching females assertiveness and communication skills may be an appropriate intervention for combating relational aggression. If children report learning such behaviors from siblings or parents interventions might be best directed towards educating parents and families about the consequences of this behavior, along with other coping strategies for managing conflict. If such behaviors are found to occur primarily in school,
interventions may be aimed at educating teachers and students about relational aggression.

Along these lines, because of the difficulties inherent in researching the covert behaviors comprising relationally aggressive behaviors, qualitative research presents a unique opportunity to examine and more thoroughly understand the dynamics of this behavior as Underwood et al. (2001) recommended. Because qualitative methods do not impose categories on the participants (as a questionnaire might), they allow researchers to more fully understand participants’ unique and at times unexpected experiences. As such, a qualitative approach may assist in understanding more fully the function of relational aggression, the influences of surrounding circumstances, and effective coping strategies for managing these behaviors. Thus, in the current study adolescent females were interviewed in order to learn about their perceptions of relational aggression and why such behaviors occur.

METHOD

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were 9 female adolescents age 14 to 18 years (\( M = 16.0 \) years, \( SD = 1.05 \)). All participants were in high school: 1 was in 9th grade, 3 were in 10th grade, 2 were in 11th grade, and 3 were in 12th grade. Of all potential participants, none were excluded due to rule-out criteria (risk for suicide and serious mental health or substance abuse issues). All participants were European American. Participants reported the following yearly household incomes: one in the $20,000-$29,999 range; two in the $30,000-$69,999 range; one in the $70,000-$149,999 range; and three over $150,000.
Two participants declined to report on their yearly income. Given that the figures were reported by the participants, the accuracy of the above figures is not entirely certain.

The majority of the sample participants came from a private high school that was part of a K-12 school in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest. The school’s administrators agreed to facilitate student participation in the study (Appendix A). The study was announced during home room classes, and students interested in participating signed up. Potential participants and their parents or guardians were provided a letter of invitation (Appendix B), which included an explanation of the topic and the procedure; an informed consent form (Appendix C), explaining the limits of confidentiality; and contact information for the primary researcher. A total of 7 participants and families agreed to participate through this means. Two other local students (one from a neighboring public high school and one from another private high school) found out about the study via the high school administrators or friends. One participant was a friend of another participant who had come along with the participant to see if she could also be interviewed. The second student heard about the study from an administrator at her high school, and she expressed interest in being interviewed as well. Provided that they had parental consent and were part of a comparable demographic group, these students were also allowed to participate. All parents or guardians were invited to contact the primary researcher as described in the invitation letter in order to agree to have his or her child participate in the study, inquire about further information, and/or set up an interview. The adolescents assented to participation and respective parents/guardians consented to the adolescents’ participation.
Prior to conducting this study, contacting the high school, and recruiting participants, a proposal for this study was passed through Pacific University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purpose of the IRB is to ensure that all research associated with Pacific University diligently guards the safety and protects the well-being and rights of the research participants. IRB approval is mandated by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Given that adolescents are a protected population, the IRB thoroughly reviewed the type, design, and procedure of the study to ensure the safety of the potential participants. A thorough proposal for the study was passed through and approved by the IRB before any research was conducted.

Design and Procedure

I planned to meet with each student individually at their high school, a conference room in the city, or the family’s home or an office, based upon each family’s preference. Based on family preference, I met with each student individually at a hotel conference room. Meeting times were arranged over the phone with both parents and students. Some students arrived to the interviews with their parents and some with friends. Demographic data such as age, race, socioeconomic status, and so forth, were gathered prior to the interview (Appendix D). All participants brought signed confidentiality agreements from their parents. Information about the demographic questionnaire, confidentiality, and any other questions were addressed prior to interview. The interviewees had been reminded to bring the forms during phone conversations to set up the conference room meetings. Some parents met with me prior to the child’s interview, and some did not. All were given the option to meet with me prior to the interview. Parents were also given the option to sit in on the interview. No parents elected to be present during the interview.
Prior to each interview, I reviewed the informed consent and the limits of confidentiality with each interviewee. I also discussed the purpose of the study, the methodology, and the follow-up procedures. I asked each participant to repeat the limits of confidentiality in her own terms, in order to ensure she understood the limits of confidentiality. I explained that I was required to adhere to mandatory reporting laws and exceptions to confidentiality, including statements about being a danger to self or others or about being a victim of physical or sexual abuse; an additional exception being a court subpoena. No reports of physical or sexual abuse were made during the interviews; neither were there reports of suicidal or homicidal ideations, plans, or gestures. Thus, no reports needed to be made.

I then provided a definition of relational aggression to each participant, using a description such as the following:

The purpose of this study is to find out about relational aggression. By relational aggression, I mean any type of behavior that is aimed to hurt another, yet is secretive or indirect. Some examples of relational aggression are talking about someone behind her back, ignoring someone on purpose, someone telling her friends to ignore someone, or excluding someone from a party. Relationally aggressive behaviors are used to hurt someone by excluding them, or threatening to exclude someone in some way from a group of friends or group activity who would otherwise be included.

Next, I again explained the procedure that had been outlined in introductory materials (i.e., that the adolescent would be interviewed individually and the interview would be audio-taped and later transcribed). A semi-structured interview format was used for gathering data. All participants were interviewed individually and responded to at least 10 primary questions or inquiries (see Appendix E), some of which were open-ended (e.g., *Tell me about a time you experienced relational aggression*). Follow-up questions were asked if the client did not give detailed explanations to the main questions
(e.g., What did you do afterwards?). Additional questions were asked to clarify content. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The interviews lasted as long as the participant needed to answer the questions, generally 45-60 min. At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewees were offered an incentive of a movie ticket or a $10 certificate on i-Tunes.

All information regarding the interviewee’s identity was kept confidential. The participant was only referred to by first name during the interview in order to protect her identity. As the principal investigator, I was the only one with access to the full names of the participants, which were kept behind a double lock (e.g., in a locked cabinet in a locked room). The participant’s name appeared on the transcript only as initials. I transcribed all interviews at my home on a password-protected computer. The interview data will be kept for 7 years following the interview for potential future use. A copy of each transcript was kept on a password-protected hard-disk to serve as a back-up, which will remain in my possession. The recorded material was destroyed promptly following transcription.

In regard to analysis of the data, the accounts given were coded in terms of specific content utilizing grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003). With this method, a line-by-line coding method was used to establish meaning units; next, subthemes were selected based on the most significant and most frequent codes. Finally, the subthemes were grouped into overarching themes. A coding partner conducted a theme analysis for several interviews as a cross-validation procedure. Given academic requirements as well as those of the IRB, some aspects of grounded theory were eliminated, such as writing a review of the literature after developing the analysis and collecting the data. The
literature review was written before beginning the research project in order to learn more about what type of study would contribute to the body of research already developed on relational aggression. In addition to having a second reader review transcripts and develop themes, to minimize bias throughout the data collection and analysis I kept a journal to explore personal biases and subjectivity regarding the nature of the research.

RESULTS

In this study, the primary research question was why relational aggression is used. Secondary questions, such as where such behaviors were learned and girls’ responses to relational aggression, were also explored. Given the broad scope of the data provided in the interviews, a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to code, analyze, and interpret the data.

Using Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory, a model was created that demonstrates a step-by-step process of understanding and coping with relational aggression (see Figure 1). The first step in the model shows the causes of relational aggression. The resulting phenomenon of relational aggression then elicits strategies for coping with such behaviors. The strategies for coping with relational aggression in turn influence the consequences of being involved in such dynamics. Various other factors impact both the strategies used to cope with relational aggression as well how one experiences the phenomenon. These topics and themes are outlined and discussed in detail below. Additional thoughts by the interviewees about what would help increase supportive relationships and decrease relationally aggressive behaviors among females are also examined.
Causes of Relational Aggression

Five causes leading to relationally aggressive behaviors were discussed frequently throughout the interviews: conflict avoidance, emotion management,

![Diagram of theoretical model for understanding and coping with relational aggression.]

Figure 1. A theoretical model for understanding and coping with relational aggression.
competition, social order/norm setting, and the need for belonging. These main themes are presented in order from the most common response to the least common response; however, the reasons tended to be complex, overlapping, and insidious (like the behavior itself). Often it was difficult to delineate just one reason behind an instance of relational aggression.

Conflict Avoidance

The most frequently identified cause of relationally aggressive behaviors was that they were used as a means of avoiding conflict. Many interviewees believed that relationally aggressive behaviors were an expression of aggression or simply an indirect way of letting out hostility or distress. Not wanting or being unwilling to be honest about feelings or reactions to an event was a main reason cited for avoiding conflict.

In one example, an interviewee talked about an incident during which she and her group of friends, being upset about a friend’s recent promiscuous behaviors, had decided they would move their daily lunch spot to a new table in an effort to avoid her. Right before they switched lunch tables, they had already begun distancing their friend. The participant stated that in reaction to their avoidance her friend “started crying one day at lunch just because she didn’t even know that anybody was talking about her, but she felt like people were being really distant.” They did not tell their targeted friend about moving tables, leaving her to find herself alone at their usual lunch spot. The interviewee expressed that it seemed easier to turn on her friend and avoid her instead of addressing concerns about promiscuity with her. Although the interviewee felt badly that she had treated her friend in this way, she felt ill-equipped to address the conflict in a constructive manner; in this regard, she stated:
Um, well, I thought it was really horrible ’cuz I felt bad for her. I mean, I understood where all the rest of my friends were coming from, but I really felt bad for her because, um . . . I was talking to my mom about . . . I think she had been abused when she was younger. And when she talked about doing that with the guy, she seemed really passive, just kind of like, “Yeah, it happened,” not like she wanted to or didn’t want to. And so I really felt bad, and the whole situation was just frustrating.

Aside from allowing girls to avoid addressing problems directly, in this particular instance the relationally aggressive behaviors were being used to communicate feedback about a peer’s behaviors. The interviewee who provided this example wondered whether or not her friend had been sexually abused. If risky behaviors were addressed indirectly through further mistreatment, such reactions might further exacerbate a problem someone might be having. In turn, opportunities to approach a situation assertively, possibly leading to developing communication skills and better relationships, or to help or encourage a friend to seek adult guidance, were also missed. Although expressed in a malicious way, the avoidance from her peers seemed nonetheless an important means of indirectly communicating their reactions about their friend’s promiscuity.

Underlying the theme of conflict avoidance was sometimes an assumption that the targeted friend should know why she was being ignored. One interviewee stated that she came to school one day to find that her close friend was not speaking to her. When she approached her friend to ask why she was not talking to her, her friend stated, “Well, you should know.” The interviewee felt betrayed and confused because she did not know why her friend was upset. Without understanding the problem, she felt unable to address the situation. Further, she found herself becoming angry with her friend for putting her in a difficult position, which escalated the tension in the situation. Girls discussed the snowball effect of avoiding conflict, such that conflict oftentimes increased and
perpetuated due to a lack of communication and increasing anger, sometimes over a simple issue.

Through the use of silence and alienation, girls reported that they avoided talking to one another about frustrations they were experiencing within their friendships. Silence and relational aggression were reported as going hand in hand. One interviewee spoke of the entrenched nature of avoidance: “But it’s more like – by now it’s more something that is automatic. If you’re mad at someone, you don’t talk to them.” Because conflicts were not discussed, feelings then were expressed indirectly. In alienating one another, it may have been easier for girls to attribute any chosen intentions to the other from a distance. For example, in the situation of the girls switching their lunch table, they chose to ignore their friend and label her a “slut” rather than talk to her about the situation. By pulling back from each other, the girls were able to think whatever they wanted about their target. One interviewee commented on the impact of a lack of communication between two girls in conflict, stating:

So I think that they just don’t communicate well enough with each other to be able to form opinions, true opinions about it [the conflict]. Instead they just feel threatened by them [each other] and just kind of come up with stuff [spread rumors]. Which is really sad ’cuz I think those two could be good friends if they just communicated with each other and got their problems out on the table.

The lack of interaction between two individuals, or even two social groups or cliques, was repeatedly a reason given for relationally aggressive behavior.

Emotion Management

Due to the withheld expression and/or communication inherent in conflict avoidance, interviewees reported a resulting indirect release of negative emotions that followed an unaddressed conflict. Relationally aggressive behaviors were frequently
reported as a means of dealing with frustration that was not expressed directly. One interviewee made a concise statement about her own emotional avoidance: “So I guess I was kind of mad about it, but I tried not to be.” It seemed that “trying not to be” entailed pushing feelings aside. In attempting to avoid the emotion of anger, she then began ignoring the source of her frustration. Avoiding her friend sent a nonverbal message to her friend about her feelings, as well as enabled the interviewee to act out feelings that were not being expressed directly. Whether or not she wanted to feel the way she did, her feelings were still communicated and expressed.

In addition to expressing anger indirectly through ignoring someone, some interviewees talked about the temporary relief that came from taking anger out on a peer. Relationally aggressive behaviors at times became a way to release feelings that were building up inside. One interviewee discussed how it just felt good to hurt someone when she was hurting:

And in eighth grade I was just plain old mean, and it felt good to hurt people. ’Cuz I was hurting so badly inside that I wanted people to know how I felt. And so I hurt them to try to show them how much I hurt. Um, and to see, just to show ’em what it felt like.

A few girls stated that, although acting out towards one another often eased tensions in the short term, it did not solve the problem over the long term. Instead, not dealing with the problem directly tended to increase the conflict, often escalating the situation. Thus, an emotional build-up in which “all the little things add up over time,” as one interviewee put it, may lead to an increased likelihood of using indirect aggression as a means of managing and coping with one’s emotions. That is, it might be relieving to act out those built-up feelings or feel empowering to hurt those who hurt you, as expressed in the quotation above. This essentially becomes a cycle of using relationally aggressive
behaviors to deal with girls’ feelings and reactions to conflict, leading to even more relational aggression.

Girls also reported getting back at friends for past transgressions and hurts or taking their frustration out on different friends, seeking retaliation for hurt they had experienced personally. As one girl stated, “They want to express their hurt and put the other person down and get kind of revenge for their hurt, especially if they’re being gossiped about at the same time.” Thus, relational aggression provided a way to act out girls’ own feelings of doubt and insecurity towards someone else. Again, as a few interviewees stated, this was a short-term solution; releasing one’s own frustration or hurt onto another did not solve problems over the long term but did help dispel some of the negative feelings in the moment.

The impulse to express feelings towards one another, even if feelings were negative, also emerged as a theme explaining why girls enjoyed talking about one another behind their backs. Some interviewees noted that this behavior felt like a way for them to vent and obtain validation, again indirectly, for their own feelings and reactions. Being unwilling to talk openly about their own feelings with each other, girls forged a system of emotional communication through talking about one another:

So, you know, although things you said about other people could be hurtful, um, you know sometimes that was all you could do is, is talk about other people behind their backs to and at least . . . justify to yourself a little bit that you’re not the only one who feels that way.

Often the girls reported feeling justified in their behavior because they believed that talking about others was the only option available to them, in terms of handling their reactions to peers, and there was an underlying need to have some kind of emotional dialogue. In that vein, the same interviewee noted:
I think honestly if you end up gossiping with another friend about it or, you know, taking steps to also respond with underhanded tactics...you know, I think that’s (sighs) in a way is better than just bottling it up and kind of moving on.

The main idea behind this statement is that it was better to do something to express your feelings and emotions rather than not express them at all.

Taking one step further the concept of talking about others behind their backs in order to express oneself or to feel better about oneself, relational aggression was also explained as a distraction from one’s own troubles. Girls felt able to avoid their own personal issues by focusing on others or on problems being encountered by their peers.

One girl who reported experiencing emotional distress due to recently finding out that her parents were divorcing stated:

You know, especially for me when I was having so many emotional health issues, um, it kind of was a way to shield myself from it...nobody knew. So, it was just like a barrier, like a shield I could put up. And nobody sort of understood, or you know even realized the, the rest of the issues, the underlying problems.

This girl discussed being relationally aggressive in terms of talking about other people and finding fault with others as opposed to dealing with the problems she was facing in her own life. She later commented on using relational aggression to maintain her popularity, stating, “Yeah, that felt good because I was really struggling with my own emotional health, for a long time...and anyway, so and in that sense it was kind of a confidence thing.” By this, she meant that through her social status, which she used relationally aggressive behaviors to maintain, she was able to feel affirmed during a difficult time. In this sense, her social life seemed to provide her with a false sense of confidence and a distraction that enabled her to avoid the emotional turbulence of her family life.
As this participant continued to reflect on what it meant to be popular, she did not believe her friends in the popular group were happy: “But I mean, if you look at their Facebooks and their MySpace [both social networking sites on the internet] they’re all drunk in every picture and with all kinds of different boys and, you know, wearing dresses that reveal *everything.*” She stated that, within this popular group of friends, one of her friend’s fathers had recently died, and the same friend’s mother was working all the time. She believed there was underlying pain for her friend, which in turn was why she believed her friend was willing to be hurtful towards others. She thought her friend focused on being popular and coveted her own social status, as a way to distract herself from her personal difficulties.

Insecurities were often credited as the reason girls talked about each other behind their backs or indirectly attempted to hurt one another. Girls reported feeling insecure about a variety of factors, such as their early dating or romantic relationships, the stability of their close friendships, or their own sense of self-worth. In terms of self-esteem, relational aggression was sometimes reported as being perpetuated because girls blamed themselves for being mistreated, trying to please their offender. Statements such as, “It must be my fault if she hates me so much. I must have done something for her to hate me so much,” reflect the self-doubt and blame that girls reported experiencing. Feeling guilty about something at times appeared to make girls more vulnerable to mistreatment because they were less inclined to stand up for themselves. Insecurities were also reported as making girls vulnerable to acting out with relational aggression. While acknowledging her own insecurities, one girl admitted that she felt better about herself when hearing about someone else’s struggles. The impulse to build oneself up by putting
another down was often cited as one reason girls perpetually talked behind one another’s backs; that is, they developed a false sense of security by placing the problem outside of their own lives and into the lives of others, at least for a moment in conversation. Mistreating each other then became a way for them to cope with feelings of self-doubt.

Talking about issues, even simply venting about others, reportedly brought some sense of emotional relief and movement. The impulse itself seems healthy, a way to release and express various feelings and reactions. However, relational aggression was often used at the expense of others. Whether ignoring others, acting out towards them, or talking about them behind their backs, these behaviors were common ways in which girls talked about moving through their emotional lives. Underlying much of the conversation was an unspoken assumption that they had little choice other than such behaviors in terms of how they might have managed their emotional reactions and responded to conflict with one another.

**Competition**

Relational aggression was frequently reported as occurring in response to some type of competition between peers, such as having a romantic interest in the same person, being academically competitive, or competing over friends. Competition over any perceived superiority (e.g., in terms of appearance, grades, athletic ability) seemed to trigger mistreatment of another. Described below are two of the most common types of competition mentioned – competition over male attention and academic competition – followed by a few more general examples of competition.

Competition over male attention was discussed with the most frequency in terms of competitive behaviors that triggered relationally aggressive behaviors. One
interviewee gave an example of females being territorial over a particular group of males. In her high school, one group of girls socialized primarily with a specific group of boys. The interviewee noticed that if girls outside of this social group attempted to befriend any of the males in the group, the other girls in the group would become hostile and reactive. She stated, “I don’t know. I’m kind of putting all this too realistically because it’s not verbally spoken. It’s like they kind of have exclusive rights to this one group of guys, which you’d call the more jockey guys.”

Another interviewee told of how she and her friend were both romantically interested in the same young man. They were all involved in an extracurricular activity, which was how they had come to know one another. Although this young man was not interested in dating the interviewee’s friend, he had expressed interest in dating the interviewee. She had discussed this with her friend, letting her friend know she was interested in him and asking her friend how she felt about the situation. Her friend told her it would be fine if she dated him. Once they did begin dating, her friend began ignoring her and influencing other friends to do the same. She posted mean statements about the interviewee on MySpace.com, a social networking site, and even approached the young man, telling him that the interviewee was trouble and discouraging him from dating her.

When this girl was asked during the interview why she thought her friend went to all that effort to try to hurt her, she replied, “I got the prize.” In this circumstance, relational aggression appeared to be a response to competition for the attention and affection of this particular young man. “Getting the prize” carries a connotation of a win-lose endeavor. In this race there was a clear winner and a loser, and the girl who “got the
prize” was ignored and slandered by her friend as a result. As discussed in the previous section, becoming relationally aggressive may also have been the friend’s way of managing and coping with her feelings related to the circumstance. The friend also attempted to control the behavior of the male involved, trying to dissuade him from becoming further involved with the interviewee.

General jealousy over females receiving attention from males was reported as spurring negative reactions from other females. Some girls were confused about whom their “real” friends were, given that friends sometimes changed their behaviors or began acting out if they felt threatened by another girl. As in the movie “Mean Girls,” the girl at the top of the social hierarchy began to act out toward her new friend as her friend’s popularity began increasing. One interviewee discussed having had mixed feelings about her friend who exemplified the “queen bee” phenomenon (Wiseman, 2002, p. 2), or the highest girl on social pecking order:

I mean Rachel, you know, kind of (sighs) had – she was kind of, you know, the queen bee. And she was the girl on top, and so all the boys were really good friends with her, you know wanted to date her basically. Which was silly in middle school, but they did. And um, there was a lot of…I think feeling of resentment towards her as much as envy. And um, you know because basically the other girls in the group – if they guys were all mad at Rachel, we couldn’t be friends with them, because if they were mad at Rachel, so they’re mad at us. And if they’re all infatuated with Rachel, we pretty much got ignored. So, I think as much as I identify myself as her friend, I…you know, she bothered me a lot, and I didn’t feel close to her. So, I guess that’s what I would say is – there were superficial friendships like that.

In this particular situation, one girl was struggling with her feelings of jealousy and envy over the male attention her friend was receiving. Although she continued to maintain a relationship with her friend, she was unsure whether she liked the girl and viewed their relationship as superficial. This is a good example of a situation in which a
girl may be vulnerable to relational aggression. A build-up of negative feelings over time may eventually turn into acting out against a friend. A group of girls can decide they are tired of their friend receiving all the attention and then act in a relationally aggressive way, such as in the earlier example in which girls decided not sit with another girl at lunch.

Along similar lines, another interviewee talked about the experience of being on the receiving end of the jealousy of her peers due to male attention she had received. She was new to a high school and, before she even had a chance to make friends, some of the females had begun acting out towards her. She remembered that when she walked through the hallways at school some of the more popular girls would call her name out, trying to sound like boys calling her name. When she looked around to see who was calling her, the other girls pretended to be having a conversation with each other, acting as though nothing had happened. She believed that the girls in the school were most likely threatened by the attention she was receiving from males and were attempting to make her feel insecure. Underlying such behaviors seemed to be an implicit threat that the girls would not be friends with her unless she acted a certain way or adhered to a certain set of standards with which they were comfortable.

A different interviewee commented on the same idea of competition over males, which she believed interfered with females being able to have positive relationships with each other:

I think if some of the kind of…girl-boy tension could have been taken away…I think a lot of it kind of arises from that, a lot of the relational aggression. Um, you know where your standing is with boys, if you have a boyfriend, if you don’t, um, if you’re liked by boys or not. I think if we could have all interacted a little bit more as friends.
The implication here is that if the element of competition over dating partners was removed, the girls might have been able to forge better relationships with one another. In response to feeling threatened by each other, there was then a desire to remove the threat, targeting someone’s confidence and security as a possible way of eliminating the competition.

The second most reported form of competition was academic competition. In a few of the interviews, competition between the smartest girls in the class was discussed at length. One girl remembered a time when the two highest achievers in her class were not on speaking terms. They ignored one another and talked about the other to their peers, each attempting to turn their friends against the other girl. Their conflict put their friends in an awkward position because, as one interviewee stated, they wanted to be friends with both girls. The dynamic between the two girls added strain to their whole peer group. The interviewees believed that each of the two girls was trying to be “smarter” and to intimidate the competition into backing down. The dynamic appeared to be more about power than about who was actually smarter.

Such power dynamics can appear in other forms in the classroom. Girls were reported to intimidate each other in an attempt to keep them from performing up to their potential. One interviewee remembered a moment in math class when she felt bullied by her peers. She had spoken up in class, answering questions about a complicated concept that she understood. She remembered feeling excited about participating. Behind her, two girls began mocking her. One girl started making a stabbing gesture with a pencil onto a piece of paper, as she whispered and laughed with her friend behind her. The interviewee knew they were expressing a dislike for her and felt threatened and distracted by their
behaviors. Such gestures were perceived by the target as highly intimidating and they impacted her willingness and confidence to perform academically.

Competition over both friends and social standing was discussed as another factor fueling relational aggression. One girl believed she had been targeted because she was a strong person and had a powerful influence on her peer group. She was in high school and had maintained the same group of four very close friends for years. She noticed one day that her friends had begun to withdraw from her. When she asked one of her friends in the group why they were ignoring her, her friend informed her that they were being pushed by another member of her group to do so. The interviewee retreated into a depression as her friends ostracized her for over a year. She stated, “I’m a strong person, so they decided to not have me be a strong person, and it worked.” She believed that one girl in particular in her friendship circle had been threatened by her influence over the other girls. It was that friend who had encouraged the other girls in the group not to talk to the interviewee. She was certain that her first years of high school would have gone much more smoothly if she had been able to talk to her friends about what was happening and maybe learn whether there was anything she had done to upset them. Competition over friends was discussed in other interviews as well. Friends were described as being protective and territorial over their close friendships, intimidating girls who would try to start a friendship with a close friend or a best friend.

Any perceived superiority, or behaviors that stood out, also seemed to elicit negative reactions from others. Even someone’s appearance was described as stirring up negative reactions. One interviewee discussed her jealousy over someone wearing cute clothes. She stated, “I mean if somebody has a really cute outfit I’ll be like, ‘Agh, that’s
so cute,’ and be like, ‘God, I wish I had that,’ and then I’ll be annoyed at the girl.” In all of the above examples of competition, there was an underlying theme that those who stood out in some way were more likely to get targeted. The girls who had more influence, whether over males, other females, or in their academics, were reported to elicit negative reactions at times from their peers.

Social Order/Norm Setting

Based upon the reports of relational aggression, one reason such behaviors appeared to continue was that they were effective. For example, ignoring others sent the message that something was wrong, and the recipient was likely to adjust her or his behavior in order to elicit a different response from peers. Thus, one of the functions of relational aggression reported in the interviews appeared to be maintaining social norms. Girls were at times targeted when their actions stood outside the realm of socially sanctioned behavior, as in the earlier example of the girl whose friends began ignoring her when they believed she was being too promiscuous. Throughout the interviews girls discussed the idea that relationally aggressive behaviors served an important social function of communicating and maintaining social order and indicating when someone stepped out of bounds.

Behaviors such as ignoring someone can be a social check when others are not complying with group norms, including simply being “annoying” to other girls. In this instance, relational aggression seemed to provide a different message than did ignoring someone when one was jealous of attention the other was receiving. Whether they were aware of it or not, girls provided each other with silent feedback, attempting to keep peers’ behaviors in check or to prevent immature or inappropriate behaviors. In such
circumstances, relationally aggressive behaviors were described as being learned and entrenched forms of social communication:

Um, but it’s kind of like a self-supporting cycle. Like, you learn it from other girls because…I guess, you know when no one wants to say or no one wants to be mean is like, some girls in middle school are really annoying and really immature. And you don’t want to hang out with them all the time. That’s kind of the bitter truth of it, and it doesn’t justify you being mean to them, but at the same time you know, you feel like…you deserve to have friends you actually enjoy being around too. And so, you know, you do it once. You like justify not inviting them to the party once, and then everyone else in your group supports you. And then they do it, and it’s like, it just keeps building on yourself, and you kind of become a person who’s okay with doing that.

In the above example, ignoring one another seemed to be setting a standard for acceptable and unacceptable behavior. It may also have demarcated girls who were in different developmental stages. For the interviewee just quoted, she and her friends had become interested in dating earlier than had the female whom they were attempting to ignore. Regarding not inviting a friend to a party, she stated, “This girl is really annoying, or you know, she’s going to be uncomfortable if we’re playing truth or dare with a bunch of guys.” In such acts, a complex social process was occurring. Girls may have excluded other girls because they were not fitting in with their interests (e.g., boys), thereby directly or indirectly setting a standard of behavior for their social group.

Oftentimes, following the rules meant adhering to the specific needs of the group to which one belonged. Girls would comply with the wishes of their closest friends, such as whom to be friends with or what to wear. When asked why they focused on the needs of the group versus their own autonomous needs, female socialization was one reason cited as the reason they put their close social circle first. Being raised to put the needs of the group before their own needs, girls learned to do what would be best for others instead of focusing on what they might want for themselves. One interviewee referred
back to a passage she believed to be true that she had read in an international relations textbook to answer the question about why girls found belonging to a group so crucial:

I read this, um, it’s actually like an international relations textbook, but it was about, um, kind of the philosophy of difference feminism. And how, um, you know it says that from birth and especially into adolescence girls are trained to make the group, and keep the group together, and be part of the group, and you know, rely on each other, and like stabilize that at all costs. And boys are taught to be independent and to not, to not rely on others. And you know, they’ll more often come to conflict over something rather than try to mediate it. So I guess especially when you’re, you know, you’re in puberty and you’re kind of becoming a girl or you’re becoming a boy, and it’s – you know you’re not a child anymore. You’re not as androgynous as you are as a child. Um . . . the conflicts that arise in the group just mean a lot more to you and are a lot more important. And if you’re – you know, I, I’m sure it’s very difficult for a boy to not have friends in middle school also, but maybe, you know, maybe they have more to focus on, um, just within themselves.

One implication of the last sentence of her statement is that she believed it was more socially sanctioned for boys to focus on their independent needs and goals than it was for girls. This interviewee thought that girls were taught that maintaining the group was their most important social task. Maintaining the group seemed to involve a dependency upon the opinions of others instead of a focus on one’s own needs, which she believed was encouraged among males. Thus, for girls, the needs of the group supplanted the needs of the individual. The same interviewee continued her point:

I think they’re [boys] sent messages that you know it’s not really okay for you to, um, to be emotional. You know, and it’s, um, you know, it’s more important for you to…focus on – kind of focus on the real things in your life, maybe. I. I think the boys I knew focused more on sports, and they focused more on school, and they focused more on their kind of …life hobbies, whereas we focused – a lot of our focus came off of that and just came onto each other.

From her perspective, females were socialized to put the needs of others or the group ahead of their own needs or pursuits and interests and this concept in and of itself was a social norm for girls.
Different groups may have different rules and social norms, some of which may be based upon where the group stands in the social hierarchy. One girl who identified as being a part of the popular group also stated that she felt constrained by the rules of her social circle. She discussed the costs and benefits of being in the popular group, one cost being that she and her friends behaved according to specific rules. She provided, as one example, rules about what clothing they could wear and when they could wear it. Although she wanted to break the rules in order to make her own decisions about what to wear, she was more concerned about losing her friends than about doing what she wanted. When asked to identify the risk associated with breaking the rules of her group, she stated, “Ten years of friendship. You know, being – I mean we…controlled everything.” Her response indicated that, if she failed to follow along with her friends, she risked losing their friendships. Additionally, part of what was important to her about the relationships was the sense of control she derived from belonging to the popular group.

This girl’s story touched on an ongoing theme present in many of the interviews: conforming to the group versus being independent and potentially risking the loss of social status of belonging to the group. A few interviewees identified a specific moment in which they faced a decision either to follow along with what their friends wanted them to do or to make a decision that felt right to them but could potentially cost them friendships. Many of the girls’ decisions, such as whether or not to speak in class, what to wear to school, or whom to include in social plans, were made on the basis of whether they believed they would continue to be accepted by their friendship group based upon those choices. The underlying fear of rejection was additionally more focused on being
ostracized from a group than it was about offending one individual. Even if one person was offended, the most threatening idea was that that one person would then impact the viewpoints of the other girls in the group. More often than not, girls indicated they would sacrifice their independent desires in order to make a decision that would be pleasing to their friends and maintain their friendship circle.

Specific social rules and standards were sometimes described as being linked to financial status. When discussing money and wealth, girls reported feeling pressure to act a certain way in order to continue to fit in with their peer group. Paradoxically, by acting one way, they oftentimes wound up feeling out of place. Behaving a certain way, or acting self-important was associated with financial status, as coming from a wealthy family was described as driving people to show they were better than others. One girl talked about her experience at a private school outside a major city, attended primarily by children with wealthy parents:

And um, it was the snootiest place you could possibly imagine…You know, it was a performing arts school for all the wealthy doctors and lawyers and business owners to send their kids, to grow up and be future doctors and lawyers and business people and Broadway stars. So, you know, I just – in an environment like that where everybody was perfect – I felt like I wasn’t. And so I had to act to be like that. You know, everybody was incredibly wealthy and, um, and, and so was I, but I didn’t really recognize it. And um, I don’t know, just, so it was so hard to keep up with all of that, knowing that I – that it wasn’t really me – and I hadn’t – I don’t know. It was hard.

Due to the pressure she felt to fit in and belong in this environment, this girl worked hard to become popular and maintain her status in the popular group. Yet, throughout her time at this school, she expressed that she was unhappy given the behaviors she engaged in so as to maintain her status, including excluding others, which was the expectation from her close social circle. The consequences of following the
implicit social norms of a group led to an internalization of frustration at not asserting one’s own wishes and desires, as discussed in the earlier section on emotion management. When asked why she could not express her feelings directly to her friends, one girl commented that to do so would be “social suicide.” She stated:

I would have never confronted her or, you know, confronted any girl I had a problem with…Um, I think…you would have been afraid it was social suicide, you know, to, to openly disagree with someone to their face, and I would have been afraid that all my other friends, kind of seeing me as more powerful, might take her side. Um, and I – it’s just really hard to confront other girls. I don’t know what it is, it’s kind of like an innate…taboo.

In this statement, it appears that the interviewee perceived that being assertive and direct about her feelings and opinions could lead to being ostracized from the group, which seemed to be a social norm in and of itself; that is, not standing up for oneself was very common. Not asserting one’s individual needs created an internal tug-of-war between following one’s desires and conforming to the group. Again, the reasons behind relational aggression appeared interwoven, feeding into each other. Conforming to social norms could lead to internalizing the frustration arising from suppressing one’s own needs. If girls asserted themselves, they often worried that they risked their group status. If they did not assert themselves, they often reported experiencing ongoing frustration at the failed congruence between their feelings and actions. Based upon reports of the interviewees, it seems that often girls felt they had to choose between personal power or asserting themselves and conforming to group rules and standards of behavior, with significant consequences arising out of either choice.

Need for Belonging

The underlying reason that was often given as to why girls would sacrifice their own individual needs for the group was that the desire to belong was often the strongest
pull for girls. Participants discussed the social pressures to both belong to a group and to go along with one’s peers in order to remain included in the group. For example, one girl said, “So, you know it’s hard, it’s really hard to choose when you’re that age, to choose between having a group of friends or being an outsider.” An interesting component of this statement was that the girl believed she had to choose between two extremes, picking a group of friends or having none at all. Missing from the interviews was any discussion of a middle ground, a way for girls to both belong and meet their own needs for autonomy.

Based upon the interviews, it appeared that these girls did not believe they were allowed to disagree with one another. A theme of dependency emerged; that is, feeling the need to belong to a group in order to obtain support, even if that meant ostracizing others or doing something one would not characteristically do. One interviewee stated:

I didn’t want to upset my friends. And I didn’t, um, I mean, I guess if they were that good friends then it wouldn’t be a problem, but, um, yeah, I didn’t want to . . . end up being ostracized by the group. And, um, and so it made it really difficult to, you know, be myself but also be friends with those people.

Thus, for her, joining the group was associated with giving up her authenticity in order to belong. The same interviewee discussed the reactions of the adults in her life as they witnessed the negative impact her peer group was having on her:

These adults that I respected and looked up to kept telling me that I needed to separate myself and telling me that I needed to, you know, be true to myself and that these girls weren’t good for me. And I knew it, but I wasn’t gonna do anything about it. So…It was too much of a risk.

Again, a theme present in this statement was risking being ostracized by the group if one were too authentic or honest with one’s friends. Thus, a girl’s own personal needs became sacrificed or were overridden by her need to belong to the group.
A possible explanation for the reasoning behind making personal sacrifices to be in the group came from another interviewee. Illustrating a similar theme, a different girl stated:

I really liked the girls who I was friends with, most of the time, sometimes I didn’t. But, um, but you know I didn’t want to…be isolated from them, and I certainly didn’t want to be on the outside because I think being in a clique sucks a lot but being on the outside is worse.

The fear of being an outsider, or being alone, emerged as a driving force for perpetuating certain relationally aggressive behaviors. For the girls speaking in these interviews, it came down to a choice between being relationally aggressive or being on the outside themselves.

Socialization, then, was reported more as occurring within a group mentality. Girls reporting making friends based not upon whom they were interested in becoming friends with, but more upon the group to which they wanted or could belong. For example, one girl said, speaking in terms of which peer group she would belong to upon beginning high school, “So, since I had two really close friends, Sarah and Susan, who were already in that group, it was kind of like my choice was sort of made for me.” Once in a group, the group rules and norms then became a significant part of their decision-making process.

Along with discussing relational aggression in terms of establishing and maintaining a social group, girls also discussed the importance of keeping the social hierarchy intact. Some of the girls interviewed identified themselves as being in the popular group, an unpopular group, or somewhere between the two. Some girls wanted to be in the popular group, whereas other girls were being pushed out of it. Along these lines, relational aggression was reported as a method of maintaining one’s social status.
Peers were mistreated or pushed out in order to ensure one’s own position in the pecking order. For some, belonging was created by excluding others. That is, girls defined themselves by whom they did and did not include in their group. Girls discussed spreading gossip about others as one means of increasing their own social status and sense of inclusion in the group. As one interviewee stated, “It’s kind of...that gossip or um...aggression is pretty much what’s expected, or it’s accepted and what’s kind of needed...to fuel girls to bond. I don’t know. I think most relationships are kind of built off that.”

Given that many girls reported that they used relationally aggressive behaviors in order to maintain their group status, this then led to the question of what benefits were derived from the group that would push girls to sacrifice their own wishes and desires or to become indirectly aggressive toward other girls in order to conform to the group norms and belong to a group. When asked this question, one of the interviewees responded, “I think we all depended on each other a lot for kind of a sense of belonging and self-esteem, and if there hadn’t been as many [girls involved] it would have felt less like a, you know, justifiable thing.” This girl’s sense of identity appeared to be formed in the group, implying that girls without a group would then be left without a sense of belonging or identity. This sentiment, in conjunction with the statement made earlier that to express a conflict directly would have been “social suicide,” provides some insight that, without a group, girls worried that they would have nothing. If the group provided social support and a sense of identity, then there would be no sense of self to fall back on without it. More significantly, girls did not feel there was a middle ground; one was either in a group, or one was alone. Thus, the fear of being left alone and ostracized led
many girls to behave in indirectly aggressive ways towards one another in order to ensure that they were not left out.

**Phenomenon of Relational Aggression**

Based upon the model of understanding and coping with relational aggression, the causes of relational aggression led to the actual phenomenon of relational aggression, meaning the specific behaviors used by girls to act out towards one another through relationships. Across the interviews, specific patterns emerged as to how girls used relationships to be hurtful. Described below are the ways in which the interviewees experienced such acts. Generally, relational aggression was reported as occurring within a dyad (i.e., between two people), between one girl and a group of girls, or between groups. Relational aggression was reported as occurring across socioeconomic brackets, although financial and class differences were sometimes reported as the dividing line between social groups. Most commonly, relational aggression was discussed as taking place between two girls over a conflict, perceived conflict, or jealousy, yet often other girls were enlisted in the battle. Some of the behaviors listed below overlap with examples given in the section on causes; however, it seemed important to isolate and describe the behaviors themselves that were reported as the phenomenon of relational aggression.

The most typical behavior noted by interviewees was ignoring the peer who was the source of their conflict. The second most frequent relationally aggressive behavior was talking about someone behind her back. Rumor-spreading was also often mentioned in the interviews as a way to target someone. Regarding these acts, one interviewee noted:
Like, when we get mad at people we try and not talk to them, we try and stay out of the situation where we’ll just get into another argument. And at that point we don’t get the facts straight. We’ll either make stuff up or blow things out of proportion, and so then when we do go to criticize people behind their back, it turns into a situation that could be harmful or just distressing to everyone.

Girls at times engaged other peers in their conflict, such as encouraging a friend not to spend time with the person with whom they were experiencing a conflict, as in the following example:

And then one day I came to school, and no one would talk to me, and um, my um …it turned out that the girl (her close friend) Sarah had convinced Susan and Julie that they shouldn’t talk to me anymore and that they should just ignore me. And they convinced the rest of the class too, and so I came to school that week, and no one would talk to me, and I just wasn’t good enough for them. Um, and so that lasted for about the last month and a half of school.

Engaging others often fueled the conflict, creating a snowball effect. As the conflict grew and more people became involved, often the intensity of the experience was increased for the target. One participant gave the example of her friend slyly giving another girl a thumbs-up as her friend was confronting a targeted girl, secretly encouraging the aggressor to continue her confrontation. The internet was also discussed as a medium through which girls became relationally aggressive. Examples were given of girls posting negative comments about one another on their MySpace or Facebook pages, as well as e-mailing or text messaging mean comments to or about one another to other girls.

Other means of relational aggression included relationship threats and control, including threatening to pull back from a relationship if one girl was not doing what a friend wanted her to do or was not playing by implicit or explicit group rules. As stated in one interview:
We had rules about what to wear. One of us couldn’t buy the same shirt as the other one unless all five of us bought it, and we could only wear it on the same day. I remember being – in second grade – being yelled at because my clothes didn’t match, and just stuff like that. It was ridiculous.

The significance of this situation for the interviewee was the fear of not being included, the threat of rejection if she did not follow the group rules. Nonverbal cues were also discussed as being used to communicate hostility towards one another, such as rolling eyes at a peer, or two girls glancing back and forth at one another to communicate frustration with a third party, as in the following example:

…they would do other stuff too. Like, I’d walk in front of their lunch table, and they’d kind of just look at me and make an annoyed face or groan, because, or look at what I was wearing or something. ’Cuz they all wear really designer stuff.

Finally, included in the dynamics of relational aggression was denying a problem if it was confronted directly. One interviewee remembered being new at a school and hearing a girl call her name in the hallway, essentially making fun of her to others. She later queried that peer about it, asking, “‘Hey, do you remember when I first came here? Did you like call my name in the hallway or something?’ She’s like, ‘No, why would I do that?’ I was like, ‘I don’t know. I was just wondering.’” Girls provided seemingly endless examples of ways in which indirect aggression played out in their social dynamics. Often during the interviews when asked to provide an example of relational aggression, they would comment, “Just one?” Although the behaviors above describe the specific ways in which relational aggression was reported as occurring, it is likely not an exhaustive list. In the following section the contexts in which such behaviors were described as being modeled and taking place is discussed.
Context

The context in which one learns relational aggression may have an impact upon the relationally aggressive behaviors that one learns and then repeats. The following data about contexts are outlined in this section: where it is learned and who does it. In terms of when relationally aggressive behaviors peak, interviewees unanimously concluded that “middle school is the worst [time for relational aggression].” Although some reported that it occurred in both elementary school and high school, they all believed that relational aggression was most prevalent and rampant in middle school.

Where Relational Aggression is Learned

Interviewees most frequently responded that they learned relational aggression from their families and gave numerous examples of observing such behaviors at home. They spoke next of learning relational aggression from their peers, and finally the media were cited as a source for promoting relationally aggressive behaviors. However, the family was the most consistent and frequently talked about source for modeling relational aggression.

Different examples emerged regarding how interviewees observed parents or siblings using relationally aggressive behaviors. Some discussed witnessing parents using such tactics to avoid conflict. One girl spoke of a friend whose mother became resentful if her mother did not believe her daughter was spending enough time with her. Her friend’s mother expressed her resentment by ignoring and avoiding her daughter. This interviewee stated:

I have a friend whose mom is, she’s a little crazy. She’s really protective…And it got to the point where, um, the daughter wouldn’t come out to go have pizza or something ’cuz her mom had wanted to watch a movie with her at home. And it’s
just…you can tell that she’s like, “Okay, you can go out with your friends, but then I’m not gonna talk to you,” or something like that.

On a similar note, regarding learning more avoidant behaviors from parents, another interviewee stated:

…when your parents argue, they then – they don’t want to talk to each other, so they don’t. And they just go on and – they kind of put their nose up in the air, and they – I mean you [her mother] answer the phone, and “Nothing happened,” and …oh, that used to make me so mad when I was a kid.

This girl was mainly commenting on the frustration of witnessing her parents pretend there was not a problem when they were actually upset with one another. She had difficulty tolerating the tension that this created in her household.

In another example, one girl remembered being at a friend’s house and listening to her friend’s mother talk negatively about some of their peers in front of both girls:

Their [her friend’s] mother is very gossipy, like I’ll be over, when I used to go over, and they’d [the mom and her daughter] be talking about like some girl in her class or some boy in her class, or like um, just dumb stuff. Like, they’d be gossiping about another girl’s parents and like, just ridiculous stuff.

This girl was explaining why she thought this particular friend’s sibling was very relationally aggressive, stating that she learned to behave that way from her mother. In terms of siblings modeling relationally aggressive behavior, one interviewee remembered her friend being mistreated by a sibling, stating: “…their siblings do it to them. Like, just sit there, ignore them, and then when they get up to leave, they’ll just like glare at them, just like, ‘No, you stay there.’ Or stuff like that.”

Another way in which girls reported resorting to relationally aggressive behaviors was by witnessing direct aggression at home and deciding that was not a good option for handling conflict. An interviewee discussed her parents’ regular fighting prior to their divorce as a way in which she had learned to use indirect aggression to cope with
conflict. She stated, “I constantly saw my parents, like, undercutting each other…so I think I was just surrounded by poor examples. I just didn’t really have – no real, you know, footing. So it made…I guess it made the relational aggression just…rampant.” She expressed that she thought she had two options for handling conflict: either to get into a fight with someone or to avoid that situation altogether in order to circumvent a fight. She worried that if she confronted challenges with her friends she would become aggressive and possibly risk losing a friendship, so she wound up acting out in other ways.

Some interviewees talked about having parents who either modeled relational aggression or turned a blind eye to it, yet others reported their parents discouraged such behaviors. One girl stated that, although her parents became very disappointed if she displayed any relationally aggressive behaviors, she felt forced to exclude girls she might want to be friends with in order to fit in with her close social group. She indicated she could socialize with the girls within her group but believed her status within the group might be compromised if she socialized outside of her group. Multiple girls discussed feeling the need to choose between excluding others in order to be a part of a group or being excluded themselves, as discussed in the previous section under causes for relational aggression. Once inside a group, relational aggression was often used to maintain who belonged and who did not belong to the group, and thus the behavior was often expected and continuously reinforced in some social circles, particularly the more popular groups. Thus, oftentimes girls learned to use relational aggression from their peers in order to be included socially.

Finally, interviewees discussed the media as a source for promoting the behaviors of relational aggression. The movie “Mean Girls,” based on the relationally aggressive
behaviors of a popular group in high school, was talked about in a few of the interviews as an accurate depiction of how some high school girls can behave. Based on the book, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and other Realities of Adolescence* by Rosalind Wiseman (2002), the movie mocks the highly aggressive nature of popular girls. The “queen bee” phenomenon is played out in the movie as one girl uses underhanded tactics with her peers and her close friends in order to maintain her top position in the social hierarchy. She resorts to spreading lies and rumors about her close friend when she feels threatened by her friend’s growing popularity. Regarding the movie, one interviewee stated, “I know girls who actually want to be mean girls…and be that really high, um, elite group that is very aggressive.”

Television shows were cited as another source through which girls observed relationally aggressive behavior, in that some shows depict adolescents being indirectly mean to one another. One interviewee believed her peers mimicked the behaviors in the television shows because they thought that was what relationships were supposed to look like: “In middle school it’s sort of like everybody wanted drama ’cuz it looked cool, ’cuz that’s what we were watching on TV, you know, the school – like the high school TV shows.”

Thus, relational aggression was reported as being learned in a variety of contexts. Whether from their family, peers, or media, interviewees had no shortage of ideas regarding where they had been exposed to learning such behaviors for handling conflict. Because they were continuously witnessing relational aggression from others in different areas in their lives, there seemed to be a sense of a culture of using such behaviors; that
is, that such behaviors are the norm for teenage girls and some adults, as reflected in the following statement:

And it’s also kind of like, entertainment. I think it’s gotten to the point with girls that you almost expect it, expect that to be at any gathering with girls. Because…also, I guess, in the kind of social life that I’m in, girls don’t tend to talk about anything that is beyond their fence and just their life, and anything that’s not right now, or blaming their parents, or um…or school or stuff. I mean, if I was to bring up a conversation about the economy, people would look at me or anybody else who did and just be like, “What?” [said sarcastically]. It’s kind of…that gossip or um…aggression is pretty much what’s expected, or it’s accepted and what’s kind of needed…to fuel girls to…bond. I don’t know, I think most relationships are kind of built off that.

This quote speaks to the pervasive nature of relational aggression. Given that teens see it modeled in a variety of areas of their lives, it is not surprising that using relational aggression is how they react to conflict.

Who Participates in Relational Aggression

Upon hearing a description of the behaviors that constituted relational aggression, there was not one interviewee who had not experienced relational aggression. They all related numerous stories of relational aggression in which they took on one or more roles: witness, initiator, and/or recipient. Some stated that their best friends and close peer group made them targets. A few girls reported being targeted by people they did not know. Girls who were trying to be popular were cited as targeting both popular peers and those also trying to get popular, attempting to exclude others as a basis for gaining entry into the popular group. Additionally, those who worked to maintain their popularity—that is, people who “have it all [clothes, looks, money, popularity]” – were included as perpetrators of relational aggression. Both troubled teens and teens who were described as “secure” were reported to use relationship threats towards others. As put by one interviewee:
I wish you had been there in our morning meeting when they announced this [the study]. Because they were like, “She’s going to be doing a study on relational aggression with 9th- through 12th-grade girls,” and everyone started laughing because everyone knows that girls are the problem, like we all talk about it, but still we all know that we do it.

The interviewees reported that most girls use these strategies to one degree or another, regardless of their social group. Some groups were reported as being more benign and less indirectly aggressive, depending upon the norms for that particular group. One interviewee commented that in her social group they chose to talk to one another about conflicts:

Like, with my group of friends, it’s – someone will ignore, like, someone, and we’re just to the point that… it’ll go on for maybe a half hour, and then we just sit down, and we talk about it and then it’s done… I think we’re a lot better about that than a lot of other people are.

Thus, it seemed that some girls were able to circumvent acting out their feelings indirectly, yet, based upon the interviews, relational aggression did appear to be more of the norm in that most girls reported being involved in such behaviors to one degree or another. In the next section, I consider strategies that teens reported using to cope with relational aggression.

Strategies for Coping with Relational Aggression

During the interviews, girls talked about how they saw themselves and others responding to relational aggression. They spoke from first- and second-hand experience about reactions that were helpful; that is, reactions that helped to diffuse a negative dynamic. They also talked about reactions that they observed to exacerbate a situation, increasing and compounding negative feelings and/or behaviors of aggression toward or from their peers. The girls also discussed the role of adults; that is, how they saw parents and teachers responding to relational aggression. Again, they talked about ways in which
they found adults’ reactions and responses helpful and ways in which they believed adults perpetuated the cycle of relational aggression. They also commented on ways in which they would like to see adults respond as well as identifying adult responses that felt supportive.

**Effective Responses**

Due to the complicated, insidious nature of relational aggression, oftentimes the responses that girls listed as effective ways of handling relational aggression contradicted one another. It may be that one response is effective in one situation and not in another; thus, there may be not one right way of responding to relational aggression, and each situation and conflict may need to be assessed independently in terms of how to respond most effectively. The effectiveness of a given response likely depends upon a variety of factors, such as the relationship of people involved in the dynamics, how much they truly like each other, peer pressure (i.e., whether to make up or stay in a fight), the seriousness of the conflict, the intensity of emotions, and so forth.

Effective responses to relational aggression are presented in no particular order of importance in this section; each of the following was mentioned frequently by the interviewees as ways of responding to relational aggression: confronting the behavior, taking responsibility, letting it go, and seeking social support.

*Confront the behavior.* When asked about ways of responding to relational aggression, a few interviewees initially suggested confronting the person with whom one was involved in a conflict. However, this was not a unanimous approach given by all the girls, and often they gave guidelines about when and how one should confront a peer. A few thought confronting someone should depend upon the circumstances and how willing
the other party was to make amends. One girl explained that one should try to address the situation, and if that did not work then one should “let it go.” Some believed ignoring the situation initially could be helpful, whereas some believed this could make it worse. One girl stated, “I don’t think ignoring it is good, not initially anyways.” But, she did think it was best to wait until “it cools down.” She thought that confronting the subject “casually” (if you still have a relationship with the person) was wise. Another girl stated, “Act nonchalant, but mention it.” A different interviewee recommended a stronger approach, believing it was important to tell the other party how you feel and then ask questions such as, “Why are you treating me this way?” She also believed that attempting to confront a difficult situation was the first step one should take in order to resolve it. In a similar vein, another interviewee thought confronting a conflict was an important way to stand up for oneself; she stated, “Well, it can just go away, but then it also goes away kind of unpunished. And so the aggressor will think it’s okay to keep doing, but it’s not.” Even though confronting a conflict was consistently mentioned, there was variation in how girls recommended approaching the confrontation. It may be important to look at other factors in the situation before deciding how to approach a peer.

*Take responsibility.* A second strategy that emerged in terms of how to appropriately handle a conflict with a peer was to take responsibility for one’s own part in the conflict. One interviewee discouraged the tendency to blame others, stating the problem was often perpetuated when blaming another: “Um, making it all about them and not about you, like saying, ‘Well, she did this and this and this,’ without saying, ‘Well, I hit her,’ or, ‘I talked about her behind her back.’” She emphasized the importance of considering one’s own role or part in creating a difficult dynamic, believing it was easier
to resolve when each party took some responsibility for the problem. The idea underlying this means of resolution is that such conflicts do not occur in a vacuum, and they are more easily approached and resolved when someone is willing to take responsibility for how she might have contributed to a conflict. Another interviewee believed that when communicating with someone about a problem, it was important to expect to compromise; she stated, “Um, I mean, you know, you can’t think that, ‘Oh, there can’t possibly be anything wrong with me, so whatever she is saying is just…ridiculous.’” Underscoring the idea of expecting to compromise was also an emphasis on being respectful of others and their opinions and ideas, which was communicated as being important in order for both parties to air grievances or talk about emotionally charged feelings.

*Let it go.* Another consistent theme in the interviews in terms of dealing effectively with relational aggression was the advice to “let it go.” Letting it go meant a few things, such as not focusing on a situation, trusting that things would work out, or even just ignoring it. As one interviewee stated, “I think just looking at the situation and saying, ‘Okay, this is what’s going on. It’s gonna pass. These are my friends. It’ll work out.’” The catch with letting it go, and an important side note, was to do this “only if you really can.” If girls pretended to be unaffected by a situation while they really were impacted by it, the advice was different (this will be discussed below). Thus, two types of ignoring were distinguished in the interviews: ignoring a situation due to being scared or really upset versus ignoring because one was simply choosing not to respond to a relationally aggressive behavior.
Ignoring a conflict when one was having a strong emotional reaction was described as meaning that one was likely feeling intimidated and controlled by the behavior; that is, the arrow had reached its target, so to speak. Girls believed that aggressors were looking for a reaction, and a big reaction poured emotional fuel on the fire. One interviewee attempted to define the line between having an emotional reaction and letting it go. When asked to identify an ineffective way of handling relational aggression, she stated:

Um, I think having a huge reaction to it. Like, that almost enables them. I mean ignoring it could work because then they don’t get a reaction at all out of it…’cuz you’re not gonna let it ruffle your feathers is a better way to go, but, I mean, there’s no way to prepare someone for what they’re going to be afraid of.

The underlying idea is that focusing on a problem or situation made it worse, and thus the advice of many girls was to “not let it get to you.” However, girls noted that people got into trouble when they were affected by something but tried to pretend that they were not. If one was truly able to let it go, ignoring the behavior was most likely to be effective.

The idea of letting it go contradicts the idea of confronting a situation. More often than not, girls thought it was best to try to talk openly about a conflict first and, if that did not work, one should “let it go.” Letting it go included trusting that tensions would pass and the situation would resolve itself. Part of what seemed to distinguish girls who were impacted negatively by relational aggression from the ones who were able to successfully maneuver through it was the ability to be less reactive to conflict. As one interviewee said, “Um, you know to guard your feelings, at least in part you have to – you have to be able to say, ‘I can’t do anything about this. This has nothing to do with me. I’m just gonna back away from it.’” Taking the concept of letting it go one step further was the
The idea of diverting one’s attention from the situation. This could mean giving some space to the person with whom one was in conflict, as in the following example:

I decided to just give her space. Because I figure that if she actually wanted to be around me, and if her friendship was meant to be, she would eventually realize that. But not to force it upon her and be like, “Why are you ignoring me?”, ’cuz then it might even drive her away more.

Diverting one’s attention also included focusing on other friendships or activities – any means through which one could redirect attention to some other focus.

*Seek social support.* Finally, many interviewees emphasized the importance of talking to others and getting advice and input about how to handle a conflict. Communication was stressed, so that one could get an opinion, help manage one’s feelings, and constructively talk and think through how to approach a dynamic. One girl stated, “I think it’s good to address the fact that it’s a problem and seeing that it’s there and being aware of it, and identify with yourself emotionally, like how do you feel about it? How is it affecting you?” This was an area of enormous importance, as the greatest reported harm in relational aggression came when girls did not talk about it and thus swallowed their feelings, which were perceived as later coming out in destructive ways. It was recommended that girls consult and confide in trusted friends and acknowledge feelings and reactions with someone safe: “But suppressing emotion and suppressing anger and stuff like that, it’s unhealthy. You need to be able to vent or have someone that you really do trust to talk to and to help you through the situation.” The more one was bothered by relational aggression, the more important it was to talk about one’s feelings. Talking to an adult was also recommended, with one caveat: The adult had to be able to listen without becoming overly reactive. Talking to parents or getting the school involved
to mediate a conflict if it was really problematic was recommended as a last resort if other avenues had been exhausted.

**Ineffective Responses**

In conjunction with effective responses for handling relational aggression, girls discussed responses they had found to be ineffective in dealing with relational aggression. Some of these were merely the opposite of effective responses but bear mentioning for the purpose of illustrating the consistency of ideas as well as complexity regarding what to do and what not to do in terms of dealing with relational aggression. Although the ideas themselves may seem simple and obvious, it can be difficult for girls to respond in a way that does not perpetuate the cycle of relational aggression. The behaviors listed below were thought of as either exacerbating or avoiding the problem and thus increasing relationship difficulty: holding it in, retaliating, and trying too hard. It seems that in dealing with relational dynamics girls were often required to do a balancing act between keeping the peace with others and managing their own emotional reactions to a situation.

*Holding it in.* In light of making sure one received social support, many of the interviewees cautioned against “holding it in.” Such internalizing behaviors were warned against because they were found to reap the most negative consequences. This ineffective response included holding a grudge against someone. The following statement emphasizes the costs of such a response:

> When you hold it in, it’s just like you’re not being yourself. You’re – you’re hiding inside of yourself ’cuz you’re afraid of expressing how you feel about the situation. Like if someone makes you mad, say something, like approach them… instead of just sitting there, going home, not talking, not eating, not doing anything social because you’re upset, and it’ll get to a place where…it can crush a person. Especially if they hold that in like all through high school or college.
Like, I’ve seen adults still do it, and you can see how it affects them. And I can see how it affects their kids, their relationships with husbands, wives. And if you can’t learn how to vent, or at least how to confront the situation, it just eats you. It eats at you slowly until you turn into either a ticking time bomb or you’re so depressed that you can’t function.

Girl also warned that sometimes a consequence of holding it in was becoming overly focused on the negative dynamic. Someone gave the example of “obsessing” about a situation, stating:

Um, I think 

obsessing

about it is just...awful. I’ve totally done that, you know when somebody was ignoring me. You freak out. Like, you don’t want anybody to be ignoring you. I’m not a bad person. What did I do? And so um, but that’s not an effective way to handle it. It doesn’t change anything, it just makes you more and more worked up.

Obsessing would be the opposite of letting it go. However, working through and identifying the underlying issues and feelings towards someone may be an important step toward being able to let it go.

Retaliation. Retaliation was discussed in terms of what not to do in response to any type of provocation. Some thought retaliation only escalated tension in a situation. For example, fighting back at a peer by talking about her behind her back was seen as increasing a negative dynamic, justifying more anger and more acting out. One interviewee shared her thoughts about retaliation:

...what I think people should do is definitely not um...get overworked about it and go and...maybe not um, not get aggressive back...I mean once, once um the situation has cooled down, I think it is wise to address it because then that’s...it’s never gonna get anywhere if you don’t. But, not to kind of do the same thing back, if you are being...[the one] who has aggression put upon you, then you don’t want to just do that same thing back ’cuz that’s never gonna work out.

Retaliation was often how the cycle of relational aggression was described as continuing to play out. Reacting out of anger by trying to hurt another, as opposed to addressing one’s feelings constructively, kept a fight going. Avoiding responsibility and blaming
others was also discussed in terms of behaviors or attitudes that perpetuated a difficult dynamic. Getting into a fight without being willing to compromise could keep one mired in a conflict because that was when girls often felt justified in their anger – that is, when they saw themselves as victims of someone else’s acting out – which was more likely to keep them engaged in a negative dynamic.

*Trying too hard.* Finally, a behavioral trap that teens were warned against falling into was continuously attempting to please those who were instigating relationally aggressive behaviors. If someone was being mistreated, being overly nice to those who were acting out was viewed as getting “walked on” by others, which was reported to likely continue such behaviors from aggressors. Trying to get a friendship back, such as repeated attempts to repair the relationship in spite of being ignored or talked about by someone, was seen as devaluing oneself and inviting more relational aggression. As stated by one girl who was finding this strategy ineffective:

> I honestly, I guess for me, I would say I just keep trying to be the better person. I keep trying to be friends with these people, and it’s not really working out for me, but I’m still trying. You know, and I just try to react to it positively.

She later noted that she thought she should stop attempting to get the relationship back, stating, “I feel like I shouldn’t keep trying. I feel like I’ve gotten to the point where I shouldn’t anymore ’cuz it’s not working.” One interviewee saw this behavior as showing others that what they were doing was effective, in that the aggressors were effectively controlling and manipulating the person who was being overly nice by exploiting their guilt and distress about being ignored.

*Avoiding ineffective responses.* As just noted, ineffective ways of handling relational aggression were seen as not communicating about struggles one might be
having, holding feelings inside, being overly focused on a conflict, retaliating back with more relationally aggressive behaviors, and being overly pleasing towards those who were being aggressive. Although these may seem like simple and obvious strategies to avoid, part what is tricky about handling relational aggression lies in its insidious, covert nature. It can be hard to pinpoint and therefore can be difficult to talk about, to name, to understand, and deal with effectively. The ensuing confusion makes it easier for girls to overreact or respond poorly given their uncertainty about the reasons for aggression or who might be targeting them.

In certain circumstances, relational aggression can be a minefield in which one does not really know where one stands with certain friends at any given time, when one will be targeted, or if one is being targeted. The pressure of such situations makes girls more likely to implode or react negatively. Identifying and effectively carrying out strategies for handling relational aggression is clearly an area in which it appears girls need the most guidance. During the interviews, the girls consistently asked to learn ways of handling relational aggression; they were looking for concrete strategies of what to do and what not to do in response to such behaviors.

Role of Parents

There were mixed reviews from the interviewees regarding the role of parents in dealing with relational aggression. The girls discussed both how they saw parents respond to their experiences of relational aggression and the ways in which they would like to see parents help them deal with relationship struggles. Girls reported finding parents to be both helpful and not so helpful; some reported over-involvement from parents and others reported too little involvement. Most girls did not think parents should
get involved with a conflict between peers at all because parents “only see their child’s viewpoint.” However, one interviewee found her parents’ role in helping her cope with difficult relationship dynamics helpful.

A small group of interviewees observed parents being uninvolved in helping their children navigate relationships and relationship conflict. Sometimes they commented on a general unawareness on the part of parents regarding the impact of relational aggression. Other times parents were reported to be too busy to notice. One participant remarked:

I know a lot of other parents that just won’t even listen…because several of my friends don’t – can’t talk to their parents. Either they’re not home very often or they’re not that in tune with their kids, or they have so many kids they can’t be attentive to each one.

Girls also believed that adults did not pay attention because they often normalized the behaviors of relational aggression. Girls reported experiencing an attitude from adults to the effect that “that’s just how girls are,” which then caused them to minimize the impact of such behaviors. One interviewee recalled the lack of reaction she received from her parents about conflict she was having: “I came home and told my parents, and they kind of brushed it off like they didn’t really think that it had actually happened, um, they really didn’t see that happening.” In part, parents’ lack of reactivity may have to do with the difficulty girls sometimes have communicating distress. One interviewee discussed telling her parents about a very challenging dynamic at school, yet she remembered mentioning it nonchalantly to her parents, stating, “Um, and when I did tell my parents, I didn’t really tell them how it made me feel. I just kind of told them.” She recalled that her parents then did not really respond, unaware of the impact her experience was having on her emotional life because she had mentioned it very casually.
On the other hand, many parents were credited with becoming overly involved in their children’s relationships. Unanimously, all of the girls interviewed believed that parental involvement in a conflict between friends made situations worse and could just add another element of reactivity, which further escalated tensions. This was noted to occur in part because parents were not involved in the conflict and, thus, often did not understand the complexity and the history underneath the dynamics, as explained by one girl:

I feel like they are more close-minded to it than we are, as being the ones in the problem…then the moms would get involved and then the moms would be fighting. I feel like it would just escalate it so much more…I’ve never liked having parents involved ’cuz I feel like they’re not gonna know the situation better than we are, so are they really gonna help it that much? Wouldn’t it just be easier for us to resolve it within ourselves?

Some interviewees had witnessed parents taking sides and getting into the conflict with their child: “Some parents, you know, I’ve seen parents totally side with their kids and get mad at the other kid’s parents.” Parents’ defensiveness was attributed to the facts that “parents only see their child’s side of it,” and parents “just feel what their child is feeling.” Thus, parents were viewed as too biased and protective towards their children to be able to assist them in effectively navigating a conflict. It was very clear in the interviews that the girls did not trust their parents to be helpful if they became involved in the dynamics of a fight; trying to resolve a conflict for their children often added a parent’s own reactivity and protectiveness to an already tense dynamic.

Not only did parents sometimes become overly involved, girls tended to see their parents as stopping them from learning lessons they needed to learn in relationships. When dealing with or hearing about a conflict, girls believed that it was important that parents understand that their child may have mistreated people, as expressed in the
following statement: “So, I think it’s important for the parent of the child that is being the mean girl...to really look at your child and accept the fact that your child is being a bitch, excuse my language, but you know, that your child is being mean.” They believed parents often jumped to a child’s defense without taking time to understand or be objective about a situation, which ultimately did not help the child. One interviewee expressed her thoughts regarding parent’s role in their children’s relationships:

I think overall though, parents should step back a little bit more. Um, I don’t know if that’s so much in, you know, relational aggression or in friendships, but in other aspects at least it seems like, you know, in, in – it seems like there’s an epidemic of helicopter parents, right now…But, at the same time, you can’t guard – I, I think parents can’t guard their children from having experiences that force them to grow up and force them to...you know, deal with difficult things.

Instead of being protected, girls wished for parents to help them learn lessons from their experiences, acting more as guides than controlling their child’s experience. They wanted more advice and less intervention. They wanted support but not rescue: “I don’t think it’s healthy to rescue them. I think it’s important to, um, to make sure they feel loved by not try to invalidate their feelings.” Along the similar lines the same interviewee proposed, “Don’t take over...ask your child what she needs.” Many wanted their parents’ unconditional support and affirmation (e.g., one participant stated what she would like to hear her parents tell her to demonstrate their support: “I’m still gonna love you even if you make mistakes, or lose all your friends, or make bad grades, or get bullied, or bully somebody else. I’m still going to love you”). Sometimes they believed it would be helpful for parents to encourage developing other friendships when their child was struggling with one relationship. They wanted suggestions, and they also wanted the freedom to choose their own course of action and learn from their mistakes and successes. Ultimately girls appeared disempowered if their parents became too involved,
which sent them the message that they were not capable of dealing with it on their own. They were then cut off from participating in and resolving challenges they were facing and likely to learn from, and thus they believed it was better to “resolve it ourselves.”

Communication was, again, strongly emphasized as an important avenue for parents to help girls cope with relationship challenges. One interviewee stressed the importance of communication from a very early age:

I mean, even before that [middle school] – they need to start, they need to have a good relationship with their kids, like talk about everything with them. I mean, make it normal. You absolutely cannot just start it in middle school. That’s kind of a borderline area. But, once you get to high school if you’re not used to talking to your parents, you won’t. I’m not used to talking to my parents, I don’t. I talk to my friends.

The interviewee who expressed the most satisfaction with her parents’ role in her relationships described her parents as active listeners. She found that her parents rarely told her what to do or judged her friends but instead offered their support by listening and helping her problem solve without becoming overly emotionally involved or rushing to her defense.

Girls did not want parents to cast blame on others, whether it be peers, teachers, or the school system. They also did not want parents to take sides. It was explicitly stated by one interviewee that parents should not say anything bad about the other child involved in a conflict, or a relationally aggressive dynamic:

If your kid is one of the kids who’s not making friends, well then, you know (what a parent might say to a child), “Maybe you need to think about what actions you’re doing that are putting other people off, but at the same time, I commiserate with you. That’s not – they shouldn’t treat you like that.” And you know, be very feeling, but. . .be honest, and you know if there’s something you know your kid is responsible for then, you know pointing that out and not shielding them from their own kind of actions. Um, but I would say yeah, more like you know, “This is what I think you should do, but you’re gonna have to make your own decision. I’m not gonna, you know I’m not gonna be calling up your teachers. I’m not
going to be calling your friend’s parents and say, ‘How dare your child do this to my child?’”

Based upon the input from the interviews regarding parents, there appeared to be a line for parents to walk between empathizing and getting too involved or offering up too many suggestions. It seems at times adolescents wanted suggestions from their parents, whereas at other times they just wanted someone to listen. Additionally, it should likely be left up to parents when and how to intervene. Girls explicitly did not want their parents calling the parents of a friend with whom they may be involved in a conflict. However, if dynamics became extreme, some type of intervention might be necessary. In that case, girls thought it was better for parents to communicate through school than to call the other parents. In an unrelenting situation, girls expressed the need for a mediator, yet they preferred that teachers or some other adult be in this role, not parents. The role of teachers is discussed in the next section.

Role of Teachers

In terms of the role of teachers in dealing with relational aggression, girls’ perceptions of their involvement seemed to depend upon the school itself; that is, whether the school was large or small, public or private. One interviewee who had experienced both private and public educations believed that it was harder to connect with teachers at a larger public school. She thought that teachers in this setting were busier and less likely to get involved with relationally aggressive dynamics, stating, “Teachers sometimes [get involved], I mean not so much – I don’t think in the bigger, public schools, but I know at our school [a small, private school] there’s like – there’s almost always a teacher that you click with.” Girls who had attended smaller private schools tended to have more personal relationships with their teachers and would occasionally call on them to help mediate a
conflict with their friends. They also observed teachers witnessing a negative dynamic and involving themselves in helping the girls resolve and air difficult feelings. Whether or not some girls would involve a teacher in a conflict was reported to depend upon their comfort level with their teachers. Others believed teachers were difficult to lean on because “you almost get a new one every year,” making it more difficult to form a relationship and a trusting bond.

Regardless of whether girls would actually involve teachers in a conflict, they unanimously preferred teacher involvement over parent involvement because they perceived that teachers tended to be more neutral in dealing with conflict. As noted by one girl:

I think, um, I think that a teacher should be more involved than a parent should, um with dealing with the other child, um, with the child that’s being mean. Um, because I think that a teacher sees, sees both sides and can have the more fair view…Like maybe the child that was being abused, um, having relational aggression, um, no one deserves it, but maybe they had been mean back. You know, so I think a teacher can have a broader perspective that a parent can’t.

Similar statements were reflected in many of the interviews, as girls noted that, if they did want a mediator, they wanted that party to be objective.

Although girls favored teacher intervention if there needed to be adult intervention, they did frequently comment that often teachers missed relationally aggressive dynamics that were taking place in the school. As noted in one interview: “It’s difficult for teachers at our school to see it ’cuz they don’t observe us in the hallways, they don’t listen to our gossip.” One participant thought that whether or not a teacher recognized such dynamics depended upon the teacher: “Some teachers know. Some teachers don’t. It’s whether or not they choose to acknowledge it.” Others believed teachers just missed relational aggression and were disappointed by their lack of
acknowledgement: “I wish my teachers would have listened and would have noticed. Um, I thought it was pretty obvious. Um, but they just weren’t paying that close of attention, I guess.”

Girls wished that teachers would keep their eyes out for relational aggression and ask questions if they sensed that problems were occurring. One interviewee stated:

I guess maybe…a little bit more…honesty and recognition of it from, from the teachers would have been helpful. You know maybe, um – I mean we went through underhanded tactics to avoid girls, and you know, we did mean things. And um, and they were never like, you know, blatantly punishable things, but…you know (sighs). I guess, I guess maybe if there had been more like…a little bit more counseling, maybe a little more, um, directed just at girls, um, and girl relationships. Um, you know, if, if the teachers would have set up, you know social events that kind of forced us to interact more with each other.

Given that most of the reported relational aggression took place at school, girls reported wanting more intervention at school. They hoped that teachers not only would intervene, but also notice negative dynamics and help them understand how to handle the situations. Mainly, they did not want to be left alone to muddle through relationship challenges without a witness and without some adult guidance. The teachers and school system by default were described as letting them down with a lack of awareness of and support for dealing with relational aggression, as described in the following statement:

I think (sighs)...some confrontation would have been a good thing, that none of us did. But, you know, I mean, ’cuz it’s really hard when you’re that age to kind of control your emotions and to, you know, actually give constructive criticism instead of just, you know, “bitch” or whatever. It’s um, you know, and you’re also discouraged from confronting by the school. I mean no one wants a fight, or a scene, or, you know, tears all over the place. And um – but I think if we had been able to say, or you know… someone stepped in and mediated and said, you know, “You guys have to work this out,” and you just say, you know, “It really hurts that you’re acting this way,” um, you know, “What have I done? What can I do to improve this?” And like demand – I don’t know – I guess if a counselor, or if there had been like a teacher who could have said, you know, “You have to say what you’ve done wrong and what you think this person’s done wrong,” and both
things. That would have helped. I mean that would have helped at least deflate some of the tension.

The two girls who cited examples of authority figures in a school intervening had had positive experiences with the situation and reported that teacher involvement helped create resolution among peers. In general, though, girls asked for more awareness and help from authority figures at school.

**Intervening Conditions**

Throughout the interviews, various intervening conditions were reported to impact the strategies girls used to respond to relational aggression. How one reacted to a covert conflict was invariably reported to impact the consequences experienced from such dynamics. Various factors were discussed as protective factors and vulnerabilities, respectively minimizing or exacerbating the impact that relational aggression might have on a person or on one’s involvement in such dynamics. Not surprisingly, intervening conditions that made one more vulnerable to being negatively impacted by relational aggression were typically the opposite of protective factors. The factors outlined below were highlighted during the interviews in terms of other life factors that influenced whether girls coped effectively or ineffectively with relational aggression.

*Level of Social Support*

In order to utilize social support as an effective strategy for coping with relational aggression, girls had to have a support base already in place. Being socially isolated seemed to be a key factor that increased one’s vulnerability toward reacting poorly and/or experiencing negative consequences from relational aggression. If a girl was unable to talk to her family or close friends and receive support and encouragement, she was more likely to struggle with difficult feelings on her own, leading to a higher risk of
internalizing difficult feelings and reactions. Not talking about things could also lead to acting out in destructive ways as a means of coping with built-up emotions. One interviewee recalled being socially isolated by her friends and beginning to cut herself because of her distress, stating, “I just felt like I didn’t belong anywhere.”

On the other hand, having strong friendships was described as a helpful intervening condition influencing how one handled and was impacted by relational aggression. If girls had support groups to fall back on, particularly groups with open and honest relationships, they reported being less affected by someone acting out relationally towards them. One interviewee remembered not reacting when some girls in her school were indirectly aggressive, stating, “It wasn’t like I felt sad or targeted all the time because I was really caught up with my new friends.” Another girl recalled feeling buffered by her parents and friends when facing some relational aggression at school, stating, “I had my friends, my friends were there for me. I had my mom, who was there for me and understood the situation.” She believed that having those resources got her through the situation, enabling her to learn from it without falling apart.

Girls distinguished between “real friends” versus false friendships in terms of factors that made relationships supportive versus more vulnerable to relational aggression:

Like, I can – for me, I can trust that my friends will always be there, even if I do get annoyed with them and ignore them for a day. I can trust that they’ll always be there, but I think those girls just don’t really – the other girls, the high maintenance ones – just don’t really trust each other. And so, they’ll like completely just turn against each other.
Trust and openness were essential factors in having authentic relationships. Another interviewee believed that having honest relationships was the only way to protect oneself against relational aggression, stating:

The really only surefire protection is to be able to have like an open relation with everyone you know, and to be able to feel confident enough in yourself to talk to people about whatever problem you’re having with another person.

Knowing friends for a long time was an additional factor mentioned as supporting the development of trustworthy friendships. Thus, the quality of friendships was emphasized as either a protection or a vulnerability to relational aggression. Along the same lines, interviewees who described having false friendships reported living in fear that their friends would turn against them, as well as mental exhaustion that accompanied having a false front. One girl commented about her role in her relationships, stating, “It was definitely acting all the time.” She remembered being sad and depressed because of her falseness in her friendships, stating, “I would go home crying all the time because it was just – it wasn’t me.” Being open and honest and finding friends who reciprocated honesty was repeatedly discussed as a way of shielding oneself from the negative consequences of relational aggression.

Self-Esteem

Having a good relationship with oneself was listed as an intervening condition that buffered against negative social experiences, both in terms of being able to develop authentic relationships as well as having the ability to stand up for oneself and/or be less reactive to relational aggression. Valuing oneself and having self-respect seemed to make girls more impervious to the opinions of others and less impacted by relational aggression. Discussing the relationship between authenticity and self-confidence, one girl
remarked, “And I think by getting real, you get self-confidence, which keeps you from having your heart walked all over all the time.” She later added, “I know who I am today …and because of that, I have so much more self-confidence. And because of that, when people say crap about me, I don’t care.”

It was the girls who cared too much about what others thought about them who then became vulnerable to being manipulated and hurt through relationships, as in the earlier example of the girl who tried repeatedly to repair a relationship as her friend was continuously posting mean things about her on the internet and turning other girls against her. She was still being targeted during the interview and had difficulty focusing on other tasks and activities in her life. It may have been her willingness to accept such behaviors and to continually experience distress because of them that made her a target.

Those girls who had the self-esteem to let a conflict go or to stand up for themselves reported being able to navigate relationship conflicts more smoothly. One interviewee described how she coached herself through confronting another girl who had been intimidating her in class, telling herself, “Okay, I gotta do this. I can’t do this. I gotta do this. I’m good, and nobody knows me here. I have all the courage I want.” She was new at the school and scared to confront her peer, yet walked up to her after class and said, “Dude…seriously.” She reported that her peer became less aggressive after she stood up for herself. She believed what girls needed was “just some way to get more courage to stand up for yourself.” She also believed that not confronting such behaviors meant that the behaviors were then being condoned. More than anything else, relational aggression appeared to target self-esteem; thus, those who were easily made to feel
insecure were likely to be more impacted by it, to respond less effectively, and to be more likely to have it continue in their lives.

**Extracurricular Activities**

Participating in extracurricular activities was discussed as another intervening condition impacting one’s level of vulnerability to negative consequences of relational aggression. Being engaged in other activities was additionally mentioned as a contributing factor towards girls developing a stronger sense of self-esteem. Activities such as sports, theatre, and music were listed as ways in which girls built more self-confidence, as well as offering another community from which they could derive support.

One participant who was very active in karate talked about how teaching karate influenced her other relationships:

> And I mean, with me, like I’ve been teaching for two years, and I can honestly say that with every decision that I make in my life, before I do it I think, “Would I want one of the kids I teach to do this?” Because like I’m – I’m a role model now, like kids look up to me. And like I don’t like the idea of them, you know, all the girls that I teach growing up to be, you know, fighting with other girls.

In addition to providing another support network, extracurricular activities were also discussed in terms of providing a creative outlet for releasing difficult emotions without taking them out on someone else. Volleyball enabled one interviewee to get aggression out. When discussing dealing with her frustration she stated, “Personally – I just throw stuff against the wall. Like, well, like – I’m a volleyball player, so I’ll take my volleyball, and I’ll just throw it against the wall and that personally helps me a lot.”

Paradoxically, involvement in activities could also provide another avenue for relational aggression to take place. One interviewee had been targeted by friends she met while participating in a local theatre production. More often than not, however, other
activities were discussed as a source of strength, giving girls another outlet for
developing friendships, dealing constructively with difficult feelings, and instilling self-confidence.

Other Vulnerabilities

Other factors identified as intervening conditions in the experience of relational aggression were general factors related to diversity or any factor that made someone stand out as different, such as having a nontraditional sexual or gender orientation, coming from a family that had less money than other families in the school, being new at a school, belonging to a fringe group, and so forth. Anything that broke social norms made girls more vulnerable to being targeted.

Consequences of Relational Aggression

Participating in relational aggression, whether as an instigator or recipient, was often described as impacting girls in a variety of ways over both the short and the long term. Girls reported experiencing a wide range of consequences, both positive and negative, some minor and some more extreme. Some of the consequences were determined in part by how one handled, experienced, and interpreted a conflict.

Negative Consequences

The majority of the negative consequences girls reported experiencing as a result of relational aggression were encompassed under the definition of depression. Girls typically described symptoms consistent with symptoms of depression when talking about ways in which they were impacted by such behaviors. Other detrimental effects of relational aggression included loss of friendships, the development of a false self, and decreased academic performance.
Symptoms of depression. A variety of symptoms of depression were described in the interviews as reactions to negative experiences with relational aggression: anger, sadness, social isolation, exhaustion, low self-esteem, and changes in eating habits. Most prominently, increased emotional reactivity was commonly mentioned as a consequence of being targeted by other girls. The underlying reason given by one girl regarding the sadness she experienced in relation to being targeted was simply, “It’s an awful feeling to know that someone hates you.” She described her reactions to her friend’s mistreatment of her, stating, “I’ve just been really, really emotional…I get set off easier.” Another interviewee remembered her friend crying at school when she did not understand why she was being ignored by her friends. Anger was another common response to relational aggression; as one girl stated, “I was really angry for awhile. I felt really betrayed.” A few girls gave examples of relational aggression from the perspective of being the perpetrator or instigator of such behaviors and had leftover feelings of remorse and responsibility for hurting others. Others described a sense of frustration and confusion resulting from not knowing how to handle a conflict and thus being unsure about how to approach their friends. Feeling helpless to respond often perpetuated the cycle of feeling badly. Girls would “hold it in,” internalizing reactions from their negative experiences, which they stated then led to feelings and symptoms of depression.

As girls grappled with difficult emotions in response to distress over relationship threats, they also talked about an ensuing sense of self-doubt, at times questioning their own self-worth. Self-esteem seemed to be the target of relational aggression, and sometimes girls were very effective at leading others to feel badly about themselves. One
participant recalled her struggle, stating, “It almost convinced me that I was a horrible person.” Another girl remembered:

I really started to believe that I wasn’t good enough…and like no matter what I did, it didn’t matter what I did, I could never be good enough…I always compared myself to others, like, “Oh, it’s ’cuz I’m not smart enough, or I’m not athletic enough, or the boys don’t like me.”

One interviewee recalled the impact that relational aggression, which she had participated in, had and continued to have on her friend: “Um, I think it still kind of affects her sometimes. It affects her self-esteem, um, and she really resents her middle school experience because she was kind of always on the outside of, of that group of girls.”

A loss of trust in relationships could set in for some, leading girls to be on guard and more cautious in relationships as they navigated the complexity of friendships. One girls stated, “I used to be really outgoing…I’m a little shy now,” as she described how being mistreated by friends had impacted her social life. Another interviewee described a sense of exhaustion that set in from navigating the tensions and confusion in her friendships: “It was just constantly work. It was a lot of effort to keep up with everything. And um, yeah, I was just really, really tired of it.” She remembered frequently going home and crying due to being worn down from such dynamics.

Whereas some described varying symptoms of depression, others saw friends become truly depressed and immobilized as a result of being targeted. One participant stated:

I guess I’ve seen people get so depressed they don’t know what to do. They just don’t know how to handle stuff anymore. I feel like all their defenses get put down, and they just don’t know how to react to stuff anymore. If someone, if anything negative comes their way they have no idea anymore because they didn’t try to fight off the little things before [it got too overwhelming].
A few interviewees saw others engage in addictive and risky behaviors in what they believed were attempts to cope with the underlying pain of being targeted. Such behavior was less the norm but was still discussed in the interviews as reactions to relational aggression. A few reported the need for some type of therapy and or treatment, whether for depression, an eating disorder, self-injurious behavior, promiscuity, or substance abuse; in general, internalized feelings were described as being acted out destructively if they were not addressed. Although other issues and/or genetic vulnerabilities may have been impacting girls’ behaviors, a few described such destructive behaviors as consequences of relational aggression.

*Loss of friendships.* The second most commonly described negative consequence of relational aggression was the loss of friendships. Relational aggression was sometimes talked about in terms of bonding girls together; however, relationships that were forged after excluding someone else were often vulnerable to a repetition of the same pattern, as described by one interviewee:

> And also with relationships so much of that aggression, even if it is...has brought you together, probably will end up turning to [against] the person it has bonded you to. And then that aggression, since you’ve become so used to it, will break the relationship apart.

Increased exposure to relational aggression likely bred more of the same dynamic as some girls grew to mistrust their peers and readily aligned with whomever they believed they needed to align in order to avoid being ostracized themselves. Some of the girls additionally clarified their perceptions that the girls most likely to turn on their friends were the girls who had less authentic relationships with one another, making it then easier for them to then cut someone out of their social circle. One interviewee commented on this phenomenon stating, “And so like one little thing can go wrong and
the whole relationship is gone.” Romantic competition, academic competition, or other situations that induced jealousy were often reasons given for why girls gave up friendships. Often hostility remained, sometimes for years, over friendships that had broken apart. This continued tension impacted their other friendships as girls frequently complained about being caught maneuvering between two girls with unresolved conflict.

False self. Due to the social pressure to fit in, girls talked about becoming less authentic in their interpersonal interactions, or developing a false self as an effect of dealing with relational aggression. Often girls reported pretending to like people they did not like or forcing themselves to get along with friends with whom they were really angry. As stated in one interview, “It was definitely acting all the time.” Believing the same was true of her friends, the same interviewee noted, “I guess everybody was sort of like me in that they were all sort of acting, but I didn’t really realize it.” Being more defensive socially was then reported as fostering shallow relationships, or relationships based upon interactions in which girls found themselves pretending to be happy all the time around one another. Learning to navigate relationships was an important social skill they were developing, yet some girls believed that they lost themselves in this process. One interviewee commented on the line between being socially appropriate and being authentic, stating, “So, I guess, you know, being able to put a façade on things is like an important skill, but there’s an import – there’s also like a line where that needs to stop.”

Decreased academic performance. As mentioned previously, competition was discussed as one of the reasons girls act out towards one another, which was then reported to impact their academic performance in several ways. Dealing with underlying social dynamics in the classroom just generally distracted some girls from being able to
focus on classroom material. One interviewee discussed being so caught up in the emotional pushes and pulls in her friendships that she was hardly interested in her school work:

I think I would have gotten so much out of the school if it wasn’t so dramatic, ’cuz in retrospect, it was an amazing school. And I got so many amazing opportunities…And now, I mean I wish I could take part in something like that now. Um, and it’s -yeah, it’s really sad that I – I kind of wasted it…Um, and I was just too caught up in all the other drama to really appreciate it.

A second academic consequence was that girls discussed being less inclined to perform well academically because of peer pressure to not stand out. For example, girls were sometimes anxious about speaking up in class when feeling intimidated by peers in their classroom, such as in the earlier example of the girl whose peers were making fun of her as she was answering questions in class. Finally, academic performance was reported as being affected because some girls began to associate school with negative social dynamics and began rejecting school in general. One participant refused to go to school for awhile because she did not want to face certain social pressures. Some interviewees experienced school as a missed opportunity, or one in which they only fulfilled a part of their academic potential.

Positive Consequences

As the girls discussed negative consequences of relational aggression, positive stories of improved social skills, developing more authentic relationships, and self-development also emerged. Based upon their experiences of both negative consequences and self-esteem building experiences, it appeared that some girls learned and moved on from difficult dynamics improving their relationship skills, whereas others got stuck and mired in the struggles.
Improved social skills. As girls moved through their middle school and teenage years, they learned about themselves and about relating to one another through their friendships. Through being treated poorly by their peers, some girls became more conscientious of how to relate to others by learning what did not feel good in relationships. One interviewee who had been turned against by a friend and slandered on the internet observed, “But I’ve noticed that I’m a lot more conscious and careful in the way that I am treating other people because the last thing I would want is for them to feel what I’m feeling.”

Others highlighted increased communication skills as a result of relationship struggles they had experienced, becoming more diligent in their interpersonal communications in order to avoid entering into negative dynamics with close friends. One participant noted, “If I say something that I think might come out wrong, I stop and check that. I say, ‘Did that make you upset? Are you okay with that?’” Another interviewee described being more careful about what she said to others, thinking about how her words might impact others or how they might be interpreted. She stated, “Now I wait and think about what I tell people.”

Authentic relationships. By learning that they did not want to be false in relationships, some girls used their relationship struggles to develop more authentic relationships. As stated by one interviewee:

I think we kind of all, you know, stopped having superficial friendships. And now the friends I’m friends with, I’m actually really, really friends with, and I appreciate them for their personalities, not just as part of a herd that, you know, we huddle together for survival.

Some interviewees stated that their relationships improved with their friends as a result of relational aggression, getting closer if they chose to eventually talk about their
problems and work through a difficult dynamic. It seemed that conflict, if handled appropriately, was an opportunity to become closer or farther apart based upon one’s reactions to it. A fight was a pivotal point in a relationship that could make or break a relationship depending upon how girls handled relationship impasses.

One participant talked about shifting her personal relationships over time from superficial to more authentic relationships. She was aware that she had the choice between treating people well, or treating people how she saw other friends treating people – namely, by using relationally aggressive behaviors. She stated:

I always had to choose kind of between was I gonna go along with my friends, or was I gonna…you know try to be nice to other people? But, it’s – it was really, really difficult trying to be a friend and at the same time, you know, have friends that – it took awhile, I guess.

She eventually learned through her struggles that she wanted to be more authentic in her relationships, which shifted her social network slowly over time. At the time of the interview, she reported being much more satisfied with her friendships than she was when she was in a clique and more relationally aggressive.

Self-development. Others reported decreased reactivity to others, increased self-esteem, and increased assertiveness with others. For some this came about through a growing acceptance and awareness that not everyone was going to like them. They also balanced the task between pleasing others and taking care of themselves. One interviewee described how she learned to prioritize her time and relationships due to the various pressures in her life:

I think the role I had to play like helped me…learn to deal with people, a lot, and kind of learn how to assert myself a lot more…Um, I think, yeah – it was incredibly invaluable…Um…but I think (sighs) it was really, really important for me and important for a lot of my friends to deal with tons of different pressures and like from, you know, from your parents and from this group of friends and,
you know, from other friends, and um…I have my group of friends and…even now, like you know sometimes conflicts come up. And like I want to – you know I just want to go hang out with these people, and I’m, I’m kind of tired of you. I’ve been hanging out with you for a long time. And I like to be diplomatic but to also be able to, you know, kind of not be pushed around by other people or not be guilted into things by other people is a really, really important skill.

As some girls learned to be motivated less by the opinions of others, they became more self-reliant and assertive in their relationships. One girl talked about being less impacted by what her peers thought due to her own growth, stating, “It helped me grow as a person. It helped me realize that not everyone’s opinion should affect how I live and how I work.” As girls learned to value themselves more, some stated they were more easily able to brush off rude remarks, learning to let them go. They developed the autonomy and sense of self to choose their responses to others rather than to react out of anger. They became less willing to be manipulated by others. Through this process came increased growth, as expressed in one interview: “I would say it’s made me a much stronger person, a lot more self-aware than I would have been.” Another girl just felt generally improved by what she learned from relationally aggressive dynamics, stating, “It made me a better person.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the causes and functions of relational aggression in the female adolescent population. Through qualitative analysis of structured interviews, girls revealed multiple reasons for relationally aggressive behaviors, including conflict avoidance, emotion management, competition, social order/norm setting, and the need for belonging. Secondary questions about how girls coped with such behaviors were also explored. Both effective and ineffective strategies for handling
relational aggression were discussed in the interviews, as well as positive and negative consequences of participating in relational aggression, whether as an instigator or recipient. Out of these data a model for understanding and coping with relational aggression was developed.

Researchers on the topic of relational aggression originally explored whether females displayed aggression in ways different from males, given that females were thought to be significantly less physically aggressive than males (Olweus, 1993). Early research on relational aggression was also aimed at delineating the construct of relational aggression and assessing whether or not such behaviors were intended to harm others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) or were indeed aggressive. Relational aggression began to be linked with future adjustment difficulties, providing initial evidence that the behaviors might be harmful and have a lasting impact upon both aggressors and recipients (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Although some researchers to date have shown that some girls experience negative consequences in conjunction with relational aggression and experience it as hurtful (Crick & Bigbee, 1998), in other studies relational aggression has been associated with higher levels of popularity (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Based upon the interviews in the current study, relational aggression was reported to take place among many kinds of girls in many kinds of circumstances, with varying types and degrees of impact. Relational aggression was not simply reported to be used by an outlier group or the popular group. Rather, it was reported to be a common way in which females communicated and approached conflict with one another. Thus, Simmons’s (2002) “culture of aggression” (p. 15) in females typified the findings from the interviews in this study (although Simmons did not clearly delineate the causes of
relational aggression, or the strategies that girls used to cope with such behaviors, as much as she exposed the phenomenon of relational aggression itself). Through the data she gathered, she explained the behaviors, logic, and at times the causes behind relational aggression. Relational aggression was discussed more as a complex system of socialization with coded behaviors conveying specific meanings and intentions. Her research provided mainly one-sided evidence of how relational aggression negatively impacts adolescent females. No evidence was presented regarding positive consequences from relational aggression, including how girls can learn from such behaviors and become more prosocial as a result of negative interactions.

Along with investigating the impact of relational aggression, most researchers to date have focused on establishing relational aggression as unique to females (Crick, 1997; Lagerzpetz et al., 1988). In the current study, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of gender in relational aggression, given that only females were interviewed; however, the role of gender was a topic that emerged throughout the interviews for a few reasons. The perception of the females in the current study was that females were more relationally aggressive than males. Although current research has yielded inconsistent findings in this regard, females have been shown to be more affected by relationally aggressive behaviors than males (Crick et al., 1996) and to be more relationally aggressive overall than males (Bowie, 2007). It is interesting to note that one of the reported causes of relational aggression in this study was competition over male attention, and thus in this way gender was reported as playing a significant role in causing relationally aggressive behaviors.
Gender was additionally reported to play a role in relational aggression in the current study in that interviewees noted both implicitly and explicitly that females were socialized to deal with conflict through relationally aggressive means. One interviewee discussed how females were socialized to prioritize the wishes of others above their own individual inclinations, leading to a build-up of frustration. Citing gender socialization as a cause for relational aggression is consistent with findings in a study by Crothers et al. (2005), in which females who had a strong female gender identity were found to be more relationally aggressive than females who were less identified with stereotypical female characteristics (i.e. passivity, being nice, etc.). In their study, part of identifying as a female was viewing oneself as having very little control over one’s relationships. Many of the girls in the current study did not perceive that confronting a problem directly was an available option, and many reported having indirect ways of handling conflict modeled to them at home, suggesting female socialization as a way in which relational aggression was taught to them.

Through their modeling, parents were reported to play a role in how girls learned to become relationally aggressive. Examining the role of parents in contributing to relational aggression is a very recent and underdeveloped topic just beginning to be explored in the research on relational aggression. Consistent with many of the interviewees’ reports that parents sometimes overlooked relational aggression and dismissed it as normal, Werner and Grant (2009) found that mothers viewed relational aggression as a more acceptable and normative form of aggression than physical aggression. This viewpoint tended to parallel a similar belief in their children. Understanding the relationship between parents and relational aggression appears to be
an important area for future research, as many interviewees discussed learning relationally aggressive behaviors from their family.

Finally, much of the current research has focused on assessing and measuring relational aggression, testing the reliability and validity of questionnaires (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Because there is so little qualitative research on relational aggression, and qualitative research allows a phenomenon to be studied in depth, this study yielded unique findings in terms of exploring the variety of causes underlying relational aggression. Girls additionally discussed positive consequences from relational aggression, which has not been discussed in previous research. Given the complexity of the behaviors, qualitative research presented an opportunity to explore the phenomenon in depth before applying quantitative means of measuring the behavior and its impact.

*Implications for Interventions*

In the current study, given the importance girls placed on their friendships and the impact that relational aggression was reported to have on them, navigating relationships seemed to be a key developmental task for them. How girls maneuvered through this time was very important to their sense of self, which was often mirrored by how they viewed themselves in relation to others. Reflecting on her relationships when she was in seventh grade, one girl stated: “I think it’s kind of an ordeal, a necessary…kind of ordeal.” Because a very important social process is occurring, what girls take away from these experiences may set a template for future relationships. If aggressive dynamics are not addressed, children and adolescents could develop patterns of aggression that carry into
adulthood. It seems essential that they learn empowered ways of handling conflicts so as to be better prepared to meet the demands of life.

Learning skills for handling relational aggression appeared to be an area in which girls wanted and needed the most guidance. Throughout the interviews girls were eager to talk about the topic and regularly commented that they would like more help from adults in dealing with relational aggression. Thus, it seems they would benefit from mediation during this period, learning constructive ways of managing the ups and downs of relationships. As illustrated by the section on positive learning, positive benefits can be derived from conflict and relationally aggressive dynamics if they are managed with support and awareness. Girls need a map to help them understand the terrain they are navigating.

In terms of managing relational aggression, the girls themselves came up with ideas regarding what they would find helpful. They all believed that more interventions targeted at managing relational aggression would have been useful. Many of the girls expressed that talking about relational aggression would help them learn what to do when confronting such situations. One reason relational aggression is perpetuated is that there is silence around it, and girls go underground with their thoughts and feelings because they do not communicate about conflict. Thus, simply naming the phenomenon and giving girls permission to talk about it might go a long way to helping them deal with it. Because there is so little discussion about relational aggression, girls find themselves without tools for responding to difficult dynamics with their peers, often leading to perpetuation of relational aggression. One interviewee suggested interjecting discussion about relational aggression into classes, stating, “If they all did a section on – even if it’s
just for girls – if they did a section on relational aggression…I would have liked to have a way to deal with it.” Girls additionally expressed that would have liked to have begun talking and learning about relational aggression and managing conflict early, such as during elementary school.

Girls wanted strategies for confronting conflict directly, such as the approaches listed in the section on effective strategies. They wanted to learn how to directly talk about and resolve problems and often did not feel equipped to do so without adult guidance. Beyond learning skills for managing conflict, girls wanted to learn how to foster supportive relationships, including learning how to be authentic in relationships. As one interviewee stated, “I just needed to know that it was all right for me to be myself, that it was – that I would be accepted.” Having parents and teachers informed about relational aggression and providing tools for them to empower girls in dealing with it were ways in which girls thought adults could support them. Specifically, they wanted to be encouraged to handle the conflict on their own and did not want adults to take over or tell them what to do but to offer suggestions instead. Girls wanted parents and teachers to be aware of the issues they were facing, as stated by one girl: “I think some parents don’t really understand, um, so I think they need to…you know, be informed and understand in order to help their kids understand what’s going on.”

Finding ways to develop and promote a more positive peer culture were also mentioned as important aspects of managing relational aggression. Girls discussed ideas such as having inclusive gatherings of people outside of school, where they could see their commonalities instead of differences. Part of increased social interaction for girls included not having males involved, which was reported to engender competition. One
A girl remembered having group discussion in her sixth-grade class, which she found helpful:

Like in sixth grade we had a great system. We would have our whole class sit in a room, sit in a circle, and we’d have like a little ball. And if you got the ball you could either bring up something that was bothering you, you could pay a compliment to someone, or just kind of – it was your time to talk. And it was great for our age group ’cuz that way we could solve the issues, ’cuz we have lots of issues in the sixth grade…And so I think that was a really…just like that open communication helps.

Girls appeared to be searching for a constructive way to have a meaningful discussion about their relationship challenges. Because they spent so much of their time at school, many of their conflicts surfaced at school, and so they wished that the school could provide a structure for working through and resolving conflicts. If a situation got out of control, girls at times felt they needed a mediator to help them air their problems.

One interviewee regretted not getting adults involved when she was targeted, believing that her friend “would have told her parents and had her parents intervene, call the school, and we would have been forced to talk about it.” She wished that she had handled the situation in that way, explaining that sometimes girls need a mediator for their conflict. Girls typically reported trusting school personnel more than parents to help them manage their conflicts more objectively.

One interviewee suggested promoting a more positive peer culture of giving compliments and acknowledging each other’s strengths instead of squashing them.

Learning to share power was a concept that was additionally brought forward in terms of promoting healthier relationships. Another participant wished she had some sort of peer mentor she could have turned to when she was being ostracized by her friends. She would have been more comfortable taking suggestions from a peer rather than an adult. A
variety of examples were given in the interviews related to how girls wished relational aggression would be handled. Ideas regarding interventions ultimately distilled down to three main categories: learning about relational aggression and about coping strategies for handling the behaviors; developing a more positive peer culture, including spending more time together in a forum where open communication and team building was encouraged; and having a system at school in place for mediating conflicts.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study yielded unique findings compared to much of the current research on relational aggression. The causes of relational aggression have not been explored and delineated in literature on relational aggression, as much of the current research has been focused on assessment of relational aggression, the role of gender, and adjustment difficulties. However, as with any research design, there were both strengths and limitations of this study. One problem in general with qualitative research is the subjective nature of the reports. For example, an interviewee may have been more willing to talk about aggression in others rather than report her own acts of relational aggression, casting blame rather than taking responsibility for aggressive behaviors. While this is a risk in general with subjective reporting, throughout the interviews the interviewees appeared to be open about discussing their own involvement in relationally aggressive dynamics, both as initiators and targets. Although a few of the girls gave examples that consisted of their observations of peer behaviors, many talked about situations in which they were involved in initiating a conflict. The interviews yielded a great deal of data and information about the phenomenon of relational aggression, which lent itself to developing clear themes and topics about relational aggression.
Throughout the interviews the girls were open and thoughtful about discussing their experiences, which in one sense is a strength but in another sense may be a limitation in that the girls who signed up for the study may have self-selected out of the population as girls who were interested and willing to discuss this topic. The girls who signed up for the study may have done so because they had more experiences with relationally aggressive behaviors than girls who did not sign up to participate in the study. A few of the interviewees mentioned that they were interested in psychology, one interviewee stating that she wanted to be a therapist. These factors may have meant that they were not representative of the population in general.

Another limitation of the study is that qualitative research is time consuming. Thus, fewer interviews were able to be conducted, decreasing the sample size. The results are then less able to be transferred to the broader population of adolescent girls. Additionally, all interviewees represented a similar demographic: They were all Caucasian adolescents from a city in the Pacific Northwest. Though their family income levels did vary somewhat, most of the participants attended the same small private high school. Thus, their experiences may differ from students in larger public high schools or students from a different cultural or racial background. Given that the demographic was relatively consistent amongst the girls interviewed, the results may then be applicable to that particular demographic.

Future Research

A part of developing one’s identity during adolescence appeared, in this study, to be defining oneself through peer associations; that is, by whom one does and does not socialize with. When handled appropriately, relational aggression seems to present an
opportunity for girls to stand up for themselves and experientially figure out how to navigate balancing their own needs with the demands of their relationships, ideally developing confidence and assertiveness in the process. The developmental tasks and skills they learned while managing their relationships were many: decision-making, time management, prioritizing relationships, advocating for oneself, handling conflict, setting boundaries, and so forth. Although some girls learned a great deal from relationally aggressive dynamics, walking away with a stronger sense of self, other girls reported getting caught or stuck in them and falling into patterns of internalizing negative emotions, becoming depressed and at times less involved and invested in their own success. What distinguishes these two types of reactions seems to be an important area for future research. Why are some girls able to rise above relational aggression and learn from it, whereas others are not?

One overarching theme about why relational aggression occurs was the theory brought up in earlier research based upon how girls are socialized. One interviewee discussed information she had learned in one of her classes regarding female socialization, stating that women were brought up to believe that meeting group needs was their highest priority. Thus, the individual need was sacrificed for the needs of the group. Further research on social norms for females may therefore be helpful in understanding relational aggression as well.

Because relational aggression is insidious and covert, it is often difficult to establish validity in assessment instruments used to measure the behaviors and their impact. Thus, some reliable and valid way of gauging and identifying girls who are impacted negatively by relational aggression from girls who are able to more effectively
cope with it would likely be very useful in helping to identify girls who are at risk and who need other types of support and/or intervention. Effective interventions should be developed and evaluated as well.

Finally, research is needed to explore relational aggression in the home in terms of how families cope with conflict. Patterns of relational aggression in the adult population would be important to understand as well. A child who experiences passive-aggressive behaviors at home may be more likely to repeat them at school. More research is needed across gender, socioeconomic brackets, cultures, and race to find out whether or not such behaviors shift in different settings and populations. Longitudinal studies are also needed in order to explore the long-range impact of relational aggression, as well as to understand how other factors in girls’ lives may make them more vulnerable to relational aggression and how relational aggression in turn may make them more vulnerable to other negative consequences.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Approval Letter from Outside Agency

November 19, 2007

Institutional Review Board
Pacific University
School of Professional Psychology
222 SE 8th Avenue, Suite 563
Hillsboro, OR 97123-4218

To whom it may concern:

We are writing this letter in reference to Justine O’Donnell’s dissertation and qualitative research study on relational aggression in the adolescent population. We want to acknowledge that we are pleased to invite students who are appropriate for Ms. O’Donnell’s study to participate in an interview with her on the topic of relational aggression. We will be contacting students via letter inviting them to participate in the study. We are enthusiastic about this research topic and happy to participate in gathering an appropriate sample.

Sincerely,

Jamie Tender
Head of School, St. George School
Appendix B

Invitation to Participate in the Study

April 28, 2007

Parent Address

Dear Parent/Guardian and Child name:

We are writing this letter to invite your child to participate in a valuable research study on the topic of covert types of aggressive behaviors in adolescent girls, also known as relational aggression. Justine O’Donnell, M.S., a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Pacific University, is interested in interviewing adolescent girls on what they think about this topic. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the function of these behaviors and positive ways of handling and addressing relational aggression. Relational aggression consists of hidden acts of aggressive behavior, such as ignoring a friend when upset, telling someone not to be someone’s friend, talking about someone behind their back, or excluding someone from a social activity. These behaviors have been shown to be damaging to children and yet they are pervasive in adolescent years. We are inviting your daughter to participate because as an adolescent female she may be able to offer valuable information about this social behavior.

The interviews for this study are expected to begin in January 2008 and to be completed by February 2008. The location of the interview will be at St. George’s School in Spokane, WA.

Your daughter is being asked to participate in a 60- to 80-minute interview consisting of approximately 6 to 8 open-ended questions that focus on her experiences of relational aggression. The interview will be tape recorded so that it may be transcribed at a later date. The identity of you and your daughter will be kept confidential throughout. The data from the transcripts will be analyzed and will form the basis for a dissertation. After the study is completed, the tape recordings will be destroyed.

There are no known risks associated with your daughter’s involvement in this interview. Possible benefits include making a contribution to understanding and addressing and/or interventions of relationally aggressive behavior. Additionally, discussing one’s experiences with potentially negative events can have positive therapeutic benefits. Your child will be awarded a movie ticket or a $10 gift certificate on iTunes after completion of the interview.

Please contact us with further questions or to give consent for your child’s participation. Ms. O’Donnell will be happy to answer any questions you or your child
may have at any time. Justine O'Donnell can be reached at (971) 645-9720 or odon1923@pacificu.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this interview and research study. We feel it is a valuable contribution towards understanding and improving young girls’ social experiences.

Sincerely,

Jamie Tender
Head of Middle School
St. George’s School
Appendix C

Informed Consent

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY
INFORMED CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Relational Aggression in Adolescence: A Qualitative Study

Investigator(s) Contact Information

Principal Investigator:

Justine O'Donnell, M.S., principle researcher, Psy.D. candidate
Pacific University
School of Professional Psychology
(971) 645-9720
odon1923@pacificu.edu

Faculty Advisor:

Genevieve Arnaut, Psy.D., Ph.D.
Pacific University
School of Professional Psychology
(503) 352-2613
arnaut@pacificu.edu

1. Introduction and Background Information

This study is being conducted by Justine O'Donnell, M.S., a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Pacific University. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the function and positive ways of handling and addressing relational aggression. Relational aggression consists of hidden acts of aggressive behavior, such as ignoring a friend when upset, telling someone not to be someone’s friend, talking about someone behind their back, or excluding someone from a social activity. These behaviors have been shown to be damaging to children and yet they are pervasive in adolescent years.
We are inviting your daughter to participate because as an adolescent female, she may be able to offer valuable information about this social behavior. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in this study.

2. Study Location and Dates

Data collection for this study is expected to begin in January 2008 and to be completed by February 2008. Data analysis will continue for several months beyond the data collection period. The location of the interview will be St. George’s School in Spokane, WA, or some other private location in Spokane, WA, such as the family’s home or an office.

3. Procedure

Your daughter is being asked to participate in a 60- to 80-min interview consisting of approximately 6 to 8 open-ended questions that focus on her experiences of relational aggression. The interview will be tape recorded so that it may be transcribed at a later date. The identity of you and your daughter will be kept confidential throughout. The data from the transcripts will be analyzed and will form the basis for a dissertation. After the study is completed, the tape recordings will be destroyed.

4. Participants and Exclusion

Only participants who meet the following conditions will be included in the study: female adolescents 14-18 years of age. Adolescents who express suicidal ideation, serious mental health concerns, or substance abuse will not be included. Participants who withdraw early from the study will not be awarded compensation.

5. Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks associated with your daughter’s involvement in this interview. However, sometimes discussing personal experiences can bring up upsetting feelings.

Possible benefits include making a contribution to understanding and addressing and/or interventions of relationally aggressive behavior. Additionally, discussing one’s experiences with potentially negative events can have positive therapeutic benefits.
6. Alternatives Advantageous to Participants

Not applicable.

7. Participant Payment

Your child will be awarded a movie ticket or a $10 gift certificate on iTunes after completion of the interview.

8. Promise of Privacy

The records of this study will be kept private. The interview will be tape recorded so that it may be transcribed at a later date. Only your daughter’s first name will be used during the interview. Initials rather than names will be used on the transcripts, and only a number assigned to the participant (e.g., “Participant 1”) will be used to refer to any quoted material in the written dissertation. Only the principal investigator will have access to tape recordings, which will be kept either with the principal investigator or in a locked storage area at all times. After the study is completed, all tape recordings will be destroyed. This informed consent form will be kept separate from any data we collect and will be similarly kept in a locked area. Only the principal investigator will have access to the full names of the participants. If the results of this study are presented or published, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or your daughter as an individual.

9. Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your decision regarding whether or not your daughter may participate will not affect your or her current or future relations with Pacific University or St. George’s School. If you decide to allow your daughter to participate, you are both free to not answer any question or to withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences. If you or your daughter choose to withdraw early from the study, your daughter will not receive compensation.

10. Compensation and Medical Care

Not applicable here.

11. Contacts and Questions
The researcher will be happy to answer any questions you or your child may have at any time during the course of the study. The researcher(s) can be reached at (971) 645-9720 or odon1923@pacificu.edu. If you are not satisfied with the answers you receive, please call Pacific University’s Institutional Review Board, at (503) 352–2215 to discuss your questions or concerns further. All concerns and questions will be kept in confidence.

12. Parent/Guardian Statement of Consent (for participants under 18 years of age)

I have read and understand the above. All my questions have been answered. I agree to allow my child to participate in the study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep for my records.

Parent / Guardian’s Signature
Date

13. Participant’s Statement of Assent (for participants under 18 years of age only)

I have read and understand the above. All my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the study. My parent/guardian has been given a copy of this form to keep for my records.

Participant’s Signature
Date

14. Participant’s Statement of Consent (for participants 18 years of age)

I have read and understand the above. All my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep for my records.

Parent/Guardian or Participant contact information:
Street address: __________________________
This contact information is required in case any issues arise with the study and participants need to be notified and/or to provide participants with the results of the study if they wish.

Would you like to have a summary of the results after the study is completed?
___ Yes _____ No

_____________________________________________________________________
Investigator's Signature
Date
Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire

What is your child’s age?
1.) 14
2.) 15
3.) 16
4.) 17

What is your child’s grade in school?
1.) Freshman
2.) Sophomore
3.) Junior
4.) Senior

How would you classify your ethnicity?
1.) Caucasian/White
2.) Black
3.) Hispanic
4.) Asian/Pacific Islander
5.) Latino
6.) Arab
7.) Indigenous/Aboriginal
8.) Multiracial
9.) Other
10.) Would rather not say

What is your current marital status?
1.) Married
2.) Single
3.) Divorced
4.) Living with someone
5.) Separated
6.) Widowed
7.) Would rather not say

Where do you currently reside?
________________________________________
(city, state)

Where does your child currently reside?
________________________________________
(city, state)
What type of neighborhood do you reside in?
   1.) Urban
   2.) Suburban
   3.) Rural
   4.) Other___________________

How long have you lived at your current residence?
   1.) Less than six months
   2.) 6 months – one year
   3.) One to five years
   4.) Five to ten years
   5.) Ten years or more

What type of school does your child attend?
   1.) Public, local
   2.) Private, local
   3.) Private boarding school
   4.) Residential treatment facility
   5.) Other_____________________

What is your present level of yearly income?
   1.) Under $10,000
   2.) $10,000 to $19,999
   3.) $20,000 to $29,999
   4.) $30,000 to $69,999
   5.) $70,000 to $149,999
   6.) Over $150,000
   7.) Would rather not say

How many siblings does your child have?
   1.) 0
   2.) 1
   3.) 2
   4.) 3
   5.) 4
   6.) other______________________
Appendix E

Interview Questions

Tell me about a time when someone was relationally aggressive towards you.
What were your thoughts about the experience?
What were your feelings about the experience?
What did you do about it?
How did you act towards the person after the interaction?
   -towards that person’s friends?
What do you think led that person to act that way?
Why do people use relational aggression?
Tell me about a time when you were relationally aggressive towards another.
What were your thoughts about the experience?
What were your feelings about the experience?
How did that person act towards you afterwards?
What do you think led you to act that way?
Are there situations where people are more likely to be relationally aggressive?
   -less likely?
Are there places where people are more likely to be relationally aggressive?
   -less likely?
What are some ways to handle it when people are relationally aggressive towards one another?
Probes
What was it like?

Tell me about a time when you witnessed someone being relationally aggressive to another?