CROSS-GENDER RELATIONAL AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE

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CROSS-GENDER RELATIONAL AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE

A Thesis

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Department of Child Development
Abstract

of

CROSS-GENDER RELATIONAL AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE

by

Christopher Robert Skrabec

The goals of this study were to examine cross-gender relational aggression during adolescence and how it may be related to depression and self-esteem. Specifically of interest was how gender composition of aggressor-victim dyads may relate differently to depression and self-esteem reported by victims. This study was conducted using a survey with 35 freshman at a Northern California high school. Results support the linkage between victimization and depression for all groups where self-esteem was associated with only same-gender aggressor-victim dyads. Genders differences were found in the ratings of harmfulness of relational aggression tactics. Limitations and future implications are discussed.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Juliana Raskauskas

_______________________ Date
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the role of gender in relationally aggressive interactions using a sample consisting of ninth-graders. Past studies have found that gender can affect how aggression develops during adolescence with females typically engaging in more relational aggression than males (Coyne, Archer, Eslea, & Liechty, 2008; Crick & Gropeter, 1995). This study examined associations between relational aggression and problematic outcomes including depressive symptoms. A final goal of the study was to examine gender differences in student perceptions of different relationally aggressive tactics.

Statement of the Problem

Relational aggression is a problem that can cause severe disturbances in the lives of its victims (Prinstein, Boegers & Vernberg, 2001). Victimization resulting from relational aggression in some cases can affect adolescent adjustment in the school setting (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). Depression and Self-esteem are two negative outcomes that have been associated with victims of relational aggression (Prinstein et al., 2001; Williams, Fredland, Han, Campbell & Kub, 2009).

Despite the possibility for these behaviors to be destructive, research has only recently started to look more closely at the characteristics of the victims and aggressors
within relational aggression. Early bullying research largely underestimated the amount that girls engaged in aggressive behavior because relational aggression is usually not easily observable by adults (Crick & Gropeter, 1995). Crick and Gropeter (1995) proposed that girls use more covert forms of aggression, which they called relational aggression. Since this study, many other researchers have begun to examine aggression that females perpetrate (Crick & Gropeter, 1996; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2009). Relational aggression is orchestrated using manipulative tactics by both genders during adolescence as a means to harm others as well as accomplish their social goals (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010).

**Significance of the Study**

Despite the amount of research conducted on the unique role of gender in the perpetration of relational aggression, there are still studies that have disputed the assumption that females engage in more relational aggression than males (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Schietauer, Haag, Mahlke, & Ittel, 2008; Tomada & Schneider, 1997). Past studies have demonstrated that both males and females can experience relational aggression (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Existing research has not examined the way that gender composition in aggressor-victim dyads of relationally aggressive interactions may contribute to outcomes (Smith, Rose, & Schwartz-Mette, 2010), a focus of the current study.

The current study differs from past studies in that it examines relational aggression as it pertains to situations where the aggressor is of a different gender than the
victim. This study also examined relational aggression where the victim is of the same gender as the aggressor. The two main variables of interest are depressive symptoms and self-esteem. The experiences of victims of relational aggression are the topic of examination so this study also examines student perceptions of the harmfulness of specific strategies used by aggressors to perpetrate relational aggression (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembecek, 2010).

**Methods**

The current study used a survey in order to study adolescent perceptions of the harm caused by relational aggression as a function of gender composition of the dyad. A school social worker who provided entry into her school helped with recruiting participants. Teachers sent home participant recruitment letters to parents of potential participants in five 9th grade classes. Prior to completing the survey, students who returned parental consent also signed an assent form.

The measure utilized self-report methodology and concerned behaviors including perpetration as well as being a victim of different kinds of relationally aggressive behaviors. In order to examine these behaviors, Crick and Gropeter (1995)’s measure was used concerning victimization as well as perpetration of relational aggression. The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES-DC) measured depressive symptoms. In this study, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory measured the reported self-esteem of participants. This survey included mostly scale items but there were also a few open-ended questions, which gave participants the opportunity to
elaborate on their victimization. The researcher gave the survey to participants in their natural classroom environment during regularly scheduled class time. The final sample consisted of 35 9th graders from a single high school in Northern California.

In order to test for associations between gender and victimization groups in the study, researchers conducted a chi-square analysis. Then, to test whether there were any differences between aggressor-victim gender dyads on depression and self-esteem, researchers ran an ANCOVA. Lastly, t-test analyses were ran by the researcher in order to see if different gendered participants found some relationally aggressive tactics to be more harmful than others.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this research, relational aggression is defined as using social relationships to harm or control others. Relational aggression can take a variety of forms including group exclusion, teasing, spreading rumors, and manipulating relationships to accomplish a perpetrator’s social goals while causing victims harm (Crick & Gropeter, 1995). Those who use relational aggression will be referred to as aggressors, and those who are targets of relational aggression are called victims.

Another term that the current study uses is tactics. Tactics for the purpose of this research are defined as different relationally aggressive strategies that aggressors use to cause their victims harm such as gossiping, group exclusion, rumor spreading, and teasing (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Pronk & Zimer-Gembeck, 2010).
Limitations

The limitations of the current study must be acknowledged. First, the participants used in this study represent a convenience sample of five non-random classes at a single school site. The return of parental consent forms was low making the sample size small. Although there were some male participants in this study, it is necessary to note that 63% of participants in this study were female, which may have influenced findings and may not be representative of the whole school population.

Some of the other limitations in this study involved more internal problems with missing responses in certain parts of the survey. For example, some participants did not note which gender their aggressor was so they had to be excluded from some of the analyses. The researcher also had to combine groups of victims because there was not enough power to compare some groups, which influenced how analyses were ran, and limited the testability of research questions. Lastly, the results of this study are taken from a non-random survey, so all conclusions drawn are correlational, not causal.

Organization of the Thesis

This chapter has served as the introduction to the thesis. Chapter 2 examines literature concerning relational aggression and explains why this study was the necessary next step within the field of relational aggression. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used to conduct the current study. Chapter 4 discusses data analyses used to answer the research questions in the current study as well as the findings of these analyses. Lastly,
Chapter 5 recounts the findings of the current study within the context of other studies, discusses implications, and presents directions for future research.
Over the last few decades, there has been an increased awareness of, and research on the problem of relational aggression (Coyne et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2010). Relational aggression is defined as aggression in which aggressors use indirect tactics such as threats to social relationships to harm others or exert power. Common strategies used in relationally aggressive exchanges are rumor spreading, gossiping, group exclusion, teasing, and other forms of psychological tactics that cause a disturbance in the lives or well being of victims (Crick & Gropeter, 1995).

Research has shown that anywhere between 15 and 18 percent of adolescents report being victims of relational aggression (Nixon & Werner, 2010; Prinstein et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2009). In one study 25% of teens reported being name-called or teased in a hurtful way, 20% were victims of social exclusion, and 24% reported being targets of false rumors (Powell & Jenson, 2010). Often, victims of relational aggression experience devastating problems such as the emergence of depressive symptoms and lowering of overall self-esteem (Prinstein et al., 2010; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004; Smith et al., 2010). Behaviors such as social manipulation including social exclusion, rumor spreading, and threatening to revoke friendship status in order to harm victims have been identified as prevalent concerns of adolescent girls’ social relationships (Tarrant, 2002). The experience of relational aggression is also associated with increases in stress and anxiety, and victims can report feeling sick and may have lower motivation to perform at
school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). These disturbances can linger far beyond adolescence and drastically shape how victims view their adult relationships (Simmons, 2002; Smith et al., 2010).

In this chapter, the key literature concerning victims of relationally aggressive behavior will be reviewed. First, a relevant theoretical framework, Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model will be presented. Next, the origins of relational aggression as well as the problems associated with it are discussed. Findings concerning gender and how it influences the prevalence and perpetration of aggressive behaviors are then be recounted. Lastly, this review will show how the current study is the necessary next step within the study of relational aggression.

**Theoretical Framework**

Throughout the study of aggression, there have been several theories used to explain how and why it occurs. These theories frequently vary in terms of whether they attribute aggressive behavior to factors within the individual or in the environment (Miller, 2002). Much of the research on childhood aggression has focused on Bandura’s Social Learning Theory in which children learn aggression from watching adults and media models in their lives (e.g., Bandura, 1999). However, this theory is better at explaining overt aggression as opposed to relational aggression, which is often difficult to detect and its not necessarily the result of direct modeling (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Simmons, 2002).
For the current study, the theory that best applies to explain the larger context of relational aggression is Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of Development. This theory centers around two main propositions concerning the ways in which development occurs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The first of these propositions describes development, social and cognitive, as occurring between individuals and progressively more complex interactions with people within their immediate environments. These developing interactions are called proximal processes. These processes reflect the environments in which they are constructed (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this way, proximal processes are an agent through which socialization occurs.

The second proposition is that how these proximal processes affect an individual’s development varies drastically based on the environment context as well as context of time in which they occur. Proximal processes can intensify negative outcomes in bad environments as well as help positive outcomes flourish in constructive environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These two propositions demonstrate the main lens for how Bioecological theorists view development in context.

It is also important to note the importance of time in this theoretical construct. Time is addressed in the second proposition above when Bronfenbrenner intimated that processes occur over time in order to influence development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This in turn also influences each of the environments that an individual inhabits throughout their lifespan, as it is crucial in each of the other systems (i.e., micro-chrono, meso-chrono, exo-chrono, macro-chrono; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Time also
relates to development in the Bioecological model when considering the continuity or discontinuity of events within the individual’s environments. The last way that time is important to Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model concerns generational differences. People are born into a cohort and those born in the same time period share the same historical experiences. This means that people of the same age will experience some of the same events and socialization forces on development for some shared environment, especially at the exo- and macrosystem levels. They will also have their own personal experiences within the period that they live in (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

In Bioecological theory, these development processes occur and develop within nested systems that vary in terms of how directly or indirectly they are related to the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). On the closest level to the individual is the microsystem. An individual’s microsystems include various immediate environments that proximal processes occur in (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, teenagers usually have school and home microsystems in addition to any other environments they may be involved in, such as romantic relationships, peer groups, or part-time work. The next closest system to the individual is the mesosystem. The mesosystem includes an interaction of an individual’s various microsystems. The importance of this level is due to the interrelatedness of human interactions, according to theorists. Many times a proximal process in one microsystem can affect the way an individual behaves as well as how development occurs in another microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
The micro- and mesosystems are on the closest environmental level to an individual. However, it is also important to note that there are some Bioecological systems which influence the individual without their direct involvement. The exosystem is comprised of environments that do not directly include the individual but despite this can still affect their development. For example, if a parent has a hectic day at work and is very stressed out it can affect their ability to be an effective parent when they get home and interact with their child, even though the child was not in their parent’s workplace, their parent’s workplace may indirectly affect their development. On the least personal level of development is the macrosystem. The macrosystem encompasses the larger societal and governmental constructs that guide interactions in a given environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This may include societal expectations and rules as well as the structure of the government. Processes at this level do not interact with the individual specifically, however they influence the values, structures, and rules that all of the inner systems develop within (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). All of these systems simultaneously influence a child’s development so it is often hard to tease their contributions apart.

Bioecological theory is relevant to relational aggression by providing a lens for understanding how and why it occurs and how it can affect victims. At the microsystem level, proximal processes may affect how an individual deals with victimization. When victims experience proximal processes associated with relational aggression they can be damaged psychologically in ways that affects their interactions in their various environments as well as future interactions (Simmons, 2002). Experiencing aggression
with proximal processes can be destructive, when peers harass, exclude, and deny youth healthy social relationships (Simmons, 2002). It can create developmental problems through repeated exposure. Victims of relational aggression report losing friends, as bullies often try to isolate their victims from many of their social resources within the school microsystem (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). In the Bioecological model, systems are interrelated. This means that when a victim is repeatedly encounters a negative event such as bullying; it can affect more than just the immediate environment where the victimization takes place. When an individual is relationally aggressed, they may experience internalizing symptoms such as depression, which is associated with lack of engagement with other people and can affect an individual’s development in different domains (Williams et al., 2009).

It is also necessary to note that a victim experiences aggression in some systems that do not directly involve the individual. An individual’s exosystem includes interactions that are not in an individual’s immediate environment and yet can still influence their life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These events happen to individuals who are in a victims different microsystems and affect the way that they interact with the individual. For example, a lack of teacher training on relational aggression in the classroom reduces likelihood of teachers being able to respond to it (Miller, 2002; Simmons, 2002). School policies and the extent to which they define bullying to include relational aggression and set out rules to govern teacher and student reporting and response is also relevant to whether victims get assistance when it occurs (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).
Macrosystem influences also do not involve the individual and yet can shape how they view their aggression. School policies often reflect larger societal attitudes about whether bullying is considered a problem. There has long been a myth about bullying that it builds character or that children should learn to deal with aggression themselves, both of which are why schools have previously not had clear policies (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Leff, Waasdorp, & Crick, 2010). There has been a shift in sentiment about aggression in schools and the school’s moral and legal responsibility to take action to keep kids safe. This shift in views will trickle down to influence the exosystem and more proximal processes. Another common macrosystem influence concerning relationally aggressive behavior is the socialization of females. Society tends to place expectations on girls to use their words instead of physically responding to girls who harm those who aggress against them (Coyne et al., 2008). Parents as well as teachers model how girls should behave in ways that are not overtly aggressive, and as children grow, become much less tolerant to females uses of overt aggression than they are to males (Bowie, 2007; Simmons, 2002).

Time is also an important concept to understand when helping victims of aggression. Ongoing relational aggression undoubtedly shapes the way that individuals behave in future interactions (Prinstein et al., 2001; Simmons, 2002). Victimization by peers creates a vicious cycle where processes can harm an individual’s well being and future social interactions (Simmons, 2002).

Bioecological theory helps to explain why educators and parents must employ both large-scale and personal level interventions in the school and home environments in
order to address relational aggression if they hope to reduce both negative proximal processes and the environments that influence them. Studies such as the present one will help researchers and concerned adults understand the complex interactions within these systems and provide ideas for constructing effective interventions that help victims cope and ultimately reduce aggression (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004; Simmons, 2002).

**Problems Associated with Relational Aggression**

While many studies have looked at relational aggression in a variety of populations, others have examined outcomes associated with this problem. Since the present study is interested in the experiences of victims of relational aggression it is of interest to look at the most common negative outcomes reported by victims of relational aggression: depression and lowered self-esteem (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004; Williams et al., 2009).

**Depressive Symptoms**

The link between relational aggression and depression has been examined substantially among a wide range of participants. Williams et al. (2009) conducted a study using a cross sectional survey design on one hundred and eighty-five African American middle school students and their experiences with relational aggression. The authors found that victims were much more likely than non-victims to report internalizing symptoms. Findings such as these have also been confirmed using research that examines a wide range of studies. In a meta-analytic review, Hawker and Boulton (2003)
examined the relationship between aggression and different outcome variables and showed that although there were linkages concerning other problematic outcomes, the linkages were the strongest between relational aggression and depressive symptoms.

However, despite the large body of research conducted on the linkages between relational aggression and depression, few studies have measured the association between relational aggression and depression in isolation from other forms of aggression (Hawker & Boulton, 2003; Smith et al., 2010). This discrepancy concerning studying relational aggression needs to be more completely examined in future studies. The current study will focus on relational aggression as an independent form of aggression, and examine victims’ experiences and the association between relational aggression and depressive symptoms both overall and for different genders.

**Self-esteem**

In past studies, self-esteem problems have also been associated with being a victim of relational aggression (Powell & Jensen, 2010; Prinstein et al., 2001). Prinstein et al. (2001) conducted a study measuring problematic outcomes associated with relational and overt aggression. The authors surveyed 566 9th through 12th graders, measuring their reported levels of victimization, aggression, self-esteem, depression, and internalizing symptoms. The results of this study showed that girls who reported being a victim showed internalizing symptoms as well as a lowering of their self-esteem. Another notable finding regarding self-esteem concerns how many times victimization affects students who already have low self-esteem to begin with. Powell and Jensen
(2010) found using a survey of 150 eighth grade Hispanic females that for adolescents, low self-esteem and poor friendship quality were associated with increased victimization. This suggests that victims may be in even greater danger because some of them may already have low self-esteem to begin with. The directionality of self-esteem problems however, may be difficult to distinguish as it is uncertain whether adolescents with low self-esteem are easier targets or whether low self-esteem is in fact a result of victimization (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

The evidence presented from these studies shows that self-esteem is a variable of interest when studies measure relational aggression and the affect it has on self-esteem. Studying gender as a covariate of victimization is also important because a victim’s gender may also affect how much an individual’s self-esteem declines because of bullying. These studies demonstrate a significant correlation between lower self-esteem and victimization among girls specifically (Powell & Jensen, 2010; Prinstein et al., 2001). This study will attempt to replicate past findings and strengthen the linkage between self-esteem and relational aggression.

**Gender Differences in Relational Aggression**

The relationship between gender and relational aggression is something that has inspired a great deal of research as well as controversy within this field. Much of what researchers know today about gender differences in aggression has origins in the study of gender socialization in children. Coyne et al. (2008) claimed that males and females are socialized to channel their aggression in different ways. Parents as well as teachers
usually socialize girls to avoid direct aggression (Bowie, 2007). Males are socialized to believe that overt aggression is often an acceptable way to behave with others; these differences are often observable in same-gender peer interactions even at a young age (Baillargeon, Zoccolillo, Keenan, Cote, Perusse, Wu, & Tremblay, 2007; Crick & Gropeter, 1995).

Parents at times unintentionally encourage passive aggression, as females are sometimes punished for behaving in an overtly aggressive manner (Bowie, 2007). For males, overtly aggressive behaviors are acceptable for them to engage in as parents can reinforce aggressive behaviors. Relationships are important to both sexes during adolescence, but in general, males are more likely than females to disregard relationships in the pursuit of other goals (Letendre, 2007). Girls meanwhile, are often encouraged to value harmony in peer relationships. They also cultivate language skills and emotional competence in identifying and understanding emotion in others (Bowie, 2007). These skills are generally helpful in maintaining positive relationships as evidenced by the relatively small percentage of the overall population who are victims of relational aggression (Prinstein et al., 2001). However, for the small percentage of the female population who are aggressive, they tend to use more covert means of aggression where they can use advanced awareness of others’ emotions to manipulate them and exert power in the relationship (Letendre, 2007).

Much of the early research on aggression found that females were less aggressive than males. Crick and Gropeter (1995) found, using a sample of 491 third through sixth graders that this was a false gender difference. This study was the first that coined the
term relational aggression and created a scale to measure it. In their study, females were more relationally aggressive than males, whereas males were higher in the use of overt aggression. Their conclusion was that females were just as aggressive as males, but they aggressed in different ways. Many researchers still believe that females are more relationally aggressive than males (see Smith et al., 2010).

This does not mean, however, that this claim has remained unquestioned by other studies. In some studies, males and females exhibit relationally aggressive behavior in similar amounts (Prinstein et al., 2001). Some research has even found that males engage in more relational aggression than girls do (Tomada & Schneider, 1997). While studies such as these have found gender differences there has also been some research conducted which suggests that gender differences are not significant. In a meta-analytic review, Schietauer et al. (2008) found that gender differences were non-significant in the study of indirect and relational aggression. This meta-analysis reviewed findings of 23 primary studies concerning relational aggression and found that there were few examples of statistically supported gender differences in any of the studies. These conflicting results regarding gender differences suggest a need for further empirical studies that examine relational aggression and gender. Studies like the current one and many more must further examine the variety of results that may be accounting for gender differences in relational aggression or possibly even confounds resulting in false gender differences (Schietauer et al., 2008).

There may be some methodical reasons for this discrepancy in findings including the way that aggression is studied. Whether surveys of relational aggression actually
measure what they intend to, for example, is often a concern. Relational aggression is

can be measured behaviorally and the behaviors used to identify it may be more common
in girls (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Smith et al., 2010). Identifying ways in which
strategies used within relational aggression by different genders may increase accuracy of
measurement. Relationally aggressive behavior may be more easily detectable in girls
when it is more clearly distinguished from overt forms of aggression. This suggests that
studying relational aggression specifically and controlling for other forms of aggression
may yield results that provide new insight into this problem (Smith et al., 2010). This
inconsistency among studies suggests that gender differences may be difficult to find or
non-significant (Schietauer et al., 2008).

Research has suggested that as early as third grade there may be negative social
consequences associated with bullies who use overt aggression such as peer rejection,
whereas using relational aggression alone may not be associated with a decrease in peer
acceptance (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Smith et al., 2010). Relational
aggressors can sometimes develop problems with externalizing symptoms (Prinstein et
al., 2001; Williams et al., 2009). However, for adolescents, engaging in relationally
aggressive behaviors does not necessarily mean a lack of acceptance by their peers
(Smith et al., 2010). For both genders, relationally aggressive strategies have been found
to be related to some positive characteristics such as high popularity when perpetrators
use relational aggression and prosocial behavior simultaneously (Puckett, Aikins, &
Cillasen, 2008). Hawley et al. (2007), conducted a study concerning friendship patterns
with 929, 7th through 10th graders where they administered a survey concerning which
friendship qualities are most desirable. The authors found that many times adolescents of both genders seek friendships which are high in excitement but also high in aggression (Hawley, Little, & Card, 2007). The current study asks about whether victims of relational aggression are friends with their aggressors. Through continuing to how different gendered adolescents become friends with bullies, researchers can gain a better understanding of how to help victims.

One area where information is limited on this topic concerns how the gender of the victim and the perpetrator may have unique interaction effects. During adolescence peer relationships increase in their significance and influence, so that youth are potentially more vulnerable to the damage done by relational aggression (Tarrant, 2002). In early adolescence, gender differences intensify, making it an ideal time to examine differences in relationally aggressive strategies that may exist between genders (Smith et al., 2010). These gender differences might make differences in strategies used by perpetrators of relational aggression more readily observable.

**Tactics in Relational Aggression**

One specific aspect of relational aggression that has been studied with regard to gender differences in relational aggression concerns tactics used by aggressors. Tactics can be defined as different relational aggressive strategies. Females more often use relationally aggressive tactics to cause havoc in the close personal relationships of their victims (Letendre, 2007; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). In today’s society, female perpetrators are also using technology to cause their victims pain. For example, Garcia-
Gomez (2011) conducted a qualitative study involving 68 female adolescent’s Facebook pages and found that females often wrote vulgar messages attacking each other back and forth. In many interactions females attempted to attack their standing with specific other girls in their social group or how their attributes were in no way desirable to men. This reinforces a common finding in the research that girls are more likely to hit where it hurts, in close personal relationships (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Letendre, 2007; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010).

Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010) conducted a qualitative study on a middle school sample of 33 victims and perpetrators in Australia asking them the reasons why they aggressed, and felt they were aggressed. A qualitative design enabled participants to give detailed descriptions about their experiences with aggression. The results of this study showed that although there were many similarities in the way that males and females used relational aggression, there were also a few distinct differences in specific tactics used. Males used relational aggression that attacked a victim’s popularity, physical abilities and skills attracting the opposite sex. Contrary to males, females used strategies that damaged close friendships (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). This shows the importance of examining different tactics because they can harm different areas of a victim’s social life. Tactics relative to different gendered aggressor-victim dyads can vary in form as well as the purpose that they serve (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010).

In another study examining different relationally aggressive tactics, Coyne and colleagues (2008) conducted a study with 160 adolescents where participants viewed a
video of both overtly and relationally aggressive behavior. After the video, researchers gave participants a survey about the behaviors portrayed in the video. Participants were asked to rate how justified they felt the aggressor was in engaging in aggressive behavior as well as what the victims should feel like. Results showed that both forms of aggressive behavior were more acceptable for males as opposed to females. Males also received less sympathy when they were the target of relational aggression. This heightens the possibility that male victims may be overlooked (Coyne et al., 2008).

Findings in studies described in this section show the importance of understanding gender differences during adolescence concerning relational aggression. They also suggest that researchers who study relational aggression must not ignore either gender (Coyne et al., 2008; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Smith et al., 2010). These studies also suggest that more information must be uncovered if researchers are to construct a more complete view of how gender victimization related to relational aggression as well as negative outcomes that are associated with this problem. Diverse tactics used in relationally aggressive acts are also important to analyze because they have the potential to harm victims in a variety of ways (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). Through conducting studies that analyze the relationship between gender and relational aggression in more depth, researchers can obtain a clearer picture of how relational aggression harms victims in different ways.
The Need for the Current Study

Although studies have examined various aspects of relational aggression, many questions are still unanswered about this problem. Studies have explored the effects of relational aggression on victims; however, research has not yet examined the unique gender relationships that compose relationally aggressive dyads. Cross-gender relational aggression where the gender of the aggressor and the victim is not the same represents an area where there is a gap in the knowledge base concerning relational aggression. It also may be informative to continue to compare these forms of aggression to same gendered aggression (Smith et al., 2010). Recent findings suggest that male and female victims may experience relational aggression in different ways because of the different areas that diverse tactics target (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010). The current study examined different gendered aggressor victim dyads and their self-reported depressive symptoms and self-esteem. The researcher also examined specific aggressive tactics in order to understand which ones cause the most harm to participants.
Chapter 3
METHODS

This chapter describes the methodology of the current study. This includes the purpose of the study, research questions, participants, measures and procedures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to examine relational aggression during adolescence within a high school setting. Of particular interest was how these relationships operate among adolescents when the victim and the aggressor are not of the same gender, a topic which past research has not examined. A secondary aim was to investigate how the gender composition related to variables such as self-esteem and depression. Lastly, the intent was also to examine different aggressive tactics to discover which specific strategies participants perceived as the most harmful.

Research Questions

In order to accomplish the goals of the current study there were three main questions that the researcher asked:

(a) What is the incidence of same and opposite-gender relational aggressing?

The purpose of this question was to help researchers understand what gender the perpetrator of relational aggression is in relation to their victim and what proportion of aggressors were male and female respectively.
(b) Do victims with different gendered aggressors differ in terms of socioemotional outcomes? This question allowed the researcher to compare differing of harm that victims experienced.

(c) Which tactics are the most harmful among male and female participants?

**Design of the Study**

This study used a correlational design to examine relationships between variables and comparison of gender groups. Anonymous, self-report surveys were used because past research has demonstrated their effectiveness in examining relational aggression during adolescence (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Such self-report is the appropriate method because relational aggression is typically covert and not easily observable. Thus, peer or teacher report may not include all accounts (Totura, Green, Karver, & Gesten 2009). For adolescents to feel safe enough to be honest about reporting relational aggression, anonymity was offered since being a victim/aggressor may be embarrassing and surveys are often collected within the school context where the aggression occurs (Roseth & Pelligrini, 2010).

**Participants**

Participants in this study were from a school in a Northern California with moderate-to-low socioeconomic status. In the final sample, 51% of students receiving free or reduced lunch.¹ Two teachers who had classes with 9th grade students volunteered to facilitate the study in all the classes they taught. The school from which the
participants were drawn was a large high school ($N=1,686$) in a suburban area. It was also notably diverse in terms of the ethnicity (European American-34%, African American-15%, Hispanic-29%, Asian-8%, multiple ethnicities-12%).

In the end, 35 participants from five different classrooms took part in the study. The majority of the sample was female (63%), but with sufficient males for comparison purposes (37%). In terms of ethnicity the sample was diverse as well as similar to the school averages (European American-31%, African American-20%, Hispanic-29%, Other- 9%, multiple ethnicities- 11%). Participants were exclusively ninth graders, so all participants were between the ages of fourteen and fifteen with the exception of one sixteen year old ($M=14.71$, $SD=0.52$). Twenty-nine percent of students (35/120) approached returned consent forms and were present the day the researcher administered the survey.

**Measures**

The survey used in this research was meant to address a variety of outcome variables. It also examined how outcome variables related to participant’s experiences with relational aggression. There were several sections to the survey: demographics/background, relational aggression, tactics, and outcomes (depressive symptoms, self-esteem). The survey is provided in Appendix A.
Demographics/Background

The survey began with a section asking participants general demographic data including age, grade level, gender, and ethnicity. This general demographic data helped the researcher compare participant’s experiences with relational aggression during data analysis. There were also filler questions in this section that asked participants general questions such as how many friends they have and how popular or unpopular they felt that they were. Of particular interest in the current study were different gendered aggressor-victim dyads. Data on gender was collected so that the researcher could compare it to participant’s self-reported levels of academic competence, depression and self-esteem and eventually their status as a victim or bully. This data allowed researchers establish the prevalence of cross-gender relational aggression among adolescents in this study.

Relational Aggression

A substantial portion of the measure used in this research concerned the level of relational aggression that individuals perpetrated as well as experienced. Relational aggression items were taken from Crick and Gropeter’s (1995) measure – the most commonly used measure to study relational aggression. The original measure items only included the incidence of relational aggression but in the present study, items were modified so that there were items that asked about victimization as well. Each behavior that was inquired about was answered on a 1 “Never” to 5 “All the time” scale. There were also items concerning the gender of the perpetrator and their relationship to their
aggressor if they responded that they had been a victim to this type of bullying. Open-ended items gave an opportunity for participants to elaborate on how their victimization affected them personally.

**Tactics**

A series of items on relationally aggressive tactics were included so the researcher could examine which aggressive tactics participants viewed as most harmful. Participants read a series of descriptions concerning different relationally aggressive strategies. They were then asked to rate each tactic on a scale from 1 (not harmful) to 5 (very harmful). There were seven questions in the survey inquiring about tactics. Each tactics’ harmfulness rating among male and female participants is presented in the results.

**Depressive Symptoms**

In order to measure depressive symptoms in this study, the researcher used a modified version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES-DC: Radloff, 1977; Radloff, 1991). This measure was shortened in order to include the most relevant items to limit the length of the survey. In all, 12 items pertaining specifically to depression were included in the survey. The CES-DC uses a four-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all” to “A lot” to assess a variety of behaviors associated with depression. Although this scale measures depression in children, past research has found it to be appropriate in the study of depression in adolescents as well (Barkmann, Erhart, & Schulte-Markwort, 2008). Because the age
range of interest in this study was on the relatively younger end of the spectrum of adolescence, it seemed more logical to use a measure designed for children as opposed to adults. This scale allowed researchers the opportunity to better understand the linkages between depression and relational aggression in different gendered aggressor-victim dyads without using an unnecessarily lengthy measure of depression ($M=11.20$, $SD=5.01$). The scale had acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha = .66).

Self-esteem

The next portion of the survey consisted of a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1979). Past research has found that the Rosenberg self-esteem measure accurately assesses self-esteem in the adolescent population (Jackson et al., 2010). Twelve questions were included that asked participants about a host of behaviors related to self-esteem. Of these questions, 10 were included in the final analysis ($M=37.17$, $SD=7.39$). This measure was included before the measure on relational aggression so that questions concerning aggressive behavior did not affect self-esteem responses. The scale had good internal consistency, Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.87.

Procedures

The researcher first obtained approval to conduct the study from the Child Development department as well as the IRB at California State University, Sacramento. After these boards approved data collection procedures, the researcher obtained district approval for this study. Once the school district approved this study, the researcher
contacted a social worker who worked at the target school who agreed to help with recruitment of teachers. The school’s principal was aware that this study was taking place.

Two 9th grade teachers volunteered to assist with the survey. They sent home a recruiting letter with students to parents of potential participants in each of the five 9th grade classes the teachers had over the course of the school day. This letter included information about the study as well as a consent form (Appendix B). The consent form gave parents the option to allow their child to participate or not. Upon return of parental consent form, participants were able to enter their name into a drawing for one of five $20 Target gift cards regardless if parents said yes or no. This was an incentive for return of consent, not for participating, since adolescents are often inconsistent about returning forms sent home to parents. One student from each classroom who returned their consent form won a gift card.

On the day of the survey, the researcher distributed assent forms to students who returned their parental consent forms (Appendix C). Participants completed surveys in class while students who did not participate worked on another assignment as designated by the teacher. The survey on average took 15-20 minutes for participants to complete.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

This chapter will present the results of statistical analyses from this study. The researcher conducted analysis on this data using SPSS statistical analysis software. This chapter begins with a description of the classification of participants by their gender and the gender of their aggressor. Next, each research question is in the context of the results of this study. Lastly, the results of how males and females reported the harm of different tactics are presented.

Relational Victimization Classifications

Before examining the research questions, the researcher grouped participants into different relational aggression victim groups so the researcher could compare them on the variables of interest. Participants’ responses on the victimization measure resulted in the classification of victims into three groups based on how they responded. A score of 3 (sometimes) or higher on any of the questions within the victimization measure was set as the cutoff for an individual being classified as a victim of relationally aggressive behavior. This cutoff was established because for someone to be a victim of relational aggression, a negative action must occur “repeatedly” (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). From this criterion, and the follow up question for each item asking whether the perpetrator was the same or opposite gender or both, participants’ responses on the victimization measure fell into the following categories. A response of “0” indicated that the participant was not involved in relational aggression; “1” involved in
relational aggression only from the same gender; “2” involved in relational aggression by the opposite sex or the opposite and same sex; and “3” involved in relational aggression on at least one question where the gender of the aggressor was unknown. Approximately 37.1% of the sample was classified as a non-victim because they did not indicate that they had been aggressed against sometimes or more on any of the questions.

Originally, participants who were aggressed by both genders and participants who were aggressed exclusively by the opposite sex were in different groups. However, after the groups were examined, there were not found to be enough participants that fell into each category to create two groups. Nevertheless, these two groups did not differ significantly on variables of interest so the researcher decided to combine groups. Table 1 shows the different participant groups that were used in this study.

**Table 1.**

*Victim Classification Including Gender of Victim (N = 35)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressed by the same gender</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressed by a different gender or Both same and different gender</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Indicated/Missing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

Incidence of Same and Opposite Gender Victimization

In order to test whether one gender was more likely to be a victim of each relational aggression category, a chi square analysis was conducted. Most notably, 67.8% of participants bullied by the same gender were female. However, the chi square analysis failed to reach significance, $\chi^2 (2, N=27) = 2.20, p=.332$.

Gender Composition and Socioemotional Outcomes

In order for the researcher to examine differences between victim groups on the key variables an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed. Depression, self-esteem, and score for relational aggression against others were the dependent variables. The participants’ relational aggression classification score was the independent variable with gender entered as a covariate.

The model used in the current study was found to be significant concerning depression $F (3, 27) = 4.994, p = 0.005, \eta^2 = .42$, as well as self-esteem $F (3, 27) =3.32, p=0.037, \eta^2 = .30$. There were no significant differences revealed between the groups concerning relational aggression against others. Victims who did not indicate the gender of their aggressor were excluded from analysis, which in turn excluded 8 participants. Table 2 shows the mean scores that each victimization group and the non-victim group received on the measures in the current study.
Table 2.

Victim Categories Compared on Depression, Self-esteem, Academic Competence, and Relational Aggression Behavior (N=27).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Not Involved</th>
<th>Same</th>
<th>Different or Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>M(SD)</strong></td>
<td><strong>M(SD)</strong></td>
<td><strong>M(SD)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>7.85(3.29)</td>
<td>13.22*(4.27)</td>
<td>14.20*(6.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>41.31(6.36)</td>
<td>32.67*(8.51)</td>
<td>34.90(6.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational aggression</td>
<td>1.23(1.42)</td>
<td>0.67(0.87)</td>
<td>2.00(2.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * significantly different from not involved at the $p < .05$ level,

LSD post hoc analysis revealed the following differences between non-victims and different victimization groups. Depression was significantly higher in all victimized groups than for not involved ($p < .05$). This difference was most notable in the group that was aggressed by either the opposite gender or the same and opposite gender ($M= 14.20$, $SD = 6.61$). Victim groups did not vary significantly from one another. This model explained 42% of the variance in depressive symptoms between different victimization groups.

For self-esteem, not involved participants had significantly higher self-esteem than those participants aggressed exclusively by the same gender ($p < .03$). However, this
did not hold true for victims who were aggressed by both genders, as their self-esteem was not significantly lower (See Table 2). This model explained 30% of the variance in self-esteem between the different groups.

**Tactics and Gender**

It was also of interest to investigate participants’ perceptions of the harm caused by different relational aggression strategies. Participants were asked how harmful they found seven relationally aggressive tactics on a Likert scale (“1”= not harmful, “5” very harmful). The tactics were counterbalanced with some described as done by someone of the same gender and others as being done by someone of an opposite gender. An independent samples t-test was conducted so that gender differences on the ratings of harm for each tactic could be examined.

As shown in Table 3, gender differences only emerged for how harmful participants found it when someone of the opposite gender spread lies about them to their friends. Female participants found this tactic to be significantly more harmful than their male counterparts did ($M = 4.21, SD = .92 > M = 3.38, SD = 1.32, p = .045$). It is also of note that the mean scores of harmfulness were highest for two questions that dealt with spreading lies and rumors for all participants. With respect to all other tactics presented in this measure however, there were no significant gender differences found.
Table 3.

*Reported Harm Analysis by Gender (N=33)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion (Same Gender)</td>
<td>2.45 (1.09)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.12)</td>
<td>2.50 (1.10)</td>
<td>-.292</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Exclusion (Different Gender)</td>
<td>2.16 (1.08)</td>
<td>2.08 (.95)</td>
<td>2.21 (1.18)</td>
<td>-.338</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spreading Lies (Opposite Gender)</td>
<td>3.88 (1.16)</td>
<td>3.38 (1.330)</td>
<td>4.21 (.92)</td>
<td>-2.09</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spreading Rumors (Gender Unknown)</td>
<td>3.70 (1.24)</td>
<td>3.23 (1.09)</td>
<td>4.03 (1.25)</td>
<td>-1.86</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike from a Crush (Opposite Gender)</td>
<td>2.53 (1.16)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.04)</td>
<td>2.63 (1.26)</td>
<td>-.583</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulling a Prank (Opposite gender)</td>
<td>3.16 (1.32)</td>
<td>3.15 (1.14)</td>
<td>3.16 (1.46)</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulling a Prank (Same gender)</td>
<td>3.39 (1.31)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.22)</td>
<td>3.67 (1.32)</td>
<td>-1.42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

Contrary to many other findings within this field, there were limited gender differences found relative to key outcome variables. Findings concerning outcome variables related specifically to how different gendered victims reported their experiences.
with different outcome variables. There were significant differences found between all victim groups and non-victimized groups concerning depression. Participants’ victimized exclusively by the same gender reported lower self-esteem. Tactics differed in terms of how harmful victims reported them being. Specifically, victims reported tactics involving lying and rumor spreading as the most harmful. The next chapter will discuss the current findings within the context of past research on relational aggression and discuss future areas for research.
Chapter 5
DISCUSSION

Relational aggression is a problem that disrupts the lives of adolescents. The harm inflicted by relational aggression can cause severe disturbances, which can affect them emotionally as well as academically (Prinstein et al., 2001; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). The present study adds to current understanding of relational aggression by examining how the gender of aggressor relates to the socioemotional adjustment of victims.

Victim Classification and Linkage to Outcome Variables

In this sample a majority of students (62%), reported being a victim of at least one behavior associated with relational aggression. This is somewhat surprising but it also must be taken into consideration that a victim only had to respond “sometimes” or greater on one relationally aggressive strategy to be placed in a victim category. In previous research, up to 75% of adolescents reported using relational aggression occasionally (Sullivan, Helms, Kliwer, & Goodman, 2010).

The results of this study replicated the linkage that previous studies have found between relational aggression and higher depression and lower self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001; Williams et al. 2009). Even after controlling for gender, depression scores were significantly higher for all victimized groups. This supports the findings of Williams et al. (2009) who found a significant linkage between internalizing symptoms. The linkage between depression and victimization likely stems
from the isolation and rejection victims experience (Simmons, 2002; Smith et al., 2010). Depression did not vary across different victimization groups. The connection was significant across all groups and did not depend on the gender of the aggressor. This may be due to the small size of the groups or the large number of females in the study who may feel more isolated and depressed because their relationships are so important to them during adolescence (Simmons, 2002; Tarrant, 2002). Another possible explanation is that in this study, males showed depressive symptoms as well because they also highly valued their relationships. Research has shown that close personal relationships, although not as central as with female adolescents, can still substantially affect males (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Tarrant, 2002).

It was not surprising that self-esteem scores were lower for all aggressed groups than for non-victims as lower self-esteem is a well-documented effect of relational aggression in the research (Hawker & Boulton, 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004; Simmons, 2002). One area where there was a discrepancy from past research concerned self-esteem across different victim groups was in the significantly lower overall self-esteem that victims aggressed by the same gender reported. The most likely explanation for this is that the victimization group aggressed by the same gender was over two thirds female. Females in adolescence have lower self-esteem than males overall, meaning they may be more affected by threats to peer relationships (Bachman, O’Malley, Freedman-Doan, Trzesniewski, Donnellan, 2011; McLean & Breen, 2009; Polce-Lynch, Myers, Klewier, & Kilmartin, 2001). In past studies, linkages between relational aggression and self-esteem problems have been the most pronounced among
females (Prinstein et al., 2001). It is feasible that if future studies examine differences in cross-gender relational aggression using a sample with more males, there may be higher global self-esteem reported by participants.

**Perceived Harm of Tactics**

This study also adds to what is known about relational aggression by looking at gender differences in perceptions of how harmful participants find several relationally aggressive tactics. There were two noteworthy findings regarding gender and relationally aggressive tactics. Girls found spreading lies and rumors in order to hurt their friendships to be more harmful than males. This is not surprising given the fact that girls sometimes value social relationships more than their male counterparts (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Tarrant, 2002). It is however notable that the effect of such a covert problem was detectable despite the small sample size. There are a few possible explanations for these findings. One possible explanation is that students were more open about personal information such as how harmful they find specific tactics. Research has demonstrated that participants may be more open about their victimization if self-report survey methodology is used (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Roseth & Pelligrini, 2010). Another possible explanation for these findings is that females find tactics involving lying and gossiping more harmful. This may also be true, as these tactics specifically can destroy social ties. Some of the most commonly reported problems associated with relational aggression are isolation, loneliness, and ultimately the destruction of close personal
friendships, which females deeply value in adolescence (Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Simmons, 2002).

Another point concerning tactics is that both genders rated tactics involving lying, gossiping and rumor spreading highly on the scale of harmfulness. It is not necessarily surprising that participants found these tactics the most harmful as past research has indicated indirect tactics are the most harmful to adolescents (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006). This increased harmfulness may be because they have the potential to damage close personal relationships and social standing (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Pronk & Zimmer Gembeck, 2010; Simmons, 2002). The data presented on tactics shows that to assist victims in the most helpful ways, researchers must continue to focus on different ways that bullies cause victims harm.

**Implications**

The findings of this research show that some differences concerning relational aggression across different gendered participants may not be as detectable as negative outcomes associated with this problem. Having a small overall sample size (35 participants) may have contributed to the lack of gender differences found in the current study. These results suggest that future studies need to have a larger sample size if researchers are trying to find gender differences. It is not surprising that the current study did not find gender differences as other research has found that even with larger sample sizes they are often difficult to detect (Coyne et al., 2008). In other studies, these differences have even been insignificant (Schietauer et al., 2008).
Due to the severity of how participants were affected in this sample, relational aggression seems to be a problem that is not going away and will continue to require interventions. Focused, well-constructed, evidenced based interventions are necessary so that victims of this devastating problem are helped the prevalence of this problem can be minimized. Some victims of relational aggression may need help from a parent, counselor, or teacher to cope with what they have experienced. This necessitates that influential adult in an adolescents life be well informed about relational aggression (Leff et al., 2010).

The harmfulness of tactics concerning lies and rumor spreading were the most harmful to participants, so future interventions must also try hard to limit these specific tactics. This includes implementing individual as well as community level changes so that aggressors know the harm that they can cause as well as that aggressive behavior is not acceptable (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Gender differences in the present study also point to a need for future studies to examine different tactics among different gendered participants. A participant being a victim may also have implications for how harmful they find specific relationally aggressive tactics. Future studies may be better able to look into whether victims of different genders find some tactics to be more harmful than participants who are not involved in bullying. These findings suggest that in the future, researchers must construct interventions that limit the prevalence of relational aggression. If effective interventions are in place, parents and educators will be in a better position to help victims.
Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of the current study. First, the sample size of the current study although adequate, was still small. Some of the victimization groups only had 5 participants. The small participation is likely due to the low overall response rate. Students with readily available parents may have been at an advantage concerning whether they returned their consent forms. Some potential participants who were aggressed in these classes may have felt that they did not want to participate because victimization had hurt them personally or because they knew that they bullied others. This may have affected the number of students who reported being victims and bullies.

Another limitation was that the researcher recruited participants from a few classrooms at a single high school, meaning that it was a convenience sample. The sample size and characteristics limit generalizability. Participants were also a higher percentage male than female. In general, females tend to engage in relational aggression as their primary means of aggression while males use other forms too (Crick & Gropeter, 1995; Prinstein et al., 2001). Female adolescents are more likely to report lower self-esteem levels as opposed to their male counterparts in general (Polce-Lynch et al., 2001). It is important for researchers to continue examining the relationship between gender and other variables of interest with larger, more diverse populations. Lastly, self-report methodology was used answer all questions so participants might have been influenced by feelings, memory, or shared method error in the current study (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).
There were some threats to internal validity. Most notably there were a high number of participants who did not indicate the gender of their aggressor. As a result, 8 participants were excluded from the ANCOVA. Participants either chose not to or simply forgot to fill in the gender of their aggressor. This may be important if failure to complete this section was not random, but instead associated with participant characteristics. For example, if males skipped these items to avoid reporting that girls victimized them, this would certainly have implications for the findings of this study.

Another internal limitation was that due to a small sample size, the researcher combined victim groups. This made differences between those victimized by opposite gender and both impossible to detect. Future studies with larger sample sizes may be better equipped to compare males aggressing on males, females aggressing on females, those aggressing against opposite genders, or both genders victimizing the same individual.

**Conclusion and Future Directions**

Although studies have examined relational aggression using a variety of different methods and populations, there is still a great deal that is unknown about this problem. Future studies must continue to examine gender differences and roles within this complex problem. The findings of the current study support gender differences, but also suggest that they are difficult, complex relationships to detect (Scheithauer et al., 2008) Another possible variant of aggression which future studies may be able to better explore is the culture of the victim and the aggressor. Aggressor-victim relationships may operate differently in diverse cultures around the world (Tomada & Schneider, 1997).
Researchers must continue to examine this problem in ways that are more complex if specific gender relationships concerning aggression are to be understood. This may include continued research on tactics that different gendered participants use as well as examining this problem using different methodologies. If researchers continue to examine this problem using innovative methods, it is likely that they will be better prepared to help victims of this problem during adolescence.
ENDNOTE

1. The information concerning participants in this study was obtained from www.schooldigger.com. A direct link to the page with information for this school was not given in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and privacy of the school.
APPENDIX A

Survey on Adolescent Social Relationships

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. You do not have to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering.

1. What is your age?_______ years

2. What grade are currently enrolled in at school?

3. Which of the following options best describes your ethnicity
   - European American
   - African American
   - Asian American
   - Hispanic American
   - Other, Please Specify_____

5. Compared to students at your school, how well do you do academically? (circle one)
   - Better than others
   - About as well as others
   - Not as well as others
   - Depends on the area on the subject in school

6. Which of the following statements best characterizes your grades (circle one)
   - I ALWAYS get good grades (A’s or B’s)
   - I USUALLY get good grades (A’s or B’s)
   - I Usually get good grades but sometimes I get average grades
   - I always get average grades
   - I usually get average grades but every once in a while I get bad grades
   - I always get bad grades
Now we are going to ask you some questions about how you have been feeling lately. These questions may also ask you about how you see yourself. Feel free to not answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable about answering.

Please rate how strongly you agree with the following statements on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) scale:

1. I am happy with my life 1 2 3 4 5
2. I feel that I am competent at accomplishing my goals 1 2 3 4 5
3. I enjoy challenges 1 2 3 4 5
4. I have a few hobbies that I enjoy very much 1 2 3 4 5
5. The thought of new experiences sometimes scares me 1 2 3 4 5
6. I have feel that I have good qualities 1 2 3 4 5
7. I sometime feel unsatisfied with myself 1 2 3 4 5
8. I have a lot to be proud of 1 2 3 4 5
9. I can do things as well as others 1 2 3 4 5
10. I feel that I am a person of worth 1 2 3 4 5
11. There are times when I feel useless 1 2 3 4 5
12. I fail sometimes 1 2 3 4 5
13. I respect myself 1 2 3 4 5
14. I believe in myself 1 2 3 4 5
15. Overall, I feel good about myself 1 2 3 4 5
Below is a list of the ways you might have felt or acted. Please check how much you have felt this way during the past week. Put an X for the best answer in each row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not At All</th>
<th>A Little</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>A Lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I was bothered by things that usually don’t bother me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I wasn’t able to feel happy, even when my family or friends tried to help me feel better.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I felt like I was just as good as other students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I felt like I couldn’t pay attention to what I was doing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I felt like something good was going to happen.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I didn’t sleep as well as I usually sleep.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I was happy.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I felt lonely, like I didn’t have any friends.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I felt like people I know were not friendly or that they didn’t want to be with me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. I had a good time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I felt like crying.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In this study, we are also interested in how students at your school get along with one another. Please think about your relationship with your peers and how often you do these things while you’re with them.

1. What is your gender?  Male  Female

2. Would you say you have more friends that are – Male or –Female

3. In general, how would you describe how many friends you have compared to others
   - More than most
   - About as many as most people
   - Less than most people

4. How popular would you say that you are overall?
   - Very popular
   - Popular
   - Average Popularity
   - Below Average popularity

5. Would you say that overall it is better to have a few close friends or many friends you do not know very well
   - Few close friends
   - Many friends you do not know very well

6. Sometimes students tell lies about a classmate so that the other students won’t like the classmate anymore.  How often do you do this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Almost All The Time</th>
<th>All The Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you do this, what is the gender of the person you USUALLY do this to?  _Male, _Female

Is the person who you usually do this to a  - Friend  - Boyfriend/Girlfriend  - Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend  - person you do not know  - Other (Please describe).
7. Some students try to keep certain people from being in their group when it is time to do a social activity. How often do you do this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Almost All The Time</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If you do this, what is the gender of the person you USUALLY do this to? _Male, _Female

Is the person who you usually do this to a -Friend -Boyfriend/Girlfriend -Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, -person you do not know -Other (Please describe).

8. Some students try to cheer up other’s who feel upset or sad. How often do you do this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Almost All The Time</th>
<th>All The Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Is the person you USUALLY try to cheer up –Male or –Female

Are you more likely to try to cheer up –Friends, or -Acquaintances

9. When they are mad at someone, some people get back at the person by not letting the person be in their group anymore. How often do you do this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Almost Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Almost All The Time</th>
<th>All The Time</th>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you do this, what is the gender of the person you USUALLY do this to? _Male, _Female

Is the person who you usually do this to a -Friend -Boyfriend/Girlfriend -Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, -person you do not know -Other (Please describe).

10. Some students help others when they need it. How often do you do this?
<table>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Almost All The Time</td>
<td>All The Time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you do this, what is the gender of the person you USUALLY do this to? _Male, _Female

Is the person who you usually do this to a -Friend –Boyfriend/Girlfriend –Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, - person you do not know -Other (Please describe).

11. Some people tell their friends that they will stop liking them unless the friends do what they say. How often do you tell friends this?

<table>
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<td>Sometimes</td>
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<td>All The Time</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If you tell friends this, what is the gender of the person you USUALLY do this to? _Male, _Female

Is the person who you usually do this to a -Friend –Boyfriend/Girlfriend –Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, - person you do not know -Other (Please describe).

12. Some kids try to keep others from liking a classmate by saying mean things about the classmate. How often do you do this?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Almost Never</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
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</table>

13. Sometimes, people are left out of social activities, how often does this happen to you?

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<td>Almost Never</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
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<td>All The Time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If this happens to you, what gender would you say the person who USUALLY does this to you is? Male or Female

Is the person who you usually does this a -Friend –Boyfriend/Girlfriend –Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, - person you do not know -Other (Please describe).
14. People will tell lies about someone in order to hurt their friendships. How often does this happen to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If this happens to you, what gender would you say the person who USUALLY does this to you is? Male or Female

- Friend – Boyfriend/Girlfriend
- Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, - person you do not know – Other (Please describe).
15. Sometimes when people are mad they attempt to exclude one another from their group of friends how often does this happen to you?

<table>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If this happens to you, what gender would you say the person who USUALLY does this to you is? Male or Female

Is the person who you usually does this a -Friend – Boyfriend/Girlfriend –Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, - person you do not know -Other (Please describe).

16. Sometimes people will try to hurt someone else when there is no reason that you can see, how often does this happen to you?

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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<td>All The Time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If this happens to you, what gender would you say the person who USUALLY does this to you is? Male or Female

Is the person who you usually does this a -Friend – Boyfriend/Girlfriend –Friend of a Boyfriend/Girlfriend, - person you do not know -Other (Please describe).

14. If you have ever been bullied, please feel free to describe below how it made you feel.

15. If you have been bullied, was the bully typically male or female or have you been bullied by both male and females?
16. If you have ever been bullied, think about the three most recent times (in the past few weeks) that this has occurred.
Was the bully typically male or female?
If you can, please describe an incident where you have been bullied.

17. Would you say that bullying has ever had a negative impact on your
   A) Academics? Yes  No
   B) social relationships? Yes  No
   C) Overall feelings about yourself? Yes  No
Please feel free to describe below

In the following scenarios, please rate on a scale of one to five how harmful you THINK you would find them if they happened to you (One being not harmful, Five being very harmful)

1. A good friend of the same gender didn’t invite you to a big party that was happening—1 2 3 4 5

2. A good friend of the different gender didn’t invite you to a party that was happening—1 2 3 4 5

3. Someone of the opposite gender spread lies about you to your friends—1 2 3 4 5

4. A friend of someone you used to date spread rumors about your social life—1 2 3 4 5

5. Someone you had a crush on told you they didn’t like you 1 2 3 4 5

6. Someone of the opposite gender pulled a prank in order to embarrass you 1 2 3 4 5

7. Someone of the same gender pulled a prank in order to embarrass you 1 2 3 4 5

Thank you for completing this survey.
APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

*Relational Aggression in Adolescence*

Students in your child’s class are being asked to participate in research being conducted by Chris Skrabec, a graduate student in Child Development at California State University, Sacramento. This study concerns peer relationships both positive and negative and how it makes students feel. Students at your child’s school as well as one other school are being invited to take part in this study. In the end it is expected that between one and two hundred students will take part.

If your child participates they will be asked to fill out an anonymous paper-and-pencil survey that asks about interactions with peers, aggression with peers such as bullying, and how peer interactions make them feel. There is also a portion that asks them to elaborate more on bullying and relational aggression they have experienced but this section is entirely optional and does not ask the child to provide any names. This survey will be completed in class and takes 15-25 minutes to complete. You may request to see a copy of the survey from the researcher, please email or call using the contact information at the end of this letter.

The survey used in the study is anonymous so your child’s name will not be associated with their answers. Surveys will be stored separately from signed consent forms. The surveys will be kept for two years and then destroyed.

Some of the questions asked in the survey may be upsetting to some students, especially if they have had bad experiences with peers. Questions ask about specific bullying incidents however no questions will ask them to name specific bullies. Children have the right to skip any questions they do not want to answer or to stop at any time. Your child will be reminded of the school counseling services and school procedures for reporting bullying prior to the survey in case they wish to use these resources. A school counselor will be available on the day of the survey administration to talk to any children who are upset by survey items.

You or your child will not receive any direct compensation for participating in this study. However this research is expected to increase our understanding of harmful peer interactions like bullying and relational aggression in adolescence. This information could be useful in creating school interventions. All students who return their consent form will entered into a drawing for one of five $20 gift cards to Target. They will be contacted via the email address they provide on their own consent form if they are selected as a winner.
If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact the researcher, Chris Skrabec: (xxx) xxx-xxxx or my research supervisor Dr. Juliana Raskauskas at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Your child’s participation in this research is completely voluntary. They can decline to participate without any consequences. Your child has the right to decide not to answer any particular question and to stop the survey at any time. That being said, once the data is collected it will be impossible to remove their responses because the surveys are anonymous. Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the consent form and agree to allow your child participate in this research if they decide to.

______________________________________________
Signature of Guardian of participant                  Date
______________________________________________
Signature of Investigator                             Date
APPENDIX C

Assent Form

Assent to participate in research
Relational Aggression in Adolescence

You are being asked to participate in a study being conducted by Chris Skrabec from the Child Development department at Sacramento State. This study is about peer relationships at school and how they make you feel. Some things the survey will ask about are what you see at school, bullying, relational aggression, etc.

This survey may help us understand peer interactions and bullying at your school. Knowing more about how peers interact, bullying, and how it affects students can help us to make programs to stop or reduce bullying. Please be as honest as you can in answering the questions. If you decide not to participate no one will be upset with you.

If you take part in this study, you will be given a survey to complete in class. It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete this survey. The survey is anonymous so please do not put your name anywhere on the survey. On the survey you will be asked in general about peer interactions and bullying at school that you see or experience and how you feel. Questions are general and no questions will ask you to give names of people involved. You will have the option to describe some interactions in more detail but this is completely optional as is your participation.

We are aware that answering questions about how you feel, things you see or bullying may make you feel bad, uncomfortable, or upset. You have the right to skip any questions you do not want to answer or to stop the survey at any time. If the questions make you feel uncomfortable you may go speak to the counselor during or after the survey. You can also call the Teen Line Hotline at (800) 852-8336 later if you want to talk to someone about bullying or how you feel.

You will not receive any compensation for helping us with this survey, but it is our hope that your information will help us to design interventions that will help keep all kids safe at school. Every student who returned their parental consent form is eligible for a drawing to win one of five $20 gift cards to Target. If you wish to be put in the drawing, please put your email information below and you will be contacted later if you are a winner.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Chris Skrabec, Phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx or my research supervisor Dr. Juliana Raskauskas at xxx-xxx-xxxx.
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You can stop participating in this research at any time. In order for you to participate, your parent’s permission has already been obtained. Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand this assent form and agree to participate in this research.

____________________________________________________
Signature of Student    Date

____________________________________________________
Student email

____________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator    Date
REFERENCES


