

# College-age Women and Relational Aggression: Prevalence and Impact



**Katie S. Krueger, Meghana Rao, Jeanna Salzer, and Jennifer C. Saucerman**

Alverno College

## Abstract

We review the literature on relational aggression in developmental stages from childhood to young adulthood. Though media portrayals of relational aggression as a female issue or a modern phenomenon are overblown, most people experience relational aggression. The form that relational aggression takes over the developmental course changes as goals and contexts change. We present data from a study of college women on their experiences and perceptions of relational aggression, including the form that aggressive behaviors take in a college sample.

In recent years, there has been increased societal attention focused on the problem of bullying and other aggressive behavior in children, specifically on the topic of relational aggression among girls and young women. Relational aggression refers to behaviors, covert and overt, designed to harm others through exploitation of relationships (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). By nature it has as its goal the damaging of social status or self-esteem of the victim (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Example behaviors include spreading rumors, gossiping, and excluding or ignoring others (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Research has indicated that the terms relational, social, and indirect aggression represent the same construct (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crothers et al., 2009) though they have been referred to as separate ideas in the past. For the purposes of this study, relational aggression will be the term used, because it focuses on the interpersonal relationships among peer groups.

However, the attention given to relational aggression among girls is not proportionate to the reality of prevalence (Tavris, 2002). That is, the media may be treating the behavior as though it is a new and prevalent phenomenon when in fact it is

not. Both men and women are equally likely to be mean, hostile and aggressive, but expression of these qualities differs by individuals and is affected by a number of factors. Further, both sexes use relational and more direct forms of aggression at similar rates (e.g. Archer & Coyne, 2005; Underwood, 2003) and rate relational or indirect aggression as more hurtful than the more direct forms (Archer & Coyne, 2005). As a behavior, relational aggression is still found among those in middle and late adulthood, ages 55 through 89, though prevalence is considerably lower than that of adolescence and young adulthood (Walker, Richardson & Green, 2000).

To better understand relational aggression we must consider motivations and processes involved, rather than relying on gender stereotypes. Additionally, we need to examine the ways in which aggressive behaviors change over time, as suggested by Moffitt (1993) who cites a "heterotypic continuity" in bullying behavior,

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### Corresponding Author:

Katie S. Krueger, Undergraduate Research Assistant,  
Alverno College Research Center for Women and Girls,  
krohns@alverno.edu

meaning that aggressive behavior transforms throughout development and is expressed in differing forms in different stages. The following sections offer a brief review of bullying motivators from early adolescence through young adulthood to demonstrate changes across development.

### **Relational Aggression in Adolescence**

The transition from childhood to adolescence marks an overall decrease in bullying (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010; Nansel et al., 2001) with an especially large decrease in physical aggression (Tremblay, 2000). Concurrently, prosocial acts increase (Tremblay, 2000) and, compared to preschool age children, those in early adolescence resolve conflicts more effectively through the use of persuasion and compromise (Mayeux & Cillessen, 2003). Development of prosocial skills and an emphasis on friendship (Sullivan, 1953) may also lead children to believe a group is wrong to exclude a peer (Killen et al., 2002; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002).

There is a general increase in aggressive behaviors during the transition from elementary to high school (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). A possible reason for the increase in aggressive behaviors is the emphasis on peer approval and status (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010; Sijtsema et al., 2009; Sullivan, 1953; Vaillancourt, Hymel & McDougall, 2003). The importance of achieving status among peers peaks during adolescence (Higgins, 1953; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010).

Status, as measured by perceived popularity, indicates social reputation and power (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) and has been correlated to relational aggression in several studies (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; LaFontana & Cillessen, 1999, 2002). For example, among children in grades three through nine, relational aggression correlates positively with perceived popularity but negatively with likeability. As adolescents reach high school, relational aggression and status are increasingly correlated, and the association is especially strong for girls (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Clearly, relational aggression can be a proactive behavior, used in such a way to achieve a goal such as status or popularity. It can also be used reactively, as a response to frustration or provocation (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). This distinction is important since reactive behavior leads to negative perceptions from peers and decreased status, though proactive behavior does not (Poulin & Boivin, 2000). In fact, reactive aggression is also associated with a variety of social and behavioral difficulties (Card & Little, 2006) which are not problems for those with proactive aggression.

### ***Moral competence and relational aggression***

Aggression in relational contexts becomes more common at the same time that children develop a more complex understanding of their social worlds. Social and moral competence begins to develop in childhood and continues in adolescence (Blasi, 1995; Nunner-Winkler, 1998). Social competence is defined as sociability, having good leadership skills and an overall integration into peer groups (Estell, Farmer, & Cairns, 2007; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999), which may suggest prosocial, non-aggressive behaviors. However, social competence paradoxically predicts both aggressive and prosocial behavior (Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999) in adolescents. A recent study shows that bullies with high social competence also have higher cognitive and effective perspective-taking skills than peers who are bully-victims (Gasser & Keller, 2009). Bullies with social competence may then be using a generally adaptive trait in a maladaptive way—using their unique positions to deceive others and exploit weaknesses in peers by means of relational aggression (Hughes & Leekam, 2004; Roland, et al., 2005).

What separates those who initiate relationally aggressive behavior from those who are prosocial? Though social competence is similar for both groups, bullies scored significantly lower on moral competence than prosocial adolescents, specifically in regard to moral motivation (Gasser

& Keller, 2009). This suggests that moral competence and moral motivation predict prosocial behavior and that social and moral competency develop and function independent from one another in some children (Gasser & Keller, 2009).

### **Relational Aggression in Late Adolescence**

Few studies examine developmental patterns in the prevalence of bullying others beyond early adolescence (Pepler et al., 2006). This lack of research may be due to the decreased levels of aggressive behaviors present in adolescent students by the end of high school (Nansel et al., 2001; Pepler et al., 2006). The peak in importance of status goals, which occurs in middle adolescence, is likely to draw attention from researchers who examine correlations between development and aggression. In late adolescence, the stage which ranges from 16 to 22 years of age (Sullivan, 1953), the importance on peer popularity is replaced by an emphasis on closer, more intimate relationships with a few peers. Thus, limited research on late adolescents and young adults is unsurprising.

Developmental patterns predict the occurrence of relational aggression in late adolescence and young adulthood. During this stage, youth have a less than fully formulated sense of self which also means a fragile self-esteem and greater emphasis on perceptions from others (Sears, 1986). A strong need for peer approval leads to dependency, conformity, and over-identification with peers. This desire for approval can be especially problematic when trying to fit in with new social groups that emerge after graduation from high school.

### **Normative beliefs**

Normative beliefs about the acceptability of aggression predict future use of aggression (Linder, Werner & Lyle, 2010). That is, those who accept relational aggression as normative behavior are likely to use it regularly. The perceptions of those in this age group are therefore useful in

understanding the scope and prevalence of aggression that is experienced.

Interpersonal relationships in late adolescence are characterized by a greater geographic and social mobility, which contributes to highly unstable peer and peer group relationships (Sears, 1986). Though rates decrease, relational aggression is more commonly used in this age group than direct aggression (Green, Richard & Lago, 1996). This finding may suggest relational aggression becomes the vehicle for peer approval, which is desired by adolescents.

Late adolescents view men as more likely to use physical aggression and women more likely to use the relational form (Basow et al., 2007). Ironically, relational aggression is rated as less acceptable and more aggressive and harmful when the woman is a perpetrator of the act than when a man is (Basow et al., 2007). These differences in perception may be because stereotypically, females are expected to be relationally oriented, and thus the relationally aggressive act is a violation of this stereotype (Golombok & Hines, 2002). So, when a female enacts the behavior which is socially expected of her, she is also at risk of violating stereotypes and may face ostracism or have aggression directed at her. Stereotypes also affect the ways in which men are perceived to be aggressive. Men, in fact, use relational aggression as often as females in most circumstances (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Basow et al., 2007).

### **Relational Aggression in Young Adulthood**

While relational aggression may not be an unusual problem throughout high school and college years, the small percentage of students who engage in the behavior more frequently during this time are at higher risk for transferring the behavior to other contexts (Moffit, 1993; Pepler et al., 2006). For example, using relational aggression at a frequent rate in high school may lead to harassing behaviors within the workplace setting. Thus, though aggression is a statistically infrequent phenomenon in the beginning stages of adulthood, those engaging in the behavior may pose outside

problems to those around them, and therefore continuation in patterns of aggressive behavior in young adulthood are worth investigating.

In terms of the continuity of aggression, as described by Moffitt (1993), aggression may transform into the roots of adult interpersonal problems (Pepler et al., 2006). “Relational-appearing aggression”, in fact, is found across several adult workplace contexts (Kaukianinen et al., 2001). Low levels of relational aggression were also found among samples of 55-89 year olds (Walker, Richardson, & Green, 2000). Thus relational aggression, though decreased in adulthood, can appear well past the stereotypical developmental stage.

## **The Current Study**

As noted, there is limited study of relational aggression in stages past early adolescence. Thus, the scope and prevalence within late adolescence and young adulthood are relatively understudied. The current investigation examines experiences and perceptions of relational aggression in the transitory period between late adolescence and young adulthood, which can be estimated to include those 18 to 25 years of age. This population can be most commonly found in the college setting.

Transitory periods may be especially relevant due to changes in use of aggressive behavior. For example, overall aggression decreases between childhood and adolescence (Nansel et al., 2001) but increases between middle and late adolescence (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Pepler et al., 2006). By the end of high school, the frequency of aggressive behaviors has decreased (Nansel et al., 2001; Pepler et al., 2006) suggesting this may be another transitory period marking shifts in aggressive behavior. As an exploratory study, we sought here to examine prevalence, context, emotions, and perceived affects of relational aggression among college students.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The volunteer participants in this study were 139 female undergraduate students at Alverno College, a women’s liberal arts college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Of the sample, 66.2% identified themselves as non-Hispanic White, 10.8% as African American, 14.4% as Hispanic, 4.3% as Asian-Pacific Islander, and 4.3% as “other”. Ages were provided in ranges; 23.7% were 18-19 years old, 32.4% were 20-21 years old, 25.2% were 22-24, and 18.7% were 25 or more years old. Semesters spent at Alverno were also provided in ranges, with 25.9% of the students experiencing their first semester, 5% having spent between one and two semesters, 25.9% having spent between three and four semesters, 22.3% having spent between five and six semesters, and 20.9% having spent seven or more semesters at Alverno.

### ***Materials and Procedure***

A 7-question survey examined prevalence of and attitudes toward relational aggression, with a specific focus on differences between adolescent and adult manifestations of relational aggression. Specific adolescent behaviors were drawn from Remillard & Lamb (2005) and workplace behaviors were drawn from Rayner & Hoel (1997). Participants were asked about their role as perpetrator and victim, whether they experienced guilt when committing aggressive acts, and how they reacted when others aggressed against them. They were asked about the prevalence of relational aggression in a variety of common contexts. Finally, they were asked about the perceived effect of the behavior on their adult life and prevalence in high school versus college contexts. Responses were collected using Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)).

## **Results**

### ***Experienced Relational Aggression***

The majority of participants (68.3%) indicated that they had been a target of sustained, ongoing relational aggression within the past three years,

with 25.9% of participants reporting experiencing it once, 26.6% experiencing it two or three times, 15.8% experiencing it four or more times. These reports correspond with the reported experience of relational aggression in various environments: the majority (51.2%) had experienced relational aggression in class; 54% had experienced in school outside of class, 69.1% had experienced it at a workplace, and 71.5% had experienced it outside of work and school.

The participants were asked to indicate whether they believed the relational aggression they experienced in adolescence affected their adult lives, and if so, whether the effect was positive or negative. Some participants (24.5%) believed relational aggression positively affected their adult lives, but many more (47.5%) believed it negatively affected their lives.

Participants noted their own responses to relational aggression. The most common strategy was “standing up” for one’s self (38.1% of the participants made use of this behavior), accommodating to the aggressor (18.0%), avoiding contact with the aggressor (42.4%), and retaliating against the aggressor (1.4%).

### **Committed Relational Aggression**

The majority of participants (71.2%) reported that they themselves had engaged in a relationally aggressive act. Most expressed remorse: 7.9% experienced no guilt as a result of committing relational aggression, 25.9% experienced mild guilt, 28.8% experienced moderate guilt, and 8.6% experienced extreme guilt.

### **Observed Relational Aggression**

This study attempted to differentiate between “workplace” relationally aggressive behaviors from “adolescent” behaviors. Workplace behaviors included people taking credit for others’ work (which 23% of the participants had observed), questioning others’ judgment (36.7%), and being overly critical of others’ work (65.5%). Adolescent behaviors included people talking

“behind backs” (which 76.3% of the participants had observed), rumor spreading (24.5%), name calling (39.6%), and giving others the “silent treatment” (48.2%). Behaviors that fell under both categories included people using humor as a way of expressing criticism (which 53.2% of the participants had observed), engaging in rude behavior (47.5%), and purposefully excluding another person (43.2%). Very few participants hadn’t observed any of these behaviors (5.8%). The frequency of observed adolescent behaviors and work place behaviors were strongly correlated,  $r(137) = .79, p < .01$ .

When asked to indicate whether relational aggression in high school occurs more frequently, less frequently, or as often as it does in college, most participants (70.5%) stated that relational aggression occurs more frequently in high school than in college. A smaller group, 23.7%, indicated that relational aggression occurs about as often, and 5.0% indicated that it occurs more frequently in college than high school.

## **Discussion**

Relational aggression has received a lot attention in the past few years with a media emphasis on “mean girls,” though research suggests that the hype may be disproportionate to the actual problem (Tavris, 2002). While interpersonal aggression does peak in adolescence, the levels of frequency before and after the peak are much lower (Pepler et al., 2006; Sullivan, 1953). Further, expressed aggression is common among adolescents and is not a cause for concern.

The current study examined relational aggression in the transitory period between late adolescence and young adulthood, a period which occurs among college students. We were particularly interested in the prevalence and contexts of relational aggression as well as the involved emotions and perceptions.

While the study did not ask about day-to-day experiences of relational aggression, it questioned participants on experiences over the past three years in which the aggression was sustaining. Over

half of the participants described experiencing relational aggression in this way, though most of those respondents reported fewer than four occurrences. This result may be due to the fact that we asked about a relatively long period of time, which may have spanned into life before high school graduation for some participants. Since previous research has found that relational aggression is more common in early high school years than after graduation (Nansel et al., 2001; Pepler et al., 2006), it is possible that respondents may be reflecting on high school experiences. Further, the expected decrease in relational aggression in late high school years suggests that prevalence ratings should be low for college students, as they were in this study. Overwhelmingly, participants described relational aggression as more frequent in high school than in college contexts, which also reflects this trend. Overall, the prevalence data here are in line with previous research, which suggests that relational aggression is normative among women in late adolescence and young adulthood (Basow et al., 2007).

The fact that a small minority of participants reported more than four sustaining experiences of relational aggression does not suggest that extreme relational aggression is a common occurrence, though it does suggest that it happens often enough to be recognizable within this age range.

In addition to experiencing relational aggression, a majority of the participants report using the behavior. This finding suggests that relationally aggressive behaviors once used in mid-to-late adolescence may continue into young adulthood. However, since over half of those using the behaviors cited responses of mild to moderate guilt, the behaviors are likely recognized as unacceptable among peers in this age group. The frequency of aggression versus acceptability of it may be further understood by the “double-edged sword” described by Basow and others (2007), in which women were expected to be relationally aggressive yet also relationally oriented. These two opposing standards may lead to women using the behavior, though feeling guilt for engaging in it.

Relational aggression appears to occur across different contexts for college students. It is interesting to note that about 20% more participants observed aggressive behaviors outside of the school setting than within it. This finding may suggest that relational aggression persists in social contexts that resemble high school life, whereas college class settings require a different kind of interaction. Aggression within the class contexts may be reduced by demands for professional interaction, or may change in nature to resemble aggressive acts in the workplace.

Behaviors specific to adolescent research and to workplace harassment studies were both described as occurring in college years, possibly suggesting that the transitioning stage between late adolescence and early adulthood may put college women in a position to access a variety of behaviors and use them with some degree of peer acceptability. Additionally, the correlation between adolescent and adulthood behaviors suggest that the behaviors are neither vastly different nor entirely separable in this age group. This may be in line with Moffitt’s (1993) theory of the heterotypic continuity of aggression. If aggression transforms through stages of development and is expressed differently in each of the stages, it is likely that the behaviors may be developing and changing as well. That is, the aggressive behavior used by an adult may be an evolved version of an aggressive act used in childhood or adolescence. Some forms may be phased out by social norms of peer groups but others may continue to be used if not challenged by peers.

The most common strategies for dealing with relational aggression as reported by our participants may reflect limits of acceptable behavior within this age group. While on the one hand, many noted they would stand up for themselves; on the other hand, many others claimed they would avoid any contact with the aggressor. We are unable to say, based on data here, what accounts for the different strategies, but potential explanations might include different social standing of the victim and aggressor, differences in intensity of behavior as perceived by

participants, or perceptions of this type of aggression based on personal history or current context. Less common strategies included accommodation and retaliation; the fact that these options were chosen less often may suggest that even in the complex social milieu where relational aggression occurs, there are more and less acceptable means of dealing with an aggressive act.

As an exploratory study, there are many limitations our findings. A single college sample cannot define the prevalence of a phenomenon. Moreover, the scope of this project prevented an in-depth exploration of the correlates and consequences of aggression in the college years.

However, as we have argued here, the developmental changes that college students experience as they move from late adolescence into early adulthood suggest that there is reason to continue investigation into the forms that relational aggression take, as well as the impact that it has on college students' lives.

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