

A CLOSER LOOK AT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION 1

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A Closer Look at Relational Aggression

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Introduction

Relational aggression is not a new form of aggression, but it is a more recently researched form which is often made out to be of little importance or unheard of all together. Many believe it to be a 'normal' part of development for children and adolescents. Physical aggression is thought by some to be more of a priority because the act and repercussions are more visible. However, relational aggression has shown to cause mental and emotional damage, which can be more severe than physical damage (Hottle, Nelson, Warburton, Young & Young, 2011). Relational aggression is a newly researched form of aggression that is quickly becoming more prominent in our culture, especially for adolescents, and there is a dire need for education on the topic.

Section 1 – “You can’t sit with us!” (Michaels & Waters, 2004) – What is it?

Researchers have been looking at aggression for years; it is not an uncommon act to witness, nor an uncommon act to misinterpret. This may be due to the several different forms of aggression that our society has seen and created. However, aggression itself can be defined as, “behaviors intended to harm another person physically or psychologically or to damage, destroy, or take that person’s property” (Moeller, 2001, p. 24). This can be broken down into two main categories: physical and verbal. Physical aggression is the most commonly known and understood form of aggression because it is done with the intention to physically harm another person through means you can witness. Verbal aggression is still well known, but much more difficult to see because it uses intentionally harmful words as the means to hurt another, rather than physicality. These two forms of aggression are relatively common and in nearly all school bullying contracts. However,

A CLOSER LOOK AT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION 3

there is a newly recognized and researched form of aggression that has yet to be identified in many schools; Relational Aggression.

Relational aggression has been heavily researched for roughly the past ten years, however, prior to the late 90's and early 2000s, there was minimal knowledge on the topic. We now have research on the topic, but many have little to no education on it. Relational aggression is most related to indirect and social aggression, it may even be described as an accumulation of the two. The most common definition of relational aggression is, behaviors that inflict harm through manipulating, damaging, or controlling of relationships (Linder & Werner, 2012; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Examples of relational aggression are, rumors, social exclusion, silent treatment, and threats to take away love. These examples can be seen in both indirect and social aggressions, which are known for not confronting the target directly and targeting self-esteem and social status of the victim. Relational aggression can be broken into two subtypes: indirect or covert and direct or overt. Covert relational aggression is seen as spreading rumors, talking behind target's back and covert is qualified as a passive form of aggression (Risser, 2013). Overt relational aggression is described as threatening to end a relationship if the target friend does not comply, overt is qualified as confrontational. Regardless of the subtype relational aggression takes, this form of aggression aims to emotionally and socially hurt the victim. Like verbal aggression, emotional aggression is not easy to see and because of this relational aggression has often not been recognized.

A majority of anti-bullying laws address aggression of the physical and verbal form, but many do not address relational. This is most likely caused from lack of education on the matter and believing other forms of aggression sit on higher importance.

A CLOSER LOOK AT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION 4

Much of our society believes that relational aggression is not in fact a form of aggression, but rather just a “normal” part of the socialization process for children and adolescents and may be recognized as “kids just being kids”. Relational aggression also sits in the shadows of physical aggression because it is often believed that physical aggression should be given more attention because the abuse can be seen. However, people need to be aware that relational aggression is not normal socialization, and the harm it causes is not less important or less hurtful than physical aggression (Hottle, Nelson, Warburton, Young & Young, 2011). In fact, a majority of bullying that occurs today is believed to take the form of relational aggression. According to a study conducted by Boye, Nelson, and Young in 2006, if anti-bullying laws continue to only recognize physical aggression then 60 percent of female aggressors and seven percent of male aggressors will fail to be recognized as bullies (p. 297). That leaves a large percent of female bullies unidentified. Furthermore, they also found that failing to recognize relational aggression would result in 71.4 percent of female and 21.1 percent of male victims would not be seen as ever being bullied (p. 297) and instead would just been seen as participating in “normal” socialization. These are troubling statistics because the effects for both the victims and the aggressors are quite severe.

Section 2 – What Could Happen

Many of the side effects of relational aggression occur emotionally and to the victims as well as the aggressors and the side effects often are the warning signs as well. This makes it a very difficult form of bullying to identify and those near it need to educate themselves on the side effects. Both victims and the aggressors suffer from rejection by peers. In the perspective of the victim this results because peers see them as

A CLOSER LOOK AT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION 5

a “target” and they too do not want to be bullied as well. The aggressors may be rejected because peers see them as threats and no one wants to get too close or on their “radar”.

As a result of peer rejection, both suffer from depression, loneliness and isolation as well. Furthermore, these are all linked to social and psychological maladjustment issues, which may delay or cut off the forming of relationships (Godleski & Ostrov, 2013).

Participating in relational aggression, as either a victim or aggressor, puts one at risk for academic failure and school dropout (Risser, 2013). Victimization of relational aggression is an outcome and predictor of poor school performance. Victims often become the aggressors and this may be due to various reasons; feelings of anger and hopelessness may be overwhelming or victims often believe that retaliation must be done in the form of relational aggression, which in turn, results in the victim becoming the aggressor. Aggressors suffer from nearly all the same side effects as the victims, however, they pose the power of often being assumed or viewed as popular. They also are socially intelligent and have strengthened peer manipulation skills (Risser, 2013). The aggressors are often not looked at too closely, aside for punishment, but it is important to understand the aggressors because they suffer as well and understanding can help create prevention.

Crick and Grotpeter conducted a study in 1996 that focused on the aggressors of relational aggression. It found that aggressive children with friends tend to surround themselves and befriend other aggressive children and partake in exclusive friendships. The main concept this study was looking at was how relationally aggressive girls engage in high levels of disclosure with friends and if this was really considered positive or if the disclosure was elicited in order to gain control. Crick and Grotpeter found that

A CLOSER LOOK AT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION 6

aggressors did not report high levels of self-disclosure, but they felt friends could and should self disclose. This supports the idea that aggressive children are not accepting self-disclosure to build strong friendships, but rather to elicit and gain control. However, even with this, adolescents in these friendships report having high levels of companionship and validation. This may be a result of relationally aggressive children choosing to surround themselves in relationships with other aggressive peers and their believe that it is healthy or “normal” behavior.

Much of how an individual handles and interprets aggressive behavior is based on personal differences during the processing of information. The interpretation of an individual may result in aggressive repercussions of two types: reactive or proactive. Prior to either of these occurring one must go through the social information-processing model (SIP), the cognitive process that may contribute to individuals behaving a certain way (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Crick & Gentile, 2011). SIP has six stages of processing that lead to an action: encoding of social cues, interpretation of social cues, clarification of goals, response access, response decision, and behavior enactment. Encoding and interpretation of social cues happens quickly and acts as a strong indicator of how the individual will choose to react. These stages are strongly based on the individual and how they perceive a situation. The clarification of goals and response access stages happen after the situation has been assessed and the individual has to think about their own goals and the various potential responses. Finally, an individual encounters the response decision and behavior enactment stages, where a decision on how to react must be made and the decided behavior is put into action. The SIP model plays a large role in creating two types of relationally aggressive individuals: reactive and proactive.

A CLOSER LOOK AT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION 7

Those that partake in reactive relational aggression put a strong emphasis on the interpretation of social cues processing stage. A reactive person tends to interpret a peer's behavior as intentionally harmful and they react with an "angry defensive response to frustration or provocation" (Crick & Dodge, 1996, p. 993). It is common for a reactive relational aggression type to interpret social cues as hostile more often than nonreactive peers and they believe there is "no benefit of the doubt" (993). Reactive relational aggression is related to higher levels of aggressive problem solving because aggression is viewed as a form of retaliation, which results in solving aggression with more aggression (Crick & Gentile, 2011). Reactive relational aggression falls under the subtype of indirect or covert aggression. It is carried out in a passive way through the use of rumors being spread or ignoring the target. Reactive is a fairly dangerous form of aggression because it is seen as a defense and therefore those that partake in it often view their actions as justified and acceptable.

Proactive relational aggression is mainly developed during the response decision-making stage of the social information-processing model. During this stage "children evaluate possible behavioral responses to a particular social situation according to several criteria, such as the type of outcomes likely to accrue for each response and their degree of confidence" (Crick & Dodge, 1996, p. 994) and the result leads to choosing an aggressive response. Proactive aggressive children evaluate aggressive acts in ways that lead to enactment of similar behaviors and is a "deliberate behavior that is controlled by external reinforcements" (Crick & Dodge, 1996, p. 993), which are expected to have positive results. When evaluated, it was found that proactive aggressive children not only view aggressive acts in positive ways, but believe the aggression is normal and

appropriate at all times (1996). Proactive children are also more likely to view aggression as an effective means to a goal. This type of behavior falls under the direct or overt form of aggression because it uses goal oriented and confrontational behavior, such as, threatening to withdraw love or friendship (Crick & Gentile, 2011). The social information-processing model creates these two forms of aggression, but there are several other external factors that feed into the idea of relational aggression prior to the SIP model.

Section 3 – Causes

“Boo you whore!” (Michaels & Waters, 2004) – Causes: Media

Relational aggression is extremely common on television shows for adolescents and the behavior is nearly always portrayed as rewarded or justified. For example, one of the most popular television shows for adolescents, mainly girls, is *Gossip Girl*. This show embodies everything that relational aggression is as well as showing the effects that it produces. However, it is never viewed as negative and the aggressors are always placed in high power and given high popular status. Through television shows like *Gossip Girl*, covert and reactive individuals learn how to use relational aggression. These individuals specifically learn through shows because they see the aggressive behavior and how reacting with the same behavior in a defensive manor results in positive repercussions. Overt and proactive individuals develop their behavior mainly through the consistent viewing of relationally aggressive material and building of schemas that enforce it as normal behavior. Coyne, Gentile and Walsh (2011), found that repeatedly viewing violent media might result in the development, over learning, and reinforcement of aggression-related schemas (p. 194), which are difficult to deconstruct

and therefore create overt and proactive individuals. There are also individuals that deal with the selective exposure hypothesis, which states that children with biological or psychological predisposition toward aggressive behavior might find violent and aggressive television more interesting (Moeller, 2001, p. 141). These children are predisposed with the idea that aggressive media is more entertaining, which often results in aggressive behaviors. Linder and Werner (2012) found, “evidence that children who consume high levels of relationally aggressive television and movies become increasingly approving of relationally aggressive behaviors over time” (p. 469). This sets up children with a predisposed interest in aggressive media for failure because even though they view it as entertainment, the over viewing of aggressive behavior often leads to approval. However, with parental or adult mediation much of the negative effects aggressive media can have may be lowered. Sadly, even with this precaution, aggression is introduced into televised entertainment so young that parents and adults stand a small chance in catching it all.

According to a study conducted by Coyne, Gentile and Walsh (2011), children spend an average of 20.8 hours per week watching television and another study by Coyne and Whitehead (2008) looked at Disney movies specifically. They found that there is approximately 9.23 hours of relational aggression in animated Disney films (p. 388). The film *Aladdin* has the largest count of relational aggression, at 20 acts per hour. People all develop “scripts” or cognitive knowledge structures that encode ‘what events are to happen in the environment, how the person should behave in response to these events, and what the likely outcome of those behaviors would be’” (Crick & Gentile, 2011, p. 217). People develop these scripts at young ages and as the media generalizes aggression

and normalizes or rationalizes it then children develop an understanding that aggression is normal and acceptable (Crick & Gentile, 2011). Having such a high amount of relational aggression in Disney movies develops scripts and schemas at various young ages.

Sibling Rivalry – Causes: Families

In researching reasons for development of relational aggression Gamble and Yu (2007) discovered that family dynamics often contributed to the degree of development. In a Nationwide study, American families with children three to seventeen years old said sibling violence or aggression occurred more often than spouse aggression or child abuse. In a study 88 percent of males and 94 percent of females reported being victims of sibling aggression and 85 percent of males and 96 percent of females reported victimizing a sibling (655). The social learning perspective says children learn aggressive behaviors through direct and indirect experiences of victimization and sibling interactions act as a social context where they learn, practice, and escalate aggressive behaviors (Patterson, 1986; Gamble & Yu, 2007). Therefore, when siblings are together and engage in aggressive behavior they are learning, practicing, and developing relationally aggressive skills. This behavior can be made worse if children live in a home with lax parental discipline, which is described by Moeller (2001) as, “failure to insist that children behave pro-socially and to impose appropriate negative consequences when children behave antisocially [engage in relation aggression]” (p. 108). This specific parenting style is related to acts of relational aggression between siblings and peers. However, Gamble and Yu (2007), found that positive family environments where members are able to express emotions are significantly associated with less relational aggression between siblings.

Boys Will be Boys; Girls Will be Girls – Causes: Gender

Similar to the stereotype that physical aggression is for boys, relational aggression has gained popular believe that mainly girls participate in it. Crick and Grotpeter (1996) found that, “when attempting to inflict harm on peers, children do so in ways that best thwart or damage the goals that are valued by their respective gender peer groups” (p. 710). This asks the questions, do males and females value the same things when it comes to social matters? The answer is no, and they adapt to the form of aggression that will best hurt their desired target. With this knowledge, it is believed that physical aggression is more salient for males because physical damage is what they value and relational aggression is more salient for females because social damage is what they value. However, studies done with males and females that controlled for physical aggression and focuses on relational found, “...that there is little support for calling relational aggression ‘girl aggression’” (Hottle, Nelson, Warburton, Young & Young, 2010, p. 26). Males and females both equally participated in relational aggression throughout the study but relational aggression is more socially acceptable for females in today’s society. This brings up the issue that gender is “socially constructed” which may influence the type of aggression each gender deems suitable (p. 20). So the genders may in fact have their own forms of aggression, but it is society that has made it so by giving the genders their “appropriate” forms.

No form of aggression is created from just one cause, but rather an accumulation of several environments and actions. It is important to have an understanding of not only relational aggression, but also the causes that may play a role in creating individuals that

participate in it. If the causes are understood then the proper mediation and prevention can take place.

Section 4 – What Prevention Would Look Like

The majority of school bullying laws today do not address relational aggression, which has proven to be a problem. Those that work within schools need to be educated on the matter in order to create comprehensible bullying laws and educate the students. After research Hottle, Nelson, Warburton, Young, and Young (2011) developed a school relational aggressive prevention plan with three stages: primary level strategies, secondary level strategies, and tertiary level strategies. The primary level, which may be the most important, is used to educate the students on relational aggressive and how to behave or react positively. The secondary level is used to give individual or small groups of students more direct education and help on the material. Lastly, the tertiary level is used as a treatment stage for students who have experienced relational aggression. Both the victims and the aggressors should be allowed help in this stage because both experience the negative effects. Witnesses to relational aggression may be given help as well in order to encourage their understanding of what was seen.

Conclusion

Relational aggression is gaining more understanding in our society and it is proving to have dangerous effects for both victims and aggressors. There are many leading causes to relational aggression, many of which we have created on our own, like showing aggression in the media, family environments, and gender stereotypes. It is important to understand that not one cause creates a relationally aggressive individual and that it is an accumulation of several causes. As this form of aggression continues, we

A CLOSER LOOK AT RELATIONAL AGGRESSION 13

need to educate people in order to create awareness and prevention because without it our schools are neglecting relational aggression in the bullying laws. As a result, many students are not recognized as either victims or aggressors. In order to value each student people need to be educated and understand the extremities that come with relational aggression.

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