The Media's Influence on Female Relational Aggression and Its Implications for Schools

Crystal Virtanen née Redden
Athabasca University

Abstract

The author of this paper explores the media's role in the normalization of relational aggression of females and the implications this can have in schools. It is important that those who teach, support, and develop curricula for students be aware of the media's role in the use, and the effects, of indirect aggression and have information on how to approach reducing the effect that the media can have. Trends and effects of relational aggression are highlighted. The media's role in normalizing relational aggression in females is explored, with a specific look at Disney's films as well as the effect the media's influence can have on youth and families. This paper will consider current tactics employed by schools and the challenges schools face. It will conclude with a look at future ideas for combating the normalization of relational aggression in the media.

Keywords: relational aggression, females, media, Disney, education

Précis

L'auteur de cet article explore le rôle des médias au sujet de la normalisation de l'agression dans les relations avec les femmes et les implications que cela peut avoir dans les écoles. Il est important pour ceux qui enseignent, de soutenir et développer des programmes pour que les élèves prennent conscience du rôle des médias dans l'utilisation et les effets de l'agression indirecte et d'avoir les informations nécessaires sur la façon d'aborder la réduction de l'effet que les médias peuvent excercer. Les tendances et les effets de l'agression relationnelle sont mis en évidence. Le rôle des médias dans la normalisation de l'agression relationnelle chez les femmes est exploré avec un regard particulier sur les films de Disney ainsi que l'influence que les médias peuvent avoir sur les jeunes et les familles. Ce document se penche sur les tactiques actuelles employées par les écoles et les défis auxquels celles-ci font face. Cela sera conclu par un regard aux idées futures pour la lutte contre la normalisation de l'agression relationnelle dans les médias.

Mots-clés: agression relationnelle, les femmes, les médias, Disney, de l'éducation

The author of this paper aims to review the popular media's role in normalizing relational aggression among females and to provide information on this subject to those in the education system. The media—which encompasses television, movies, radio, and the Internet—is a powerful socializing agent for young children (Linder & Werner, 2012). Relational aggression, also known as indirect aggression, is a passive-aggressive, manipulative way to inflict harm on others (Moretti, Catchpole, & Odgers, 2005). It can have devastating effects on both the aggressor and the target (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young, Nelson, Hottle, Warburton, & Young, 2011). It is important that those who teach, support, and develop curricula for students be aware of the media's role in the use, and the effects, of relational aggression and have information on how to approach reducing the media's impact. This paper will start with a short review of what relational aggression is, as well as trends and differences across age and gender, and then move on to the effects that relational aggression can have on both the victim and the aggressor. This will be followed by a review of the popular media's role in normalizing relational aggression amongst females (Goldberg, Smith-Adcock, & Dixon, 2011), with a specific look at Disney's role in normalizing relational aggression, and how media exposure affects rates of relational aggression (Gentile, Coyne, & Walsh, 2011). The media's influence on adolescent girls (Pipher, 1994; Roberts, 2001), and the effect this influence can have on families (Pipher, 1994), will also be discussed. Next, this author will consider current tactics employed by schools and the challenges schools face. This will be concluded by a look at future ideas for combating the normalization of relational aggression in the media.

Relational Aggression

As outlined earlier, relational aggression is a passive-aggressive, manipulative way to inflict harm on others (Moretti et al., 2005). Geiger, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Crick (2004) call attention to media sources that have increased their attention on relational aggression since 2000, putting the spotlight on the negative social and psychological problems inflicted by it; an opposing view to Geiger et al.'s assertion is that the media also contributes to the normalization and spread of relational aggression (Goldberg et al., 2011). Goldberg et al. highlight that young females are learning at a very young age, through media outlets such as movies and television, not only how to be relationally aggressive, but also that the behaviour is acceptable. Although relational aggression in the media is also aimed at and used by males, the focus of this paper will be the effects on females.

Relational aggression can take many forms (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Moretti et al., 2005). Moretti et al. state that unlike overt aggression, which can cause physical harm, relational aggression can cause psychological harm. They go on to describe that relational aggression includes tactics such as giving the silent treatment, and spreading rumours with the intention of damaging another's social status. They highlight that it is a purposeful and covert form of bullying that acts to cause harm to others through social exclusion, public humiliation, and personal rejection. It is important for those in the education system to understand the trends and effects of relational aggression so as to be better prepared for dealing with youth who use it and for supporting victims. The following will review the trends of relational aggression in North American schools, and the negative effects that it has on both the aggressors and the victims of relational aggression.

Trends

Relational aggression behaviours can start at a young age (Brendgen, 2012). Brendgen notes that at around ages four and five, as a child's verbal and social cognitive skills start to evolve, the child can begin to use relational aggression. Brendgen attributes this to the fact that young children recognize that relational aggression can cause as much damage as physical aggression; however, it does not carry the same risks as if they were caught using physical violence, as often the punishment for hitting someone is more severe than for name-calling or spreading rumours. Brendgen outlines that as a result, relational aggression eventually becomes kids' main strategy, and as children age, they become more adept at using it. Nishioka, Coe, Burke, Hanita, and Sprague (2011) add to the assertion that relational aggression starts in early childhood and stress that relational aggression continues into grade school, becoming more prevalent as children age. Their study found that students in Grades 5 to 8 reported using more relationally aggressive tactics than students in Grade 3. Relational aggression can start before children even get into school, and as they get older, they use a wider variety of tactics (Brendgen, 2012; Nishioka et al., 2011).

Gender and Relational Aggression

Gender may play a role in relational aggression (Archer, 2004; Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Although previous research into relational

aggression found females to be overall more relationally aggressive than males (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996), recent meta-analysis on the magnitude of gender differences in direct and relational aggression found this difference to be negligible (Card et al., 2008). This shift could be attributed to the increased use of social media. However, Archer highlights that there is a difference in relational aggression across gender that generally starts at 11 years of age (Grade 5/6). Archer continues by outlining that the highest rates of female relational aggression are found between the ages of 11 and 17. Coyne and Whitehead (2008) stress that during adolescence, television programming aimed for teens starts sending out messages that girls are more indirectly aggressive than boys, which could be contributing to the polarization highlighted by Archer. Of particular interest is research by Russell, Kraus, and Ceccherini (2010) indicating a gender difference in the perception of the severity of relational aggression. Their study reveals a perceptual difference between boys and girls, with girls having rated relational aggression as more hurtful than boys did. Gender may play a role in the use of and attitudes towards relational aggression. More research in this area is needed to gain a clearer understanding.

Effects of Relational Aggression

Relational aggression can have devastating effects on both the aggressor and the target (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young et al., 2011). Crick and Grotpeter's research reveals that youths who use relational aggression tactics are at a higher risk for adjustment difficulties. Their findings suggest that relationally aggressive youths feel unhappy and distressed about their peer relationships and are more likely to experience depression and loneliness. Young et al. add to this, stating that aggressors are also more likely to experience more negative life satisfaction, negative and unsatisfying relationships, and poor emotional stability over time. In addition, Young et al. highlight that these individuals are more likely to be self-destructive and possess poor impulse control and anger-management skills. Victims of those who use relational aggression tactics are also at risk (Young et al., 2011). Young et al. point to negative effects on the victim's self-esteem and academic success. In addition, they call attention to the fact that relational aggression victims are more likely to be rejected by their peers. This can result in avoidance of social situations, such as school, due to the fear of negative social experiences. Relational aggression can have devastating effects on both youth who use it and those who are the recipients.

Relational aggression can take many forms and can change its intensity throughout grades at school (Brendgen, 2012; Nishioka et al., 2011). Although research indicates minimal difference between genders in relational aggression use (Card et al., 2008), Archer's (2004) research has shown an increase in usage among females around the age of 11. Some gender differences are found in the perceived severity of relational aggression (Russell et al., 2010). In addition to this, relational aggression can have devastating effects on both the aggressor and the victim (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young et al., 2011). To be better equipped to deal with relational aggression, it is important for those in the education system to understand its trends and effects.

Media

The media has become a powerful socializing agent for young children (Linder & Werner, 2012), and although aggression can be seen and learned in a number of settings—such as at school and during play dates—the media plays an important role (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006). Studies on the impact of relational aggression seen on television are still in the early stages (Coyne et al., 2006); however, the research to date shows that there are more instances of relational aggression on television than there are of direct aggression (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2004). Coyne et al. (2006) found that adolescents were exposed to almost 10 times as much direct and relational aggression on television as in school. Additionally, a Coyne, Archer, and Eslea (2004) study is the first to indicate that viewing relational aggression from media sources can have an immediate impact on relational aggression. The following section will look at the popular media's role in normalizing relational aggression amongst females (Goldberg et al., 2011), with a specific look at Disney's role; it will then examine how media exposure affects rates of relational aggression used (Gentile et al., 2011), the media's influence on adolescent girls (Pipher, 1994; Roberts, 2001), and the effect this influence can have on families (Pipher, 1994).

Normalizing Relational Aggression

The media normalizes the use of relational aggression by females (Goldberg et al., 2011). Goldberg et al. apply a feminist counselling perspective to the media's influence on relational aggression amongst females. They outline that the feminist framework looks

to address society's impact on who people are and how they develop, as well as power imbalances caused by society. They highlight films such as *Mean Girls*, by Michaels and Waters (2004), and *Heathers*, by Di Novo and Lehmann (1989). These films depict popular girls as using relational aggression tactics, and therefore pave the way to normalize relational aggression in film. Goldberg et al. assert that since these films were released, the majority of new films aimed at young audiences contain some form of relational aggression. The trend reaches beyond film: they go on to highlight television's growing number of reality shows that contain recurrent depictions of women using relational aggression tactics—such as conniving, backstabbing, and spreading rumours—as the norm. Goldberg et al. point to *The Bachelor*, by Fleiss and Levenson, which debuted in 2002 and is still on the air, as one of the reality shows that portray females as competitors rather than allies. The show exhibits females who purport close friendships with one another but will treat each other like enemies. The idea that females should be nice to each other's faces, but that it is acceptable to be cruel behind one another's backs, further perpetrates the normalization of relational aggression. Females on Fleiss and Levenson's show will often use a number of relational aggression tactics to assert their power, such as name-calling, spreading rumours, and manipulating group dynamics through exclusion and deception. Goldberg et al. stress the importance of counsellors becoming aware of the presence and impact of these tactics. In a school setting, it is important for professionals to understand and know the extent to which the media normalizes females using relational aggression (Goldberg et al., 2011), in order to address the inappropriate behaviour when it is seen in school.

Disney's Role

Exposure to both direct and relational aggression starts at a young age (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). Coyne and Whitehead were some of the first to examine how relational aggression is portrayed in children's television and film, and focused their study on its frequency in Disney films. Their study looks at 47 Disney films initially released in theatres and a minimum of 60 minutes long. Operationally defining relational aggression as either covert or overt aggression intended to hurt another person by psychological or social means, they completed a coding sheet for each film, measuring a number of variables, such as character appearance, type of relational aggression, and character type. The

study finds that overall, Disney films showed an average of 9.23 instances of relational aggression per hour, with the highest results of relational aggression being in *Aladdin* (20 acts per hour), *Cinderella* (19.17), and *Pinocchio* (18.35).

In their study, relational aggression is broken down into four subtypes: social exclusion, which is the most common, takes place in 37.6% of reported incidences (i.e., gossiping and ignoring); malicious humour (i.e., making fun of in public, deceiving, imitating behind back, etc.) accounts for 25.10%; guilt induction (i.e., placing undue pressure, blaming unjustly, etc.) accounts for 7.6%; and indirect physical aggression, such as plotting, stealing, and blackmailing, accounts for 29.7%. Among their results, they reveal that characters portrayed as humans show significantly higher levels of relational aggression than nonhuman characters. In addition to this, their study also reveals that generally, relational aggression is portrayed as unjustified and not an acceptable behaviour; however, when broken into the subtypes, they find that social exclusion is more likely to be shown as justified than not, whereas physical aggression and guilt induction are shown as unjustified. Particularly interesting in their findings is that although more acts of relational aggression are performed by bad or evil characters, the acts of relational aggression performed by good characters are all significantly more justified than not, compared to the acts initiated by bad characters.

Overall, the study states that Disney films send fairly good messages and concludes that their levels of relational aggression are similar to programming aimed at other ages and to levels typically found on television, which is implied to be the norm. However, it is important to note that two points are not addressed in this study. First is the relationship between relational aggression and power. Although Coyne and Whitehead (2008) assert that because Disney portrays a negative view of relational aggression more often than not, these behaviours are less likely to be copied, it can also be argued that any depiction of relational aggression, exhibited by good or bad characters, can result in imitation by children. Bad characters can often be portrayed as powerful, and Roberts (2001) highlights that bullying is often about power struggles. Roberts believes that children often feel powerless in an adult world and can seek false power, which Roberts considers to be power stolen from other people. Whether it is a good character or a bad character using relational aggression, it is possible that the message is the same: if you do this, you will feel powerful. Second, it is important to look at the susceptibility of young children as opposed to older ones. Strasburger, Wilson, and Jordan (2009) highlight this difference

by outlining that young children can be more vulnerable to messages from the media. Without real-world knowledge to make choices about the messages they receive, young children can have difficultly evaluating these messages. In addition to this, Strasburger et al. state that children often have an incomplete understanding of reality, and some struggle to separate television and real life. Strasburger et al. go on to argue that teens, who are more able to make conscious choices than children, will often use the media to form their identities in a more conscious way. Children are more susceptible to messages seen in the media (Strasburger et al., 2009), and as Coyne and Whitehead have outlined, exposure to both direct and relational aggression can start at a young age.

Media Exposure Rates

Exposure to media violence can negatively affect youth (Gentile et al., 2011). Physical and relational aggression seen in the media can impact the amount of aggression used by youths (Gentile et al., 2011). Gentile et al. highlight that there are many developmental tasks and milestones important for healthy development in children, and assert that possibly the most important of all is that of making friends. They state that in order to be part of a peer group, children must learn to act accordingly, adjusting their beliefs and norms to be similar to those of their peers; this, however, can pose a number of challenges. For example, if a particular peer group consumes a lot of media violence, the norms of the group may shift to be congruent with the media's level of aggression. This can cause some youth to exhibit an increase in aggressive behaviour and a decrease in pro-social behaviour.

Gentile et al. (2011) attempted to fill in a gap of understanding: to determine whether or not physical and relational aggression among people is affected by that in the media. They hypothesized that media violence exposure would be positively correlated with aggressive beliefs and behaviours. They also hypothesized that exposure to violence in the media would be positively correlated with later aggressive beliefs and behaviours and significantly negatively correlated with later pro-social behaviours. Each participant completed three surveys on consecutive days twice throughout the school year: a peer-nomination measure of aggressive and pro-social behaviours, a self-report survey of media habits and demographic data, and a self-report measure of hostile attribution bias. Additionally, teachers reported on the frequency of children's aggressive behaviours by completing a survey for each participating child. A structural equation model was

conducted with the data collected, and the model indicated that media violence exposure is directly related to higher relational, verbal, and physical aggression as well as lower prosocial behaviour.

When gender was examined, they found that although boys were more physically aggressive and girls more verbally and relationally aggressive, when a multi-group model was conducted to test for differences, there was no significant difference between them. Gentile et al. (2011) believe this indicates that media violence exposure has the same basic effect on both genders. In addition, they found parental involvement to be negatively associated with the amount of television time and of media violence exposure. Their results also indicated that weekly television time negatively predicted school grades. This reveals that parents can positively influence their children's academic achievements by monitoring their screen time and allowing less exposure to media violence.

This study has a number of implications, such as the dangers of exposure to media violence and the negative effects of this violence on the future of youths (Gentile et al., 2011). The connection between media violence exposure and relational aggression in youths poses a significant challenge for schools. Gentile et al. see a potential vicious circle in the making, wherein children who adopt the aggression seen on television may become increasingly ostracized from peer groups that do not have the same media exposure. As a result, they will potentially form alliances with other aggressive children. This may increase the amount of aggression seen in schools from both male and female students. In addition, they believe that in the subculture of aggression there is also a de-emphasis on school performance. Exposure to media violence has significant negative effects on youths' future, including their academic and social success (Gentile et al., 2011).

The Media's Influence on the Thinking of Adolescent Girls

Pipher (1994) explores the challenges that the media inflicts on young females, and contributed to the development of The Ophelia Project. In a 2006 letter no longer available on The Ophelia Project website, Susan Wellman, the founder of The Ophelia Project, noted that challenging aggression and bullying was an impetus behind the founding of the organization. Pipher highlights that the average teen watches 21 hours of TV each week, compared to spending 5.8 on homework or 1.8 reading. More recent trends point to a drop in teens watching television and an increase in their Internet use (Statistics Canada, 2006). It

seems that either way, youth are being exposed to mass media. Pipher calls the media-saturated culture "girl poisoning" (p. 12) and asserts that the media and peer groups, not parents, are the primary influences on how adolescent girls act and look. She goes on to state, "America today limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized" (p. 12). Roberts (2001), the developer of Safe Teen, a youth-based assertiveness program, expands on this, revealing the gender discrepancies in acceptance of media violence. Roberts outlines the media's discrepant reactions to violent female acts as opposed to those done by males. She observes that in the United States, 70 women die every week at the hands of their male partners, but when a woman assaults her husband or kills her child, it is the lead story across media outlets. Pipher (1994) highlights that the media sends specific gender messages to our society, and it is possible that by saying it is not okay for females to be physically aggressive, the media leads young women to use more relationally aggressive tactics. These messages inflicted by media are impacting how females interact with one another (Pipher, 1994; Roberts, 2001).

Effect

Pipher (1994) highlights the conflicts that many families experience as a result of "girl poisoning" (p. 12). Media companies have the goal of making money from their teen viewers. Parents have the goal of producing well-adjusted, happy adults. Often these goals are in conflict and leave young girls with friction between what parents have instilled as acceptable norms, and different norms imparted by the media. A similar conflict also arises between the education system and the media: the education system promotes pro-social values and norms that may not harmonize with those depicted in the media. Schools are expected to play an important role in the production of healthy, well-adjusted youths. How schools can work towards combating the conflicting values presented by the media will be discussed later in the paper.

Television is a powerful socializing agent for young children (Linder & Werner, 2012), and although aggression can be seen and learned in a number of settings, the media plays an important role (Coyne et al., 2006). The media normalizes females using relational aggression (Goldberg et al., 2011). Gentile et al. (2011) found that physical and relational aggression seen in the media can affect the amount of aggression youths use (Gentile et al., 2011). In addition to this, Pipher (1994) and Roberts (2001) indicate that messages inflicted

by the media are negatively impacting the socialization of females as well as causing conflict in many homes. Children are exposed to these types of messages at a very early age (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). Consequently, the media plays a very important role in the future of youths (Coyne et al., 2008; Gentile et al., 2011; Pipher, 1994).

Current Tactics and Challenges

Schools face many challenges in combating relational aggression. Currently, Canadian schools have a number of programs and intervention strategies aimed at reducing relational aggression (The Ophelia Project, 2012). The following will examine a Young et al. (2011) review of current intervention strategies being integrated into schools, then look at the challenges within the current programming, as well as the perceptual differences between staff and students on bullying and the problems it causes.

Intervention Strategies

Young et al. (2011) discuss three levels of intervention strategies commonly being integrated into schools. At the primary level of intervention, all students are commonly involved with group and individual work that promotes the expression of inner feelings, mutual acceptance, kindness, self-confidence, and self-acceptance. At the secondary level, strategies aimed at social competence are seen, as well as antiviolence activities aimed at developing empathy, perspective-taking, social problem-solving, and assertiveness. Also at the secondary level are efforts to reinforce positive family and sibling relationships and to teach techniques for use at school, which then can be transferred to the home environment. Young et al. go on to explain tertiary levels of strategies that provide treatment for students who are at risk of being victimized or of engaging in relational aggression. Young et al. highlight that most of these programs are designed for girls and emphasize teaching about relational aggression, and the harm it can cause. In this tertiary level, safe environments are developed to learn about pro-social relationships and skills, as well as methods of gaining social supports. Young et al.'s three levels of intervention strategies are commonly used in North American schools today.

Challenges with the Current Programming

Some current programs that have been developed and tested have seen positive results in reducing relational aggression across grade levels, such as Roots of Empathy (2012). It is important to note that there are many programs aimed at relational aggression. The challenge with this type of programming is two-fold: these programs must be purchased and are not built into the curriculum, and many programs are school-based, without a parent component. This leaves school districts that do not have the financial means unable to access proven programs and at a disadvantage compared to those that are capable of purchasing the programs. In addition, school staff must take the initiative to seek out these programs and integrate the teachings into their classrooms. The Ophelia Project (2012b) is one program that aims to reduce relational aggression by providing free courses to school staff. There is information available on the media's effect on relational aggression and youths; however, this does not appear to be standard for relational aggression programming. Programs and guides can be purchased by or for families, but few school-based initiatives involve bringing families into the school. Although some developed programs have been shown to be effective in reducing relational aggression, these programs need to be sought out and downloaded above and beyond the curriculum and often do not specifically address the role of the media. As highlighted earlier in the paper, parents play a role in the reduction of relational aggression (Gentile et al., 2011). Finding programming or learning opportunities to engage parents in schools could result in a reduction in relational aggression incidents.

Perceptual Differences

The perceptual differences between students and school staff regarding bullying and peer victimization are another challenge currently being faced in the school system (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). Bradshaw et al.'s research indicates that in comparison with the results from students' reports, school staff at all levels (elementary, middle, and high school) underestimate the number of students involved in frequent bullying. In addition, their research shows that staff with greater efficacy in handling bullying situations are more likely to intervene and less likely to make the situation worse. Bradshaw et al. draw attention to the importance of staff learning strategies for detecting forms of bullying, such as relational aggression, but also of staff recognizing that all forms of bullying have a negative effect on both the school environment and a child's social-emotional functioning.

Schools have taken steps to combat relational aggression through the use of programs and intervention strategies (The Ophelia Project, 2012; Roots of Empathy, 2012; Young et al., 2011). These steps, however, are mitigated by the challenges being faced in the schools. There are challenges in accessing current programming, as well as the challenge of perceptual differences between staff and students regarding bullying. The more that school staff are aware of what relational aggression is and how it is being taught to youths, the better prepared they will be to identify and support all the youths involved, perpetrators and victims alike. Although there is forward momentum, more still needs to occur, as will be discussed next.

Future

If the medium is not changing its messages, schools, families, and communities need to improve their work on preventing relational aggression. The following will review suggestions for schools to combat the normalization of relational aggression by involving parents and developing media literacy within the schools. In addition, the need for clearer ratings and labelling in both film and television will be discussed, along with what is within the schools' realm of control, and recommendations for future research.

Parents play an important role in their child's development (Gentile et al., 2011); however, as Pipher (1994) outlines, the media is becoming a more and more powerful socializing agent. There are tools within a parent's realm of control that can combat this. Gentile et al. (2011) highlight that parental monitoring of how much time a child spends watching television and the content to which he or she is exposed could help decrease the amount of relational aggression seen and possibly used. In addition, research by Pernice-Duca, Taiariol, and Yoon (2010) indicates that children reported engaging in more relational aggression when they perceived their family as less cohesive and less responsive to their need for support. Having this information, schools can work to engage families as part of the school community, which could be done by encouraging parent volunteers in the classroom or offering information sessions. By inviting families, schools can provide both structured and non-structured learning opportunities for them. Additionally, this increased involvement will give children the opportunity to feel supported by parents and teachers through their presence in the school.

Goldberg et al. (2011) stress the need for developing media literacy in schools. Media literacy allows individuals to better evaluate the messages they receive in the media. Goldberg et al. believe that taking this strength-based approach will enable youths to discover and critically analyze the messages they receive. Possibly most importantly, Goldberg et al. outline that youths will learn how those messages affect how they think, act, and feel. By increasing awareness and enhancing young females' abilities to think critically, schools would be setting youths up for higher success. Although Goldberg et al. do not determine a specific age at which to begin teaching media literacy, the research has shown that exposure to and use of relational aggression can start young (Brendgen, 2012; Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). Goldberg et al. state that making media literacy training available to young male and female students would allow the students, as a group, to deconstruct media messages, and possibly make the school a safer place for each child to be him- or herself.

The implementation of media literacy teaching in schools could take any number of shapes, depending on the grade level: showing a film in class and taking the opportunity to deconstruct a specific scene; making a game out of it by challenging students to find instances of relational aggression in a film or show; using older students in the school to talk to younger students about the importance of media literacy. If students are taught to critically examine the messages relayed through the media, they will possibly be better prepared to deal with the negative undertones and less likely to engage in relational aggression. The development and inclusion of media literacy for children throughout their school experience would be most effective starting at the primary level.

To build on the idea of integrating media literacy (Goldberg et al., 2011), it is prudent to look at what it would be like if schools took the teaching of social competencies and of prevention methods aimed at direct and relational aggressive behaviour as seriously as core curricula. Devoting class time at all grade levels, in addition to training teachers to use research-based techniques, could help reduce relational aggression. This could be especially useful in grades where we start to see an increase in relational aggression tactics. Nixon and Werner (2010) review the effectiveness of a comprehensive, school-based intervention program by The Ophelia Project, called Creating a Safe School (CASS), and find that students who initially reported high levels of relational aggression saw a significant reduction in relational aggression against their peers. Although the results indicate that more research needs to be undertaken, the study does demonstrate

that it is possible to reduce relational aggression through school-wide (staff and student) education programs. Taking bullying prevention as seriously as academics do could help reduce the instances of relational aggression.

Linder and Gentile (2009) highlight the poor validity of the current television rating system relative to aggressive content. They argue that the rating system is inadequate, as it does not provide parents and guardians with the proper information to control exposure to harmful content. With the currently available research illustrating the negative effects that media portrayals of relational aggression have on young females (Gentile et al., 2011; Goldberg et al., 2011; Pipher, 1994), it is important that the rating scales for movies and television become more current. One idea would be to set societal norms regarding what is acceptable. As discussed earlier, Coyne and Whitehead (2008) outline that Disney films show an average of 9.23 instances of relational aggression per hour, which is on par with programming aimed at other ages. Current North American norms presently appear to indicate that an average of 9.23 instances of relational aggression an hour is acceptable. G-rated movies will likely continue to portray relational aggression at this level unless society chooses to modify the acceptable levels. Although what happens outside of schools may seem beyond their realm of control, schools can have a positive impact in addressing this issue through providing information on what relational aggression is, its effects, and the role that the media has in normalizing it. By educating parents, schools can empower them to take action in their homes. In addition, advocacy at the school level—through engaging and mobilizing youth to write letters to policy makers, rating agencies, and movie companies—could be a step in the right direction. Further research into society's acceptance of relational aggression as a part of life is needed to have a better understanding of how to combat the media's normalization of relational aggression.

Research in the field of the media's effect on female relational aggression could be expanded in many areas. As highlighted earlier in the paper, more research is needed on the efficacy of programs integrated into the school community that address relational aggression and the media's effects—programs such as The Ophelia Project. In addition, research investigating society's acceptance of relational aggression as a part of life could yield some interesting results. Of note, reviewing the current literature reveals a gap in the research investigating any cultural implications of relational aggression. Another gap is the absence of inquiry into the effects that relational aggression can have on the

bystander. Further investigations in this area could be beneficial. Because this field of research is in its early stages, the possibilities for future work are virtually endless.

If the media is not changing its messages, schools, counsellors, families, and communities need to step up their work on preventing relational aggression. This section has reviewed suggestions for schools to combat the normalization of relational aggression by involving parents and by developing media literacy within the schools. The need for a clearer rating system for film and television was discussed, as well as some recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

Relational aggression can be very damaging (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Young et al., 2011). By modelling passive-aggressive and manipulative tactics learned through the media, many young females are inflicting harm on others (Goldberg et al., 2011). As highlighted throughout this paper, it is important for those who work in a school environment to recognize and understand relational aggression and the role that the media plays in normalizing it. This paper reviewed what relational aggression is, its trends and differences across genders, as well as the effects that it can have on both the victim and the aggressor. This was followed by a look at the popular media's role in normalizing relational aggression among females, as well as current tactics employed by schools to address the resulting challenges. Ideas and suggestions for the future were also provided.

Relational aggression is very serious, and as such should be taken seriously by both schools and communities. By incorporating awareness as an educational tool, schools and communities alike can work together to help negate these problems.

References

Archer, J. (2004). Sex differences in aggression in real-world settings: A meta-analytic review. *Review of General Psychology*, *8*(4), 291–322. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.8.4.291

Bradshaw, C. M., Sawyer, A. L., & O'Brennan, L. M. (2007). Bullying and peer victimization at school: Perceptual differences between students and school staff. *School Psychology Review*, *36*(3), 361–382. Retrieved from www.nasponline.org/publications/spr/abstract.aspx?ID=1842

Brendgen, M. (2012). Development of indirect aggression before school entry. *Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development*. Retrieved from www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/BrendgenANGxp1.pdf

Card, N. A., Stucky, B. D., Sawalani, G. M., & Little, T. D. (2008). Direct and indirect aggression during childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review of gender differences, intercorrelations, and relations to maladjustment. *Child Development*, *79*(5), 1185–1229. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01184.x

Coyne, S. M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2004). Cruel intentions on television and in real life: Can viewing indirect aggression increase viewers' subsequent indirect aggression? *Journal Of Experimental Child Psychology, 88*(3), 234–253. doi:10.1016/j.jecp.2004.03.001

Coyne, S. M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2006). "We're not friends anymore! unless...": The frequency and harmfulness of indirect, relational, and social aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, *32*(4), 294–307. doi:10.1002/ab.20126

Coyne, S. M, & Whitehead, E. (2008). Indirect aggression in animated Disney films. *Journal of Communication, 58*(2), 382–395. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00390.x

Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, *66*(3), 710–722. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1995.tb00900.x

Di Novi, D. (Producer), & Lehmann, M. (Director). (1989). *Heathers* [Motion picture]. Atlanta, GA: Cinemarque.

Fleiss, M., & Levenson, L. (Executive Producers). (2002). *The bachelor* [Television series]. Burbank, CA: American Broadcasting Company.

Geiger, T. C., Zimmer-Gembeck, M., & Crick, N. R. (2004). The science of relational aggression: Can we guide intervention? In M. M. Moretti, C. L. Odgers, & M. A. Jackson (Eds.), *Girls and aggression: Contributing factors and intervention principles* (pp. 27–40). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Gentile, D. A., Coyne, S., & Walsh, D. A. (2011). Media violence, physical aggression, and relational aggression in school age children: A short-term longitudinal study. *Aggressive Behavior*, *37*(2), 193–206. doi:10.1002/ab.20380

Goldberg, R. M., Smith-Adcock, S., & Dixon, A. L. (2011). The influence of the mass media on relational aggression among females: A feminist counseling perspective. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *20*(4), 376–394. doi:10.1080/109 26771.2011.568995

Grotpeter, J. K., & Crick, N. R. (1996). Relational aggression, overt aggression, and friendship. *Child Development*, 67(5), 2328–2338. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1996. tb01860.x

Linder, J. R., & Gentile, D. A. (2009). Is the television rating system valid? Indirect, verbal, and physical aggression in programs viewed by fifth grade girls and associations with behavior. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 30*(3), 286–296. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2008.12.013

Linder, J. R., & Werner, N. (2012). Relationally aggressive media exposure and children's normative beliefs: Does parental mediation matter? *Family Relations, 61*(3), 488–500. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00707.x

Michaels, L. (Producer), & Waters, M. (Director). (2004). *Mean girls* [Motion picture]. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures.

Moretti, M., Catchpole, E., & Odgers, C. (2005). The dark side of girlhood: Recent trends, risk factors and trajectories to aggression and violence. *Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 14*(1), 21–25. Retrieved from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2538724/

Nishioka, V., Coe, M., Burke, A., Hanita, M., & Sprague, J. (2011). Student-reported overt and relational aggression and victimization in grades 3-8. *Issues & Answers*.

REL 2011-No. 114. Regional Educational Laboratory at Education Northwest. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2011114

Nixon, C. L., & Werner, N. E. (2010). Reducing adolescents' involvement with relational aggression: Evaluating the effectiveness of the Creating A Safe School (CASS) intervention. *Psychology In The Schools*, *47*(6), 606–620. doi:10.1002/pits.20494

The Ophelia Project. (2012). Programs and Services. Retrieved from http://www. opheliaproject.org/about.html

Pernice-Duca, F., Taiariol, J., & Yoon, J. (2010). Perceptions of school and family climates and experiences of relational aggression. *Journal Of School Violence*, *9*(3), 303–319. doi:10.1080/15388220.2010.483724

Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls.* New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Roberts, A. (2001). *Safe teen.* Vancouver, BC: Polestar.

Roots of Empathy. (2012). Roots of Empathy: From research to recognition. Retrieved from www.rootsofempathy.org

Russell, B., Kraus, S. W., & Ceccherini, T. (2010). Student perceptions of aggressive behaviors and predictive patterns of perpetration and victimization: The role of age and sex. *Journal of School Violence*, *9*(3), 251–270. doi:10.1080/15388220.2010.483171

Statistics Canada. (2006, March 31). Television viewing. *The Daily*. Retrieved from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/060331/dq060331b-eng.htm

Strasburger, V., Wilson, B. J., & Jordan, A. B. (2009). Children and adolescents: Unique audiences. In *Children, adolescents, and the media* (2nd ed.). Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

Young, E. K., Nelson, D. A., Hottle, A. B., Warburton, B., & Young, B. K. (2011). Relational aggression among students. *Education Digest*, *76*(7), 24–29. Retrieved from http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/Relational_Aggression_ PLOct10.pdf