

TEENAGE GIRLS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE FUNCTIONS OF RELATIONALLY AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS

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Adolescent girls reported on their experiences both as perpetrators and as victims of several distinct forms of relational aggression. Details of these incidents were gathered from 114 ethnically diverse ninth and tenth graders via a secure online survey. The frequency with which girls perpetrated or were targeted for particular acts of relational aggression was assessed and, based on the responses, a computer program randomly selected one item (i.e., gossip, ignoring, or exclusion) for which each girl was asked to recall a specific experience and answer follow-up questions. Perceptions of the goals and functions of specific relationally aggressive acts were assessed, as well as how the perpetrator or victim felt at the time of the incident. Ignoring or "giving the silent treatment" appeared to be a unique form of relational aggression inasmuch as the girls perceived different motives, or functions, for ignoring compared with gossip and exclusion and felt worse at the time of the ignoring incident, both when they were reporting as aggressors and as victims. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Aggression has long been a topic of concern for teachers, parents, and students. Overt forms of aggression, such as hitting or pushing, probably because they are conspicuous and can be dangerous, have received a great deal of attention from both school administrators as well as persons in the research community (Coie & Dodge, 1998). It has been well documented that males are more physically aggressive than are females (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006), and the fact that research attention and intervention efforts have traditionally focused on overt aggression has had the unfortunate consequence of limiting our understanding of conflict among females. Within the past 15 years, though, the identification of more covert forms of aggression that use social relationships as a main vehicle of harm has raised awareness of "mean" behavior among females (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz & Bjorkqvist, 1994). For example, the term "relational aggression" has been used to describe behaviors aimed at damaging another's friendships or feelings of inclusion in a peer group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Specific examples of relational aggression include spreading malicious rumors or gossip, exclusion from a group or activity, and ignoring or "giving the silent treatment." Although mounting evidence has suggested that boys and girls might be more similar than different in their use of relational aggression (see Card et al., 2008), specifically investigating the experiences of adolescent girls remains an important task because their aggressive behavior has historically received less research attention than has aggression among males and, as a result, remains less well understood.

Frequency and Forms of Relational Aggression

Relational aggression has been assessed using a variety of methods and in populations ranging from preschoolers to college students and older adults. Many studies have concluded that both the perpetrators and the victims of relational aggression are at risk for a host of psychological and social difficulties. In this tradition, it has been advantageous to determine who the aggressors and victims

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might be and how they differ from their peers. It is also important, however, for teachers, parents, and professionals to be aware of the everyday experiences of most teenagers; for that reason, research should also focus on "what" occurs and "how often," in addition to "who" are the more extreme cases of victims and perpetrators.

In terms of "what" constitutes relational aggression, self-report measures usually ask about intentionally ignoring and excluding someone from a group or activity (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), with questions about rumors and gossip added in studies of adolescents (Werner & Crick, 1999). The different manifestations of relational aggression, however, are rarely scrutinized separately. Instead, most researchers sum or average across multiple items leaving much to learn about the specific forms that relational aggression might take and the subjective experiences of those incidents. Only a small number of studies have examined specific aggressive behaviors reported by adolescents. Two such studies found that rumors and gossip are among the most frequent acts reported by both boys and girls (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Similarly, an interview study of adolescent girls in Australia found that commonly cited forms of aggression included spreading rumors, social exclusion, and ignoring (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000a). Among a slightly older sample of college students, indirect acts of relational aggression, such as gossip and talking negatively about someone not present, were the behaviors most frequently mentioned in response to an open-ended question about the characteristics of aggression between females (Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2008).

Beyond the observation that adolescents cite gossip, exclusion, and ignoring as common forms of relational aggression, we know little about the actual frequency with which these acts occur in the lives of adolescent girls. Moreover, there is a paucity of research examining how individuals actually experience particular acts of relational aggression as victims and perpetrators. In one of the few studies to delve into the details of specific incidents, Goodwin's (2006) ethnographic observations of girls playing at school showed how children's evaluative discourse about others can solidify the boundaries of social groups, reconfigure alliances, and sanction unacceptable behavior. We still know little, however, about the subjective experience of such events in adolescence. Thus, in addition to assessing the frequency with which different relationally aggressive behaviors occur, it is important to probe descriptions of specific incidents of relational aggression to gain a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how this phenomenon looks and feels to those persons directly involved. For example, what functions did the act serve for the aggressor? Also, did the victim attribute the behavior to a particular motive on the part of the perpetrator?

Functions of Relational Aggression

In the tradition of research on overt forms of aggression, the potential motivations for, or functions served by, relational forms of aggression have become a recent focus of attention (Bailey & Ostrov, 2008; Fite, Stauffacher, Ostrov, & Colder, 2008; Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Understanding the motives behind relational aggression has important implications for school policy and intervention (Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006; Young, Boye, & Nelson, 2006), inasmuch as its specific functions can be targeted and more prosocial means of achieving the same goal can be encouraged. Toward this end, researchers have begun to disentangle the forms and functions of aggression. Two forms of aggression—relational and physical—are typically examined in such studies, and both are believed to serve either reactive or proactive functions. Reactive aggression has been described as an angry, defensive reaction to provocation or to having one's goals blocked, such as purposefully harming someone to get back at her for a previous transgression (Dodge, 1991). In contrast, proactive, or instrumental, aggression occurs in anticipation of self-serving outcomes (Dodge, 1991). For example, if two girls were running for class

president, one could spread gossip about the other to harm the other's reputation and thereby increase her own chances of winning the race. The two functions are often distinguished by the wording in a question stem. For example, a reactive item might begin, "When I am mad at others, I . . ." or, to assess proactive aggression, "To get what I want, I . . ." (Little et al., 2003). This line of research has highlighted the heterogeneous nature of aggression and uncovered the unique psychosocial profiles of individuals who use the different forms of aggression for different functions (Bailey & Ostrov, 2008; Marsee, Weems, & Taylor, 2008; Walcott, Upton, Bolen, & Brown, 2008). Surprisingly few researchers, however, have asked teenagers themselves about why aggression might occur.

In an exception to this general tendency, when seventh- and eighth-grade adolescents were asked to speculate about why they might have been targeted for an incident of relational aggression, the most frequently cited reasons were that the aggressor was trying to get revenge or to make them mad (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). In Australia, when teenage girls were asked why a fictional character described in a vignette engaged in relational aggression, two broad categories of responses emerged. The first involved alleviating boredom and creating excitement; girls described relational aggression as something to talk about or something fun to do. The second category involved friendship and group processes, such as jealousy, attention seeking, self-protection, revenge, and a desire for inclusion in a group (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000b). The motive of revenge would likely be categorized within the broad spectrum of reactive aggression, whereas anticipatory motives such as self-protection more closely align with the concept of proactive aggression. Other functions of aggression cited by adolescents appear more intricate than the traditional categories of reactive and proactive, but could perhaps be viewed as subfunctions falling within this broader classification system. For example, motives involving social control, such as a desire for inclusion in a group, and amusement motives like relieving boredom, might be considered proactive. This dichotomous method of classification would seem, however, to gloss over much of the rich detail of adolescent girls' use of relational aggression that could be potentially important and informative in the design of intervention and prevention programs.

Feelings at the Time of the Relationally Aggressive Incident

Research, to date, has been critically important in establishing the emotional correlates and consequences of relational aggression, especially among females. For example, it has been well-documented that the repeated experience of relational aggression and victimization is associated with adjustment difficulties, including depression, loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem (for reviews, see Archer & Coyne, 2005; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Merrell et al., 2006). Less is known, however, about the immediate emotional milieu of such experiences. For example, what kinds of feelings do the perpetrator and the victim experience at the time of a relationally aggressive incident? Do their feelings vary depending on the form of the aggressive act (e.g., spreading rumors vs. ignoring)? In the design of intervention and prevention programs, this type of detailed information might be quite useful. For instance, professionals might assist both perpetrators and victims in developing coping and communication strategies focusing on the specific emotions felt at the time of a relationally aggressive incident. Understanding the nuances of how relationally aggressive incidents might look and feel to the persons directly involved can, clearly, have important implications for how parents, teachers, and professionals approach this behavior.

The Current Study

The current study aims to build on previous work in several respects. First, we examine the frequency with which different forms of relational aggression occur, on average, in the daily lives of adolescent girls. Rather than providing a general examination of physical versus relational forms

of aggression, we narrow our focus to acts *within* the category of relational aggression to provide a more detailed and intricate look at the particular types of acts encountered by adolescent girls. Next, we gather descriptive information from girls based on their experiences both as perpetrators and as targets of *specific incidents* of relational aggression. The perceived motives or functions that the aggressive behavior might have served, and the types of emotions felt at the time of the specific incident, were of particular interest. Regarding the functions of aggression, the motives examined here—social control, amusement, revenge, and anticipation—are intentionally narrower than the broad categories of reactive and proactive, allowing for a richer and more detailed understanding of why some teenage girls might engage in relational aggression. Results of previous qualitative work guided our determination of which functions might be salient to adolescent girls; therefore, we ensured that the four motives selected were derived from open-ended dialogue with adolescents themselves (Owens et al., 2000b; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Finally, in addition to gathering descriptive information regarding the perceived motives and particular emotions felt at the time of a relationally aggressive incident, the current study extends previous research by examining whether motives and feelings at the time of the specific incident differed according to the form that the aggressive behavior took (e.g., spreading gossip vs. ignoring). For example, are rumors more often associated with social control motives than is ignoring? Is exclusion associated with feelings of more guilt on the part of the perpetrator at the time of the incident than are rumors?

In sum, the purpose of the current study was to use girls' descriptions of specific experiences to illuminate nuances in the forms and functions of relational aggression both for researchers interested in this topic and for persons directly involved in the daily lives of adolescent girls. The four main goals were (1) to explore the frequency of different forms of relational aggression and victimization; (2) to provide descriptive information on the perceived functions or motives of specific incidents of relational aggression; (3) to assess the types of feelings that girls report experiencing at the time of the incident; and (4) to examine whether feelings at the time of the incident and/or perceived functions of the act differ according to the form of relational aggression in question.

METHOD

Participants

The data for this study came from a larger project investigating the social experiences and self-perceptions of ninth- and tenth-grade girls. Participants were recruited from a public high school in the Los Angeles area, attended by approximately 3,300 students. Of the 392 girls who were invited to participate, 142 (36%) returned signed parental consent and youth assent forms. Among those girls, 114 (80%) logged onto a Web-based survey and answered all of the questions (58 ninth-grade students, 56 tenth-grade students). Participants ranged in age from 14.4 years to 16.7 years (mean [M] = 15.7 years). The public school from which the sample was drawn has an ethnically diverse study body (49% White, 32% Hispanic/Latino, 7% Asian, 11% Black, and 1% Other), which is reflected in the ethnic diversity of our sample. Forty-nine percent of the participants were White, 18% were Hispanic/Latina, 9% identified as Asian/Asian American, and 5% were Black. The remaining participants identified as "Other" (14%) or chose not to respond (4%). The girls reported a high level of parental educational attainment (56% of fathers and 51% of mothers with a Bachelor's degree or higher). According to the school demographic data drawn from the California Department of Education (CDE), the average parental education level, on a scale of 1 (*not a high school graduate*) to 5 (*graduate school*), was 3.69 for the year of data collection, representing more than *some college* but slightly less than *college graduate*. Thus, a high level of educational attainment was characteristic of parents of at the school from which we drew our participants.

Procedure

The participants were recruited in the spring of their ninth- or tenth-grade year. A researcher went into 38 separate English classes, made a short oral presentation to the class about the study, and distributed packets with additional details, as well as consent and assent forms, to all of the girls in the class. Interested female students returned the signed parental consent and youth assent forms either through the mail (a business reply envelope was provided in the packet) or by dropping them off at school, either at a secure drop-off box in an administrative office or at booths staffed by researchers in two convenient locations (the option used by most of the girls). The decorated booths were set up every school day over the course of 2 weeks and were located in outdoor courtyards that served as gathering areas when students ate lunch. Research assistants were available during lunchtime and before classes in the morning to collect consent packets and answer questions. A password-protected Web site, created by a professional software engineer and graphic artist, housed the survey. As an additional security precaution, participants provided demographic information on a form returned with their consent forms at the beginning of the study, instead of on the Web site.

Participants received usernames and passwords to log on to the Web site and were instructed to complete the survey on their own and in a private location. Although responses could be provided in several sittings, the different components of the survey were presented in a predetermined order. Upon completion of the survey, each girl was given a \$15 gift certificate to a nearby shopping center.

Materials

Data for the current study were obtained from two sections of the Web-based survey. In one section, participants were asked to report on their own relationally aggressive behavior, and, in the other section, they were asked about their experiences as victims of relational aggression perpetrated by other girls. The two sets of questions were counterbalanced so that approximately half of the participants received the aggressor items first and the victim items second and the other half of the participants received the two sets of questions in the opposite order. The relational aggression questions were embedded with other measures not used in the current study, and participants always received one set of the relational aggression items toward the beginning of the Web survey and the other set of items toward the end. This was done so that reports of their own aggression and reports of their own victimization experiences were separated by a significant amount of time (the entire Web survey took approximately 1–1.5 hours to complete and could be completed on multiple occasions over the course of a week). The time commitment required to complete the entire survey was relatively high; however, given that girls were allowed to save their data and return to the Web site any number of times within 1 week of first logging on to complete the survey, the burden was most likely reduced compared to traditional pen-and-paper surveys administered in one session.

Pilot Study. A group of adolescent girls ($n = 9$), similar to the eventual participants in age and demographic background, was interviewed about their experiences with “mean” behavior among their female peers. In individual, informal interviews, they were free to report any type of mean behavior they wished and were asked follow-up questions regarding their perceptions of the motives behind each behavior and how the perpetrator and victim might have felt at the time of a specific incident. Based on these interviews, the wording of survey items was developed and refined. Several items were added to reflect common themes from the interviews that were not represented in initial drafts of the survey. For instance, a mean behavior mentioned by multiple girls was “stealing the guy” that another girl liked. This behavior seemed developmentally appropriate for participants, but was originally overlooked because existing measures of relational aggression rarely include such an

Table 1
Mean Scores on Items Representing Individual Forms of Relational Aggression and Victimization

Items on Relational Aggression Scale	Mean Score-Aggression	Mean Score-Victimization
Talked behind a girl's back	3.02	2.80
Tried to damage a girl's reputation by spreading rumors about her	2.52	1.73
Intentionally ignored a girl or gave a girl the silent treatment	2.15	2.08
Tried to get others not to like a particular girl	1.72	1.91
Kept a girl from being accepted by your group of friends	1.48	1.50
Tried to steal the guy another girl liked	1.38	1.70

Note. 1 = never in past year, 2 = once in past year, 3 = more than once in past year, 4 = many times in past year.

item. After amending the survey according to information gleaned from the interviews, a separate set of girls similar in age and background to the participants ($n = 8$) then responded to the survey and were given the opportunity to provide feedback on each item. They received paper versions of the survey with extra space after each item and were asked, as they answered the survey on the computer, to make note of any awkward wording, irrelevant items, or confusing instructions they encountered by writing comments in the space provided for the relevant item on the paper survey. Their feedback was used to further refine the wording of items and instructions. None of the girls providing pilot data were participants in the current study.

Frequency and Forms of Relational Aggression. Six items on the survey completed by the participants described behaviors commonly used to assess relational aggression (See Table 1). The specific acts included in the measure and the words used to describe them were developed based on existing relational aggression scales (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) and were refined, as described earlier in text, in the pilot study. A 4-point scale indicated how frequently the respondent engaged in that behavior toward other girls over the past year (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Once*, 3 = *More than once*, and 4 = *Many times*). For example, girls were asked to indicate how often in the past year they had "tried to get others not to like a particular girl." Questions about the respondents' experiences as "victims" of relationally aggressive behavior were analogous to the "perpetrator" items with the necessary minor wording changes (e.g., "intentionally ignored you or gave you the silent treatment"). Each item was rated on the same 4-point response scale, this time to indicate how often the respondent was the target of that behavior, perpetrated by another girl, over the past year (see Table 1).

Specific Relationally Aggressive Incident. According to previous research (see Archer & Coyne, 2005) and the pilot study data, gossip, ignoring, and exclusion are among the most common relational aggression experiences reported by adolescent girls. Participants who endorsed any of the three items—ignoring, spreading rumors, or keeping someone from being accepted—from the frequency estimates were selected to receive follow-up questions about a specific experience of relational aggression. Each item for which a girl gave an answer other than "never" on the frequency estimate portion of the questionnaire was included as part of the pool of relationally aggressive behaviors for which she could receive follow-up questions. Of the one to three items potentially in the pool for each girl (i.e., ignoring, rumors, exclusion), one was chosen randomly by the computer as the focus of follow-up questions. No questions were posed if a participant responded "never" to all three items. The participant was asked to recall a specific time she engaged in (perpetrator version) or was victimized by (victim version) that particular behavior and then respond to a series of questions about that specific incident. Follow-up questions were prefaced by the following statement

(with only the specific form of behavior changed and minor alterations in wording necessary for the victim version):

You indicated above that you have intentionally *ignored a girl or given her the silent treatment* at some point in the past year. Now we would like you to think about one specific time when this happened and to briefly describe the incident below. This is only to help you remember the incident, so write whatever you need to help you remember it.

A blank text box was provided for participants to describe the aggressive incident. Girls were then asked follow-up questions about details of that experience.

Of 114 girls, 85 (75%) received follow-up questions when describing their experiences as a perpetrator ($n = 37$ intentionally ignoring someone; $n = 37$ spreading rumors or gossip; $n = 11$ excluding someone from a peer group). Not as many girls received questions about exclusion because fewer girls reported excluding someone during the past year. Although the computer randomly assigned a single form of aggressive behavior, the pool of behaviors for random assignment was limited to those endorsed by the respondent.

When reporting on being the victim of relationally aggressive behavior, 72 of the 114 (63.2%) girls received follow-up questions ($n = 31$ being ignored, $n = 26$ having rumors or gossip spread about you, $n = 15$ being excluded from a group). Of the 72 girls who received follow-up questions on a victimization experience, 60 had also received follow-up questions about an incident in which they were the perpetrator of relational aggression, suggesting a considerable amount of overlap in terms of aggression and victimization.

Perceived Functions of the Aggressive Behavior. Five survey items were developed to reflect the motives for relational aggression described in the introduction and were refined based on the pilot study feedback. *Social control*, or aiming to improve one's social status or otherwise shape one's social world, was assessed with the following items: "you thought it would help you get closer to one or more other girls" and "you thought one or more of your friends didn't like her." *Amusement* or diversion was tapped with the item "it seemed like a fun thing to do at the time," *anticipatory* or self-protective motives were represented by the item "you thought that she was going to do something bad to you and you wanted to do something to her first," and, finally, *revenge* motives were assessed with the item "you were trying to get back at her for something she had done to you that made you mad."

When describing a perpetrated act, girls indicated whether each motive item was a reason for their aggressive behavior in that incident with a 5-point response scale that ranged from 1 (*this was not a reason*) to 5 (*this was a main reason*; See Table 2). Participants were told that there could be many reasons for the same behavior and were instructed to consider and respond to each item separately. When responding as victims, participants were asked to reflect on reasons why the perpetrator may have engaged in the aggressive act. They were given the same five potential motives and were asked to indicate whether, although they could not know for sure, each might have been a reason for the perpetrator's behavior in that incident. The items mirrored those presented on the perpetrator measure (e.g., "it must have seemed like a fun thing to do at the time") and were rated with the same 5-point response scale. Because there was a bimodal distribution of responses to each motive item on both the perpetrator version and the victim version, a categorical score was used; responses other than 1 (*not a reason*) were coded as endorsing that particular reason for the aggressive behavior.

Feelings at the Time of the Incident. On the perpetrator version of the survey, the participants described how they felt at the time of the incident by rating seven emotions (listed in Figure 1) on a

Table 2
Continuous Means and Dichotomous Percentages for the Functions Endorsed by Perpetrators and Victims

Functions of Act	Reporting as Perpetrator		Reporting as Victim	
	Number of girls endorsing ^a	Average score ^b	Number of girls endorsing ^a	Average score ^b
Trying to get back at her	48 (56%)	2.36	50 (69%)	2.69
Thought friends didn't like her	27 (32%)	1.62	28 (39%)	1.76
Seemed like a fun thing to do at the time	25 (29%)	1.59	36 (50%)	1.96
Thought it would help you get closer to other girls	21 (25%)	1.41	39 (54%)	2.10
Thought she was going to do something bad to me	14 (16%)	1.27	22 (31%)	1.61

Notes. ^aFor dichotomous scores, no endorsement of motive = responded with a 1 (not a reason); endorsement of motive = responded with a 2 or above on the 4-point scale (a reason). ^b1 = This was not a reason; 3 = This was one of the reasons, but not the main one; 5 = This was a main reason.

5-point scale (1 = *I did not feel this way*, 5 = *I definitely felt this way*). When responding as victims, girls rated 11 emotions that they might have experienced at the time of victimization (items differed slightly from the perpetrator version based on pilot study feedback that certain emotions should be added or dropped). Each emotion was rated with a 5-point scale (1 = *I did not feel this way*, 5 = *I definitely felt this way*). Refer to Figure 2 for a list of the 11 emotions.

RESULTS

Results are organized according to the four main goals of the study. First, descriptive information is provided about the frequency of the different forms of relational aggression. Next, results are

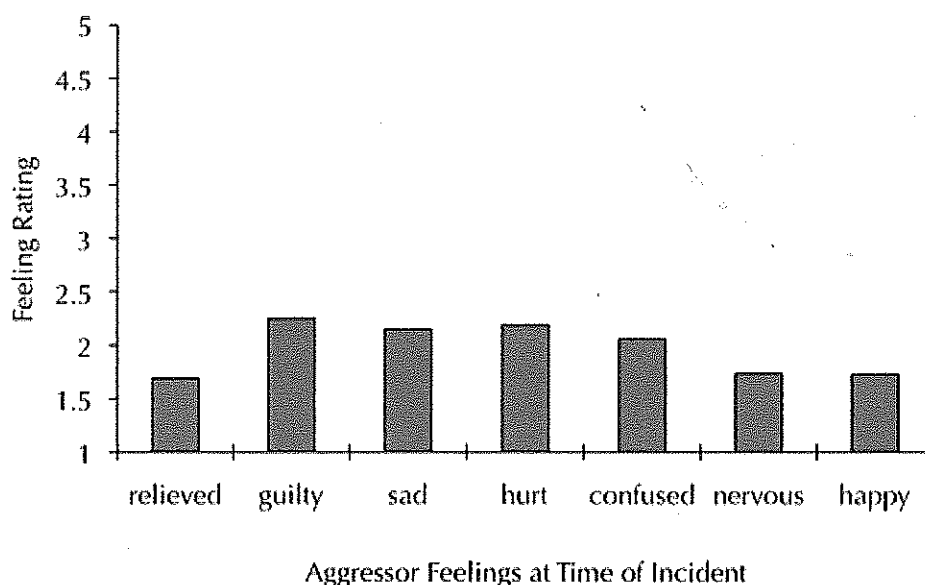


FIGURE 1. Mean aggressor-reported feelings at the time of the relationally aggressive incident, measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *I did not feel this way*; 3 = *I somewhat felt this way*; 5 = *I definitely felt this way*).

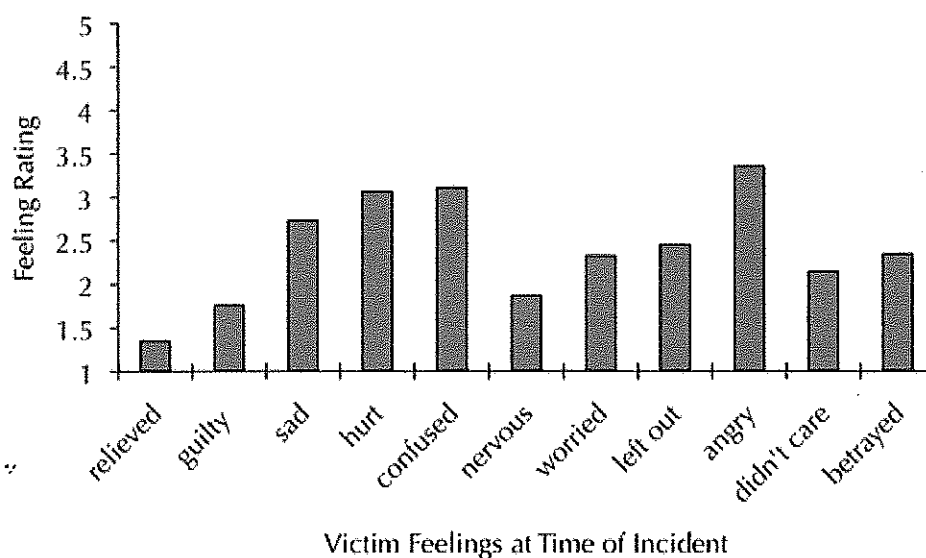


FIGURE 2. Mean victim-reported feelings at the time of the relationally aggressive incident, measured on a 5-point scale (1 = I did not feel this way; 3 = I somewhat felt this way; 5 = I definitely felt this way).

presented in terms of the perceived functions of and emotions associated with specific incidents of aggressive behavior. Finally, we examine whether the reported functions and feelings at the time of the incident differed according to the form of aggressive behavior in question.

Frequency and Forms of Relational Aggression

On average, the participants in this study reported having perpetrated each act of relational aggression at least once during the previous year ($M = 2.05$, standard deviation [SD] = .63). As shown in Table 1, the most frequent behavior was talking behind someone's back, which the average girl reported doing "more than once in the past year." Spreading rumors or gossiping about a girl and intentionally ignoring a girl were the next two most frequent behaviors. These *same* participants reported, on average, being victimized by each act of relational aggression about the same number of times in the previous year ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .73$) as they reported being aggressive themselves. The most frequently reported types of victimization were being talked about behind one's back and being intentionally ignored (see Table 1).

Functions of Aggressive Behavior

As shown in Table 2, the function that girls most frequently endorsed for the incidents of relational aggression that they perpetrated was "trying to get back" at the victim (56%). It is interesting that the second most frequently endorsed function was thinking that their friends didn't like the victim (32%). These two functions correspond with the *revenge* category and the *social control* category, respectively.

When the same participants were reporting as victims of aggressive acts, the most frequently perceived function was that the aggressor was "trying to get back" at them (69%, see Table 2). Thinking that the aggressor engaged in such behavior because she thought it would help her get closer to her friends was also frequently reported (54%).

Feelings at the Time of the Incident

As shown in Figure 1, when reporting on an experience of perpetrating relationally aggressive behavior, girls were likely to report feeling at least a bit guilty ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.17$), hurt ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.26$), and sad ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.26$) at the time of the incident. In contrast, when the same participants reported on an experience of being victimized by relationally aggressive behavior, girls indicated that they felt angry ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.79$), confused ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.11$), and hurt ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.07$; Figure 2). Comparing the height of the bars in Figures 1 and 2, it is clear that girls reported more negative feelings as victims than they did as perpetrators. For instance, among those receiving follow-up items for both versions of the survey, girls reported being significantly more sad [$t(59) = -3.48$, $p < .01$], hurt [$t(59) = -4.22$, $p < .001$], and confused [$t(59) = -6.05$, $p < .001$] when they were reporting as victims than they did when reporting as perpetrators.

Functions and Feelings for Different Forms of Aggression

Associations between the form of the aggressive behavior that the respondent was asked to describe, its perceived functions, and feelings at the time of the incident are reported first based on descriptions provided as perpetrators, followed by parallel analyses for incidents of victimization.

Relationally Aggressive Behavior. A set of chi-square tests of independence examined the association between the three forms of aggressive behavior (i.e., ignoring, rumors, and exclusion) and the functions listed in Table 2. Separate chi-square tests were examined for each of five possible functions to see if the endorsement of that function differed depending on the form of the aggressive behavior described. Results indicated that endorsement of the function "seemed like fun" was significantly associated with form, $\chi^2(2) = 10.94$, $p < .01$. Girls who reported on ignoring were much less likely to endorse "seemed fun" as a reason for their aggression (10%) than were those who reported on incidents involving rumors (43%) or exclusion (46%). Chi-square tests for the other four functions were not significant.

The next set of analyses examined whether there were differences in the feelings reported by the perpetrator based on the form of incident she was asked to describe. A one-way between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on the seven dependent variables associated with self-reported perpetrator feelings at the time of the incident (listed in Figure 1). Wilks' criterion indicated that, as a group, the dependent variables were significantly influenced by incident type [$F(14,152) = 2.49$, $p < .01$]. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs with Tukey's Honestly Significant Differences (HSD) post hoc tests revealed that girls who reported on ignoring indicated that they felt sadder ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.26$) after the incident than did girls who reported on rumors [$M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.18$; $F(2,82) = 4.36$, $p < .05$]. There was also a significant univariate effect for aggressor happiness, such that the girls who reported on exclusion were more likely to report feeling happy after the incident ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.04$) than were those who reported on ignoring ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .93$) and rumors [$M = 1.68$, $SD = .97$; $F(2,82) = 4.72$, $p < .05$].

Relational Victimization Experiences. Analyses on data from the victimization portion of the survey were analogous to the tests described earlier. First, a set of chi-square tests of independence tested associations between incident form (i.e., ignoring, rumors, and exclusion) and the five functions listed in Table 2. Three of the chi-square tests were significant, revealing that incident form and function endorsement were significantly associated for the functions "Get back at me" [$\chi^2(2) = 6.91$, $p < .05$], "Friends didn't like me" [$\chi^2(2) = 8.74$, $p < .05$], and "Seemed fun" [$\chi^2(2) = 9.58$, $p < .01$]. Girls who described an incident of being ignored by peers perceived a different pattern of aggressor motives as compared to victims who were assigned the other two forms of

incidents to describe. Specifically, girls who reported on being ignored were less likely to endorse "Friends didn't like me" (19%) as a reason for their victimization than did girls who reported on incidents involving rumors (54%) or exclusion (53%). The girls who reported on an ignoring incident were also less likely to endorse "Seemed fun" (29%) as a reason for their victimization than were the girls who described incidents involving rumors (65%) or exclusion (67%). It is interesting that the retaliatory function was most likely to be endorsed by victims of ignoring; 84% endorsed "Get back at me" as a reason for their victimization, as compared to 47% of those reporting on exclusion and 65% of those who described being victimized by rumors.

To assess differences in feelings based on the form of victimization a girl was asked to describe, a MANOVA was performed on the 11 adjectives listed in Figure 2 describing how she, as the victim, felt at the time of the incident. According to Wilks' criterion, the dependent variables were significantly influenced by incident form [$F(22,116) = 1.83, p < .05$]. Only one follow-up ANOVA was significant, however, when employing Tukey's HSD post hoc test, indicating that the girls who described incidents of being ignored were more likely to say they felt guilty after their victimization ($M = 2.13, SD = 1.15$) than were those who described having rumors spread about them [$M = 1.42, SD = .90; F(2,69) = 3.37, p < .05$].

DISCUSSION

The current study examined teenage girls' experiences with specific incidences of relational aggression and victimization in hopes of elucidating the forms, functions, and emotional correlates of this type of behavior. Participants in this study afforded us a deeper and more nuanced view of the nature of relational aggression than has traditionally been available. Girls reported being involved in each form of relational aggression, as both victims and perpetrators, at least once in the past year, with talking behind a girl's back being the most frequently reported behavior. The most frequently endorsed functions (both when girls were reporting as perpetrators and as victims) included revenge and a desire to shape and control one's social world. Finally, linking forms of relational aggression with feelings and perceived functions, the girls in this study were more likely to describe ignoring, compared to rumors and exclusion, as a purposeful form of aggression associated with negative feelings at the time of the incident. They were less likely to attribute ignoring to a desire for amusement or social control on the part of the perpetrator and more likely to attribute it to revenge compared to those reporting on rumors and exclusion.

Frequency and Forms of Relational Aggression

Results indicating that talking behind another girl's back, spreading rumors, and ignoring are frequent forms of aggression reported by teenage girls that are consistent with findings based on interviews with college students regarding the types of aggressive behaviors used among females (Nelson et al., 2008). They are also consistent with findings among samples of middle-school-age children in England and the United States (Coyne et al., 2006; Paquette & Underwood, 1999), suggesting that the forms of relational aggression reported most frequently among females are consistent across age groups from early adolescence to young adulthood. Additionally, the current study builds on research conducted with 15-year-old girls in Australia (Owens et al., 2000a) by showing that talking behind another's back is also frequently reported among girls in American high schools. Given that studies originating from multiple countries and conducted with samples of varying ages show that rumors, ignoring, and talking behind another's back are frequently employed forms of aggression, intervention and prevention efforts targeting these specific behaviors might be particularly effective. It would also be beneficial for practitioners and parents to understand some of the common reasons why these behaviors might take place among adolescent girls.

Functions of Relational Aggression

This study examined a variety of potential functions of relational aggression, including social control, amusement, revenge, and anticipation of future harm. Our participants were particularly likely to cite revenge (i.e., "trying to get back") as a motive for the aggressive incident, both when they were reporting as perpetrators and when they were reporting as victims. This pattern is in line with interview-based findings from research with seventh- and eighth-grade boys and girls in the United States (Paquette & Underwood, 1999) and with high-school girls in Australia (Owens et al., 2000b). The current findings add to interview-based reports by suggesting that teenage girls are likely to cite revenge as a motive for relational aggression even when afforded the privacy of an online survey.

Although revenge has not been specifically examined as a motive in many studies of relational aggression, it does fall into the broader category of reactive relational aggression—a type of behavior that has garnered recent attention in the literature (Bailey & Ostrov, 2008; Little et al., 2003; Marsee et al., 2008; Ostrov & Crick, 2007; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Walcott et al., 2008). Research aimed at differentiating between a range of motives that fall *within* the overall umbrella categories of reactive and proactive relational aggression, such as that reported here, is also important inasmuch as it could have useful implications for those invested in curbing "mean" behavior among adolescent girls. Detailed knowledge of the reasons why girls might engage in relationally aggressive behaviors, as well as an understanding of how victims perceive and make sense of such acts, would be informative in the development of more precise intervention and prevention programs and policies (Young et al., 2006).

Linking Forms, Functions, and Feelings

A striking finding was that 84% of the girls in this study who described an incident of being ignored attributed the perpetrator's behavior to wanting revenge. In comparison, only about half of the victims describing rumors and exclusion endorsed revenge as a motive. It appears that ignoring is a means by which adolescent girls try to punish each other and get revenge for perceived wrongs. These findings suggest that ignoring is a form of behavior that is particularly likely to be used as reactive relational aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1996).

Ignoring, or giving a girl the "silent treatment," indeed emerged as a unique form of relational aggression in this study. For example, when reporting both as perpetrators and as victims, girls describing an incident of ignoring were much less likely to view amusement as a motive (i.e., "seemed fun") compared with girls reporting on rumors and exclusion. In addition, fewer victims reporting on ignoring endorsed the perpetrator's wish for social acceptance or control (i.e., "her friends didn't like me") as a motive than did victims reporting on rumors or exclusion. A description given by a participant when reporting on an incident of ignoring another girl helps to illustrate these findings: "Well one of my best friends was kinda making fun of me and joking around to [*sic*] much. She was also picking her boyfriend over me and it was driving me crazy. I didn't totally ignore her I just kept my distance." Other girls mentioned that they were in a fight with a friend and, as a result, didn't want to talk to her. Victims, too, repeated this theme when describing incidents of being ignored. For example, one girl wrote, "I said something I shouldn't have and my friend got upset and didn't talk to me for a while, didn't look at me in the halls or talk to me once. She acted as if I wasn't alive."

In sum, it appears that both perpetrators and victims perceive ignoring as a purposeful form of revenge, not something that is perpetrated for entertainment or as a way of fitting in with friends. Incidentally, according to the findings reported here, it appears that ignoring is an effective form of punishment because it makes victims feel guiltier than do rumors or exclusion. The apparent

uniqueness of ignoring as a form of relational aggression is a novel finding that we believe warrants further investigation.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Notably, we focused on girls because they have been underrepresented in the aggression literature; however, we know that relational aggression does occur among boys and, as several studies have indicated, at about the same frequency as among girls (for reviews, see Card et al., 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). Thus, it is important to ask similar questions of boys and to assess any gender differences in the experiences that teens describe. Moreover, because the participation rate in the current study was low, replication is necessary to more confidently generalize the findings reported here. Although we have no individual data from girls who were invited to participate but did not return consent forms, we are encouraged by the similarity in ethnic distribution and average parental education attainment level between our sample and that for the entire school population.

We asked the same adolescents to describe incidents in which they were perpetrators and incidents in which they were victims of relationally aggressive behavior. Our approach contrasts with more traditional views of "aggressors" and "victims" as different individuals, and our findings indicated that most girls have at least some experience in both roles. Although we counterbalanced the surveys to limit the effects of order, there would be no chance of contamination if the aggressor and victim incidents had been described by different adolescents. Another interesting possibility would be a study of aggressor-victim dyads, where the same incident is described from both perspectives.

In addition, asking girls to choose one incident of relational aggression on which to report was a limitation inasmuch as we don't know how well the descriptive information reported here characterizes most occurrences of each type of relational aggression. We do believe, however, that our study benefited from the detailed information provided by each girl about a single incident of relational aggression. It seems reasonable to assume that the girls chose incidents that were salient and meaningful to them. The requirement to describe a specific experience also probably improved the external validity of reports.

Finally, the motives presented to the girls in this study were only a handful of the many reasons someone might have for being relationally aggressive. Moreover, girls do not always know why they aggressed or were victimized; therefore, endorsement of some motives might be easier and take less personal reflection than others. Nonetheless, we developed the motive questions based on previous research (Owens et al., 2000b; Paquette & Underwood, 1999) and our own interviews with adolescent girls in the pilot study and, therefore, we believe that our items reflect motives that girls in this age range consider to be viable explanations for their aggressive behavior. The findings presented here extend previous research by providing an examination of motives for relational aggression that are more specific than the broad categories of "reactive" and "proactive." The current study is also unique in its focus on forms of behavior *within* the broad category of relational aggression, rather than relying on the traditional physical versus relational dichotomy.

Conclusion

Adolescent girls' descriptions of their experiences with various types of relational aggression and victimization suggest that at least some forms of relationally aggressive behavior are normative experiences in this age group. Our data suggested that intentionally ignoring someone is perceived differently than other forms of relational aggression. Adolescents in this study perceived different motives for ignoring, and they also felt worse at the time of the ignoring incident, whether they were

reporting as aggressors or as victims. The phenomenon of ignoring or "giving the silent treatment" deserves more attention from researchers.

Even though some experience with relationally aggressive behavior seems to be normative, both the perpetrators and victims of such acts report feeling at least some negative emotions following the incident. Thus, in addition to aiming intervention and prevention efforts at persons who are chronic aggressors or victims, primary prevention programs could focus on reducing the occurrence of such incidents among all students. Findings from the current study shed light on some of the nuances of such experiences and, therefore, can be useful in developing programs to reduce relational aggression in school settings. For example, children and teens could learn about the emotional costs of relational aggression that are paid by everyone, including the perpetrators. Understanding the functions that relationally aggressive acts are intended to serve can aid in determining alternative, more prosocial ways to teach students to achieve the same goals.

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