

# It's "Mean," But What Does It Mean to Adolescents? Relational Aggression Described by Victims, Aggressors, and Their Peers

Journal of Adolescent Research


25(2) 175–204

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DOI: 10.1177/0743558409350504

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## Abstract

Early adolescent girls and boys ( $N = 33$ ) with known histories of relational aggression and/or victimization gave detailed accounts of the nature, frequency, intensity, course, and impact of relational aggression among their peers. They also described reasons for, and forms of, aggression after being prompted by a series of hypothetical vignettes. Despite identifying many forms of aggression that were similar for girls and boys, some sex differences were found; girls were described as experiencing more victimization within close friendships than boys, with a focus on maintaining exclusivity. Boys described exclusion from larger groups with themes of masculinity, athletic skill, and/or perceived sexual identity. Girls' and boys' perceptions about the motivations for these different forms of relational aggression were quite similar. These included power, popularity, and wanting to fit in as well as the aggressors' emotional states and the victims' characteristics.

## Keywords

relational aggression, relational victimization, motivations, peer relations, qualitative

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Relational aggression includes negative social behaviors that are intended to harm relationships, social roles, and/or social standing (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). These include exclusion from activities or a desired friendship group, the silent treatment, and spreading false rumors. Manipulating the relationship is the aggressive tactic of choice and can be achieved via verbal, direct, or indirect aggressive behaviors (Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002; Rys & Bear, 1997; Tapper & Boulton, 2004).

Relationally aggressive behavior and victimization have been shown to deplete mental health and other aspects of child and adolescent socioemotional functioning (e.g., Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Keenan, Coyne, & Lahey, 2008; Murray-Close, Ostrov, & Crick, 2007). Other research has shown that relational aggression and related social interactions are changing rapidly (Chamberlin, 2006). For example, patterns of relational aggression may be growing even more complex primarily due to the use of text messaging and social networking Web sites. Such findings indicate that it is time to reconsider relational aggression by gathering detailed accounts from the participants and their observers. These accounts are likely to yield necessary information about the dynamics of relational aggression in the school environment, such as the different forms of the behavior. Such information could also inform about how these behaviors are perceived and how they impact upon adolescents. In this article, we refer to this as the meaning of relational aggression and how it is enacted in the peer group, rather than to understand the meaning of personal experiences for each individual. The purpose of the current study was to gather such accounts about the forms and functions of relational aggression among both girls and boys. In this study, we focused on adolescents' understanding of the nature, frequency, intensity, course, and impact of relational aggression. We expected that this information would be particularly useful for future reconsiderations of measurement techniques and study designs. It also could be used to guide interventions to reduce aggressive behavior and bullying whether in person or via technology.

In the current study, boys and girls were interviewed, and their experiences were analyzed for themes and compared. An innovation of this study was the ability to interview both girls and boys who were identified by their classmates as relationally aggressive and/or relationally victimized, and to contrast their descriptions and explanations for aggression with those from a group who were reported by classmates as low average in aggression and victimization. By including girls and boys, we also could focus on gender and gender differences in the nature and impact of aggression and victimization. Participants in a previous study were selected for interviews based on their history of relational aggression and/or victimization (Zimmer-Gembeck, Hunter, &

Pronk, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck, Hunter, Waters, & Pronk, 2009). Relational aggression and victimization were measured via classmates' identification of peers highest in aggression and self-report of victimization.

Some peer-related problems have been studied by collecting interview data (e.g., Card, 2007; de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Goodwin, 2002). However, previous qualitative research on relational aggression has tended to concentrate on girls (e.g., Goodwin, 2002; Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000). In addition, there are few studies that include direct accounts from girls and boys who are known to have experienced high levels of relational aggression. When researchers have interviewed adolescents, they have not known whether their participants had been directly involved in some of the acts they described. Conducting interviews with those who had direct experience was expected to provide more detailed examples of relational aggression in all its forms and to provide further insight into the reasons for such behaviors among both girls and boys.

Our interviews were conducted with early adolescents between the ages of 11 and 13 years. This is an age period when young people report an escalation and growing awareness of relational aggression; some researchers have argued that the highest rate of relational aggression is found during early adolescence (Owens, Daly, & Slee, 2005). This also is a time of life when relational aggression has been associated with rejection and other problems with peers (Henington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1998; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004; Zimmer-Gembeck, Geiger, & Crick, 2005).

## Motives for Relational Aggression

In addition to focusing on accounts of relationally aggressive acts, we also asked questions to gather early adolescents' understanding of why these behaviors occur, how they occur, and their perceived impact. Because the possible reasons for relationally aggressive behavior have been described in a number of theories (e.g., Pellegrini, 2002; Rose et al., 2004; Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001), we relied on these theories to frame our interview questions and prompts used throughout the process, rather than aiming to test their applicability. Researchers have suggested that children and adolescents use relational aggression as a strategy to influence their social worlds. This can be damaging to the mental health and relationships of both victims and aggressors, but it can also serve a social purpose and meet individual goals. When used as a tactic to achieve dominance, aggression plays a role in peer-group hierarchy formation during the transition from primary school to secondary school (Pellegrini, 2002). In other recent research, relational aggressors do

benefit within these role structures. For example, adolescents who are more relationally aggressive have been found to be more prominent with their peers (Card, Hodges, Little, & Hawley, 2005; Cillessen & Rose, 2005).

Such perspectives suggest that there are a variety of reasons or motivations for relational aggression. In fact, some motivational explanations for human behavior can be easily applied to the understanding of relational aggression. In one of these theories, Emmons (1997) has described needs for affiliation, power, and status as potential motivations for aggression. Relational aggression may occur because of a motive for inclusion or a motive for power and peer status. This is also consistent with other views of motives; Hicks (1997) outlined two predominant social motivational goals of *status* and *relationship*, Pellegrini (2002) identified affiliative and aggressive dimensions of dominance, Currie (2001) described affiliation and dominance motivations associated with bullying, and Roland (2002) found bullying behaviors to correlate with power- or affiliation-related achievements. The motivations underlying relational aggression could also be better understood if gender differences are examined. For example, Roland found boys' bullying behavior to be more strongly associated with power motives, whereas girls' behavior was more strongly associated with affiliation motives.

Similar to these perspectives, social dominance theory (Hawley, 1999) provides another explanation for relational aggression during childhood and adolescence. Relational aggression may have a foundation in the ethological concept of social dominance, which can be interpreted as a strategy to fulfill one's social motivations of being central within the peer group. Some aspects of human behavior, according to this theory, may reflect our primate origin. Similar to the animal kingdom, children and adolescents' peer-group environments are organized hierarchically. Therefore, those who are more central in the group are proposed to possess greater resource acquisition strategies. More recently, Hawley and colleagues (Hawley, 2003; Hawley, Little, & Card, 2007; Hawley & Vaughn, 2003) built on this theory to indicate the concept of the *well-adapted Machiavellian*, who is able to achieve social dominance, while at the same time do so in a prosocial way that maintains one's social relations. This could characterize the highly skilled relational aggressor.

To understand the dynamics of relational aggression and children's perceptions of the motives for it, we conducted interviews with girls and boys who had been reported to be aggressors or victims. Interview techniques have been useful in past research that has had the purpose of understanding the forms and the explanations for relationally aggressive behavior. In one of the earliest qualitative studies of indirect forms of relational aggression, Owens, Shute, and Slee (2000a) interviewed Australian adolescent girls (aged 15 and

16) to describe their perceived reasons for indirect aggression, defined as “more subtle psychological forms,” and was considered “to be more typical of females than males” (p. 20). According to these authors, example indirect aggression behaviors included spreading false stories about others and exclusion from the group. Explanations fell within two broad categories: (a) alleviating boredom/creating excitement and (b) friendship and group processes (which encompasses attention seeking, inclusion in the group, belonging to the right group, self-protection, jealousy, and revenge).

More recently, Frisen, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson (2008) utilized open-ended written responses with early adolescents to gather their perceived reasons for bullying. A range of reasons occurred within eight categories, including negative characteristics of the victim as triggering the bullying (e.g., appearance, behavior, background, socially isolation) as well as characteristics of the bully (e.g., personality, background, motives of seeking power). In this study, a greater proportion of the boys attributed bullying to the seeking of power, whereas girls were more likely than boys to indicate social isolation of the victim as a trigger for relational victimization. Using both verbal responses to standardized vignettes and queries about personal experiences, we add to this previous research by including participants with a known history of aggression or victimization. Our purpose was to gather more detailed personal accounts, and to compare girls’ and boys’ reports of the forms, and the meaning or motives for relationally aggressive behavior and victimization.

In many accounts, relational aggression has been described as more common among girls than boys and even described as a girl phenomenon, whereby girls are described as engaging in some relationally aggressive behaviors more than boys, including rumor spreading and exclusionary behaviors (e.g., Buntaine & Costenbader, 1997; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although studies do report that girls may be more relationally aggressive than boys, especially beginning at about the age of 12 or 13 years (Geiger, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Crick, 2004; Rys & Bear, 1997; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2005), researchers have increasingly described boys’ relational aggression by noting that their behaviors may have a different purpose and be directed at a different set of peers. For example, in a meta-analysis, Card (2008) distinguished that when aggression is considered broadly, boys are assessed to be more physically aggressive and girls to be more relationally aggressive. However, when relationally aggressive forms of behaviors are considered in isolation, boys are also found to be demonstrating such behaviors. In addition, some have argued that boys may not be as negatively impacted by relational aggression when compared to girls (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Our aim was to describe the context and occurrence of relational aggression in boys and girls, according to

their views and experiences. Including boys in such a study can challenge preexisting societal norms and go beyond past qualitative studies that have been focused on girls only (e.g., Eder, 1985; Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2002).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants were 15 boys and 18 girls in Grade 7 (aged 11, 12, or 13) from two Australian schools. These schools are referred to as School 1 and School 2. In Queensland Australia, most children remain in primary school from Grades 1 to 7 before transitioning to high school. Students are about 1 year younger when compared to the same grade level in many other countries (e.g., some European countries, United States, Canada). Therefore, the current sample comprised early adolescents in their final year of primary school.

Participants were randomly selected from groups stratified by aggression and victimization histories known from a previous study (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2007, 2009). Students high or low in aggression were determined by examining the quartiles. Those in the highest quartile were identified as high in aggression (HA, see Table 1), whereas those in the lowest quartile were low in aggression (LA). Those in the second quartile are described as Low Average in Aggression (LAA) and those in the third quartile are describe as High Average in Aggression (HAA). Quartile cutoffs also were used for victimization and groups are referred to as Low (LV), Low Average (LAV), High Average (HAV), and High (HV; see Table 1).

Interviewees were 11 students who were high in relational aggression as reported by their classmates (with 4 students low and 1 high in relational victimization); 8 students who were low in relational aggression as reported by their classmates (with 1 student high and 4 low in relational victimization); 4 students who were self-reported victims of relational aggression; 5 students with low levels of self-reported victimization; and 5 students with moderate status (i.e., having moderate levels of relational aggression and relational victimization). Equal participant numbers were originally anticipated for each of the groups. However, due to the need for parental consent to participate in this follow-up interview study, unequal group sizes occurred.

### *Interview Protocol*

A semistructured interview protocol was followed, which included the general topics to be addressed and a list of probes and questions for each topic.

**Table 1.** Codes Used to Designate Participant Relational Aggression and Relational Victimization Levels

| Relational aggression |                     | Relational victimization |                        |
|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| LA                    | Low aggression      | LV                       | Low victimization      |
| LAA                   | Average aggression  | LAV                      | Average victimization  |
| HAA                   | Moderate aggression | HAV                      | Moderate victimization |
| HA                    | High aggression     | HV                       | High victimization     |

The interview protocol was developed after consulting past research methodologies and findings, theory, and literature (Emmons, 1997; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000b; Simmons, 2002). The interview was pilot tested with three adolescents (all aged 12) before use with the study participants.

The interview began with a series of vignettes (see appendix) and follow-up questions. The vignettes were adapted from previous research on social aggression by Galen and Underwood (1997) and relationally aggressive behaviors outlined by Crick and Grotpeter (1995). The interview sections are outlined below. Starting with the vignettes before asking about personal accounts allowed for the building of rapport and some systematic data collection across all interviews (see Owens, Shute, et al., 2000b, for a discussion about the importance of using hypothetical events). Rather than using the terms *relational aggression* or *relational victimization*, the phrase *mean behaviors* was used in the introduction of the interview to direct participants to the topic, but further use of the word *mean*, as well as the use of the words *bullying*, *aggression*, or *victimization*, were avoided as much as possible. Participants were free to describe any behaviors during the interview. The word *mean* was selected because most young people are very familiar with movies, articles, and books that use this terminology and also assisted with keeping the focus away from physically aggressive behaviors.

*Interview Section A: The motives and goals of relational aggression.* The motives, or perceived reasons for relational aggression, were explored in the first section of the interview. The participants were randomly presented three out of six vignettes of hypothetical scenarios of relational aggression. Participants were asked to take the perspective of the aggressor when answering follow-up questions. Exploratory questions were used, such as (a) “Why might the person do this?” and (b) “What might the person achieve from doing this?”

Participants were given the opportunity for open-ended responses as well as follow-up, closed questions. For the closed questions, participants were asked to indicate the two most likely motives and outcomes that have been reported in past research (based upon Owens and colleagues' findings and Emmons, 1997). This included needs for power, affiliation, popularity, revenge seeking, improving own negative feelings, or putting someone else down.

*Interview Section B: Personal experiences of relational aggression.* Following the presentation and discussion of each vignette, participants were asked close-ended questions about their own experiences with similar behavior. This included asking (a) how often victimization and aggression occur within their peer group, and (b) how often the participant might exhibit the aggressive behavior or be victimized. Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

*Interview Section C: Personal accounts of relational aggression and victimization.* Participants were asked to describe how their classmates are mean to one another via peer relationships. More open-ended questions were posed to gain participants' knowledge of specific forms of relational aggression. For example, participants were asked the following: "I have presented a few scenarios of children being mean to one another; what are some other ways kids can be mean in similar ways at your school?" Guided by research of Tapper and Boulton (2004), the definition of relational aggression was repeated here to ensure participant understanding of the word *mean*. Participants were provided with standard prompts if they experienced difficulties thinking of examples.

## Procedure

Following university ethical approval, parental consent was obtained. The consent rate was 72%. Participants also gave their assent to participate. Students were blind to why they were selected for the study and were told that selection was random.

Individual interviews were conducted in a quiet, separate room at school during regular class hours. Interviews were digitally recorded and were approximately 30-40 minutes in length. Prior to starting the interview protocol, participants were informed of the confidentiality of their responses and the voluntary nature of participation. At the end of the interview, participants were offered debriefing. No participant reported significant distress following the interview. However, several participants took the opportunity to further discuss their bullying experiences. Finally, each participant was given one movie ticket to thank them for their time.



*Coding and analysis.* Interviews were transcribed by two researchers. One individual read all interviews and identified reasons and descriptions of relationally aggressive behaviors and organized into these into major themes, which were discussed and considered with a second researcher. The coder was blind to the participants' aggression and victimization status and blind to gender. This coding process was guided by approaches outlined by Barker (2002) and Neuman (2006). An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was utilized, where phenomenology is centered on the ways that people perceive and experience the world around them (Barker, 2002; Giorgi, 1997). In this instance, the phenomenon of relational aggression in the peer group was of key interest. IPA is a systematic and practical approach for analyzing phenomenological data, assessing qualitative data both within-cases and across-cases through two stages. The first stage of IPA works with transcripts of participants individually. In the second stage, a cross-case analysis was conducted across individuals to detect common themes about the phenomenon being studied. The aspects shared across participants are then detected. Although an IPA approach is described (Giorgi, 1997), our use of the approach primarily relied on the general concepts to guide the direction for analysis and coding. This approach assisted us to identify the emergent themes.

Neuman (2006) outlined some key steps for developing a coding system before delving into the stages of IPA, suggested by Barker (2002). Neuman recommended conducting open coding, where the researcher first examines the data to condense them into preliminary analytic categories of codes, followed by axial coding, where the researcher organizes these codes, begins to form links, and discovers key analytic categories, with final touches completed with selective coding. The researcher then identifies and selects data that support key analytic categories. In combination, Barker's IPA and Neuman's qualitative approach were used to systematically guide the assessment of individual differences, while also obtaining themes and categories across the transcripts.

Categories were broadly identified using open coding and supplementary quantitative ratings obtained in the first section of the interview (i.e., the most likely motivations and outcomes indicated by participants from the presented list). First, this was conducted across participants. Following this, axial coding was conducted where the codes were organized and linked with similar categories. Selective coding then took place within and across participants, where frequency counts and exemplar quotes were organized in an Excel database for behaviors, experiences, and perceived motives for relational

aggression. Within-participant comparisons assessed thematic differences according to gender and victimization/aggression status.

## Results

We summarize themes that emerged from the interviews. Exemplar quotes are provided for each theme. Wherever appropriate, we noted gender differences or differences between those known to have experience with aggression compared to others. When quotes are used from transcripts, the corresponding participant is referred to by gender and her or his relational aggression profile (see Table 1).

### *Personal Experiences of Relational Aggression*

Overall, five categories of behavior were found. These included having unpredictable or inconsistent friendships, using rumors and gossip, exclusions, and ditching friends for a more appealing peer, social intimidation, and the use of notes and/or technology.

*Unpredictable or inconsistent friendships.* Boys and girls described aggression as very frequent within their friendship groups. It was rare for friendship groups to be stable, reflecting what can be likened to as rollercoaster patterns. Instead, it was common for one of the group members to be liked and popular within the group one day and to be much less liked the next day. According to a boy's observations of two girls, "one day their best friends, and then the next day rumors start going around and they aren't good friends" (HAA, HAV). Although this was somewhat more commonly reported about girls, some boys also reported such inconsistent peer status among boys.

*Rumors and gossip.* The term *bitchiness* often was used to describe individuals who engaged in spreading rumors and negatively valenced gossip, but this was most frequently used by girls to report on the behavior of girls. One girl described *bitchiness* within her friendship group in this way,

We are all just sitting around and someone gets up to go and get a drink; the minute they walk away, everyone will start talking about that person . . . I don't say anything about my best friends, but I would like to know what they are saying about me . . . You sometimes go along with it, but you don't say anything. (HA, LAV)

Some girls reported flirting with other girls' boyfriends to "make them jealous" and also being two faced to friends. One girl noted the subtle nature that

relational aggression can take, “When they are fighting, they look at them and talk into someone else’s ear and they just glance at them . . . you don’t know what they are saying” (HA, LV). Boys and girls described spreading rumors and gossiping when they discussed bitchy behavior. Yet, they also described nonverbal behaviors, such as eye rolling, glances, and ignoring that were used to enhance the negative impact of rumors and gossip.

Overall, these behaviors were most often described as girl behavior, with many boys describing this as “a girl thing.” For example, one boy stated, “girls, they are shocking. They do it all the time, they spread rumors about each other . . . and sometimes you just get caught up in it; you are in the middle of it all” (HAA, HAV). However, this quote also suggests that boys are not immune, and as one boy admitted, “I might have spread a rumor once or twice” (HA, LAV).

*Exclusion and ditching (cutting) of friendships.* Overt exclusion from friendship interactions was described as occurring to both boys and girls; however, there was a sex difference in the setting of these behaviors. Boys’ were systematically excluded from involvement in sports and games, whereas girls were more likely than boys to describe exclusion from small group interactions (especially during lunch) and social outings. This involved behaviors of ditching existing friends for new, more popular or appealing friends. According to one girl, “So you leave your other friends in the hope that you can become popular too” (HA, LV), and another girl said,

Like in PE [physical education class] they say pair up with partners, and you say to your best friend “lets go together” and they say yes and then somebody else comes along and they go off with them . . . they are probably more popular. (LAA, LV)

Another girl claimed to have been the victim of the silent treatment in the past “where they stop talking to you and make you feel guilty” (HAA, HAV). Some peers exclude others by not making you feel welcome; for example, according to one girl, “At lunchtime I was hanging around with these people, and this girl kept on saying ‘what are you doing here?’” (HA, LAV). Ignoring was also described by participants, such as the experience of one girl, “A group of your friends are going down to the oval and they are talking and you come along and they like get up and walk away” (LAA, LV).

Boys too described direct exclusion from peer groups:

There were these two guys that were friends. One of them started getting popular, and they just started leaving the other friend out . . . they

just got pressured into leaving the other person out and being mean to them. (Boy, LAA, LV)

They also described ignoring behaviors, such as “when you walk up to people and they are talking and when you get there they just stop talking” (Boy, HA, LAV), and cutting of friendships, “sometimes friends have a fight, so they go play with different people and they try to turn all the people against that person” (Boy, LA, HV). Examples even more specific to boys were “people getting left out when playing a game; you line up so that people can choose you for their team, and nobody chooses you and you get left out” (Boy, LA, LV); “playing football . . . he never passes the ball to me” (Boy, LAA, LV); or “like when people play football and you come down to see if you can play, and they don’t let you play” (Boy, HA, LAV).

**Social intimidation.** Participants reported a variety of social intimidation tactics. These included ganging up on peers/friends, use of ultimatums, threats to harm a person physically and/or socially, social ridicule, and nonverbal behaviors. Often, these included verbal or physical aggression. Boys reported verbal and physical aggression were commonly used along with relationally aggressive behaviors. Girls reported that girls threaten physical violence toward other girls but rarely used it.

Ultimatums were also described as a way that peers can be mean. For example, aggressors were described as having friendships that were conditional on certain behavior. For example, one girl reported being torn between two friends that did not like each other. They would use ultimatums in an attempt to draw her on their side.

I wanted to go after her and then XXX goes “oh yeah, what friend are you; are you our friend, or are you her friend?” And I’m like not a person who takes sides with XXX, she is feeling upset and I want to go and make sure she is alright. (HA, LV)

Another boy reported another instance, where “they read your diary or something and they say ‘if you don’t give me money I will tell everyone who [*sic*] you like” (Boy, LA, LV).

The interviewees also reported ridicule, which included name calling and practical jokes. According to one boy, “They would call you a girl and stuff if you didn’t want to play footy or because you walk away from fights and other stuff” (HA, HV), and a boy who also stated, “People in class they just say things that really hurt you like, maybe singing a song and change the words to resemble something else” (LA, LAV). *Nonverbal aggression* was

also used as a social intimidation tactic, such as giving dirty looks, rolling their eyes, sticking out their tongue, and turning their back on a person. One girl aggressor stated, "just giving them looks, as they walk by you, you might give them a really mean look" (HA, LAV).

*Notes and cyber and technological aggression.* Some participants reported the use of notes, e-mail, and other forms of technology. A girl provided one example of using notes. She was passed a note saying her group was having a party on the weekend and she was not invited. Another girl stated, "Say if XXX hated me for a day the note would be about me the whole time, and then usually the teacher finds it and then she reads it out loud" (HAA, LAV). Participants also reported relational aggression via the Internet. Some reported using others' accounts to post information/send e-mails to others. According to one girl, "[The e-mail system] is really dodgy 'cause it's easy to get into people's things, like you never know what they could say . . . you go in and delete all their contacts if you don't like them"; she also stated,

People have display names and people usually write nasty things about people for their display names so people can see it and the person can see it as well . . . stuff like, they blame each other for things and calling each other "rats." (LAA, LV)

Only three participants (two girls and one boy, 9%) described aggression via the Internet, but another girl also reported the use of the telephone; two girls in her friendship group called her while having a sleepover to tell her she had not been invited and threatened to spread a rumor about her.

### *The Relational Aggression of Girls Compared to Boys*

When participants were directly questioned about the types of mean behaviors boys and girls utilized, some differences emerged. Different responses were obtained according to participants' gender and aggression/victimization status. More specifically, boys and/or those low in aggression located the problem with girls and described them to often be bitchy and emotional in their friendships. In comparison to boys' behavior, girls were referred to as being more verbal, giving dirty looks, being mean behind another's back, using more ignoring behaviors, being more rude and nasty when they are mean, and also holding grudges for weeks or even months. Themes of friendship exclusivity or there is a crowd were more common among girls than boys. Boys were described as more physically aggressive when angry with a peer. When boys were referred to as being relationally aggressive, boys'

behaviors were described to include behaviors within large groups rather than within dyads or small friendship groups. When relationally aggressive behaviors were used by boys, it was more often described as direct and in your face, using tactics such as excluding from sporting games or teams, more teasing, and paying out on others' skills such as sporting abilities. Boys were described as getting over things and repairing relationships more quickly than girls. According to one boy's descriptions, "girls usually do it emotionally and make the other one feel really small, while boys usually get into a fight and hit each other a few times and they just forget it, while the girls hold a grudge more" (LAA, HV). This participant thought that boys were more likely than girls to forget about it after 2 or 3 days, whereas girls held grudges longer.

A boy noted the underhanded nature of girls being mean where "girls might get a note and pass it around, and this is more harsh than just a punch in the face . . . girls have little secret ways of doing things" (LA, LV). Some boys reported to be dragged into girls' relational aggression,

Sometimes you just get caught up in it, you are in the middle of it all . . . yeah, like these two girls the other day they were having fights and stuff, so I walked up . . . I was friends with both of them, I was trying to stop them, and one was saying to me "don't be friends with her".  
(Boy, HAA, HAV)

Although most participants described these gender differences, some felt that there were no differences in the types of mean behaviors that boys and girls use. One girl (HA, LV) felt that boys were often the messengers in gossip, blabbing and passing the rumor along. On the contrary, some interviewees reported girls to be unable to keep secrets and boys as more trustworthy. Some girls would state that they would much rather hang out with boys because they would not be nasty and backstab like girls. Others felt that both boys and girls were capable of excluding peers and talking behind their backs.

### *Explanations and Perceived Motivations for Relational Aggression*

Girls' and boys' explanations for relationally aggressive behaviors were found to fall into three broad categories of *social dynamics*, such as power/dominance, prominence, and wanting to fit in; *aggressors' emotional states*, such as jealousy, feeling bored and angry; and *victim characteristics*, such as lack of social appeal and emotionality (see Table 2). Overall, boys and girls seemed to have similar views on the reasons for relationally aggressive behaviors.

**Table 2.** Summary of Perceived Reasons for Relationally Aggressive Behaviors

| Category                         | Definition   | Themes within category   |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Social dynamics                  | Maintaining one's social standing, or aiming to increase it, by being socially dominant or manipulating another's social standing  | Social dominance<br>Popularity<br>Socially downgrading or isolating a peer   |
| Characteristics of the aggressor | Relational aggression as a means of compensating for negative internal emotional states, aiming to increase positive feelings of self  | Fluctuating moods<br>Jealousy<br>Anger/seeking revenge<br>Friendship insecurity<br>Creating excitement to overcome boredom |
| Characteristics of the victim    | Aspects of the victim's personality or certain traits were associated with being disliked and/or relationally victimized. At times, features were both positive and negative | Lack of social appeal in victim<br>Emotionality of victim<br>Positive victim characteristics                               |

Hence, few sex differences in the perceived motivations for these behaviors were found.

### *Explanations and Perceived Motivations for Relational Aggression: Social Dynamics*

*Power and dominance.* Social dominance and prominence, such as seeking power, popularity, and status, were the most common reasons participants gave for relational aggression. Themes of attention seeking (i.e., wanting to stand out) were also described. Gender differences were detected within this category, where boys more often referred to power as a motive than girls. Power revolved around finding a peer who was socially weaker than them, where “bullies never seem to pick on someone as strong as them, they always pick on the younger ones and people who aren’t as strong” (Boy, LA, LV). Another boy also supported this, stating, “It makes them feel better about themselves and stronger” (Boy, HAA, HAV).

Most participants described relational aggression as a behavior that assists in climbing the social ladder. This was often achieved by ditching friends

who were not so popular, in the hope of acceptance in the more popular groups, or by not sticking up for their friends when the aggressor was more popular, sometimes even siding with the aggressor over their friend. Popular peers were described as mean to those who were perceived as lower in the social hierarchy, conveying an air of importance within the peer group. Populars were seen to stick with fellow populars to maintain their status, doing whatever it takes (i.e., being relationally aggressive) to maintain their popularity. An example was from a girl, lower in popularity, stating, “They [the populars] don’t want to hang around with you and stuff like that because they think they are better than you” (Girl, HA, LAV).

Social dominance also included descriptions of relational aggression used as a tactic to gain social prominence—Aggressive peers were perceived as having a desire to be the center of attention or wanting to gain more friends. Based on this motive, one may exclude someone who might be a threat to his or her feelings of inclusion and acceptance (“because they would want to fit in better with others, and they want to push that person out”—Boy, LA, LV). It was also often identified that someone may be mean or betray a friend in order to be more accepted and included in the group, “Maybe they are your friend, but the team is just saying ‘oh don’t be his friend he’s not popular,’ like peer pressure” (Boy, LAA, LV).

*Socially downgrading or isolating a peer.* The main themes that emerged within this category were aggression toward a peer who is perceived as a threat to one’s own popularity or status within the friendship group (i.e., a popular person could dampen their reputation, and they may not be so prominent) and cutting off friendships from others. According to one boy, someone may not be invited to a party because they “might be more popular, and more people might pay attention to that person if they were invited” (Boy, LA, LAV). Overall, participants’ descriptions suggested that turning people against someone occurred on three levels: (a) at the *dyadic level*, a peer might turn on the other in a “best friend” dyad, so they “ditch them” or “you might bug them a lot” (Girl, HA, LV); (b) at a *group level* by turning the group against an individual, “They are leaving you out by taking all of your other friends” (Girl, HA, LV); or (c) at the *grade level* by turning the entire grade against an individual or against an entire friendship group, “their friendships and popularity would go down the toilet” (Boy, LA, LAV). Some participants described that people have the goal of socially isolating particular individuals, “Then you have nothing to do at lunchtime” (Boy, LAA, LV). One girl reported that her group didn’t want to be seen near a member because of what she was wearing to a disco, “We didn’t want anyone to know that she was our friend—She seemed a little tarty” (Girl, HAA, LAV). This motivation may serve two



subgoals for the group: (a) maintaining the reputation of the group and (b) letting members know the rules of belonging to the group.

### *Reasons for Relational Aggression: Aggressors' Emotions and Other Characteristics*

Another commonly identified reason for relational aggression was personal characteristics of the aggressor. The themes within this category were the aggressors' unstable moods, jealousy, boredom, anger/seeking revenge, and friendship insecurity. Relationally aggressive behaviors were seen to compensate for negative internal emotional states, with the behaviors at times increasing positive feelings of self. Words and phrases that were used to describe relational aggressors included moody, stuck up, confident, sporty, mean, catty, bitchy, sporty, cool, think they are superior, power seekers, popular, and not well liked.

*Fluctuating emotional states.* Another theme identified in the interviews was the fluctuating mood and unstable friendships of aggressors. Some aggressors were perceived to have the ability to switch from nice to mean; according to a girl, "Some of them are nice some days and mean the other" (LA, LV). This perspective was also described by a boy who said, "They can be nice at times, but then they can backstab you" (Boy, HAA, HAV). One girl had experienced this from aggressors,

They have two sides to them . . . they have a really nice personality and the other side what I have seen is like, bossing around and trying to steal other people's friends and turn them against you and you feel really left out. (Girl, HA, LV)

These fluctuating personas or moods seem to make some aggressors appear unpredictable. This pattern of behavior may be similar to the cycles of emotional manipulation witnessed in maltreating relationships (Linder et al., 2002). Such patterns of behavior can produce many social allies but also many problems for victims, social relationships, and groups.

*Jealousy, anger, and revenge.* Jealousy was often mentioned as a motivation for relational aggression. Aggressors were described as envious of a peer's status, belongings, abilities, or personal characteristics, which provoked their aggressive behaviors. Relationally aggressive girls were described as jealous of others' greater popularity and friendship. Quotes illustrating this were common among both boys and girls. One boy stated that "maybe they are jealous 'cause you are better friends with another person, and they might

spread a rumor that you are saying stuff about the other friend” (Boy, HAA, HAV). A girl described this by saying, “They might be jealous because there is so many good things about the person and no bad, and they spread a rumor to make out there is bad in the person” (LAA, LV). A key example of a situation that occurred around motivations of jealousy was provided by a girl:

If one of my friends got their hair done and it looks really good and they get heaps of attention, then you say it doesn’t look that good. You actually know that it looks good, but you don’t want to admit it. You could be jealous of them. (HA, LAV)

Some participants alluded to a feeling of inferiority as a cause of jealousy and relational aggression, where the aggressor aims to put someone down to make themselves feel better or to make the other person feel bad (i.e., “They could be jealous of you for any reason, and they are trying to hurt your self-esteem and are trying to make you feel bad”—Boy, HAA, HAV). Being mean was seen often as attempts to improve one’s feelings of belongingness and feelings of self-worth by making another feel bad or decline in status with peers. Aggressors were reported to have motivations to bring someone else down if they see they are feeling too good about themselves.

*Anger and revenge.* Anger and revenge were described as responses to either betrayal by friends or to mean behaviors within the peer group. Often participants reported paybacks as a reason for relationally aggressive behavior, and many viewed it as sticking up for themselves. Some example statements included the following: “Sometimes if someone has done this to me and it has made me really angry, I will do something like this to them” (Boy, HA, LAV), or “you may have broken up the friendship between them and their best friend, and they might want revenge” (Girl, HA, LAV). The cycle of relational aggression and revenge seems apparent in these quotes, where the behaviors can intensify over time with motives of anger and revenge associated. Some participants also reported to fulfill revenge motivations indirectly by finding a scapegoat person because they were unable to pick on the bully that picks on them—Instead, they victimize someone perceived as weaker.

*Feelings of insecurity in friendships.* One boy (LA, LV) from School 1 summarized these reasons well, stating that an aggressor’s friendships can lack depth and quality and may not be necessarily be well liked;

Nobody really likes a bully . . . they will hang out with them so they feel safe, but they are never truly popular. At some schools there might

be a bully that is popular, but the thing is, he thinks himself as popular but nobody else does. (p. 15)

Another boy from School 2 reported on his observations of a queen-bee girl in Grade 7, "Her friendships are very up and down . . . she tries to steal other people's friends. Tries to use them against them"; he also stated about her, "She can't be nice and get friends; she tries to be mean" (LAA, LV). A boy felt that aggressors often try really hard to fit in with their peers by having the right clothes and appearance, and value this more than their schoolwork at times.

*Creating excitement to overcome feelings of boredom.* Creating excitement within the friendship group was another perceived reason for relational aggression. Some participants reported that relationally aggressive behavior could be used to create a stir among the friendship group or the peer group. Others also noted that peers would have a joke at someone's expense to get everyone to laugh. Trying to *start someone* or *psyching someone up* (i.e., getting a reaction from them) were common terms. Friendship groups would often internally collaborate or scheme new ways of being mean to someone. According to one girl, at lunchtimes "sitting with your friends and deciding what (rumor) you are going to say to everyone, that's fun!" (HA, LAV). Ridicule often was used to create some excitement amongst the peer group; for example, according to one boy, "They would want everyone to know you stood in dog poo, and they would all be laughing. It would make some excitement" (LA, LV).

### *Reasons for Relational Aggression: Victims' Characteristics*

The final category of motivations was the characteristics of the victims, such as personality traits. This included individuals who were seen to be overly emotional, less appealing physically and socially, boring, or not sporty enough. There were some exceptions to describing negative characteristics of victims, however. Some were described as having very many positive characteristics that trigger relational aggression. This suggests two groups of victims of relational aggression, (a) those who are socially isolated and who are perceived as lacking some desirable individual traits and (b) those who are perceived as threats to the social hierarchy and who have very desirable traits.

*Lack of social appeal.* A lack of social appeal in others was often reported as a reason for relationally aggressive behaviors. It was common for words such as nerds, dorks, or geeks to be used for those with very few friends. According to one girl, victims are "at the bottom of the chain" (LAA, LV). This involved dislike of characteristics of particular individuals, such as

personality, attitudes, popularity status, social skills (e.g., not a fair player or not nice), physical appearance, fashion, interest or perceived of as boring, simply not fitting in, or exhibiting odd social behaviors. Dislike was contagious within friendship groups. Participants reported that dislike of another was expected when dislike was more widespread within a friendship group of the broader peer group. Participants described the phenomenon of having a shared enemy. One boy said you might write a mean note, "to prove to your friends that you do not like them" (LA, HV). According to a girl, who referred to friendship groups,

They could have discussed something over the weekend and they might not like you anymore . . . they might say some things that they don't like about you and they could have all agreed on it and then don't want to be your friend anymore. (LA, LV)

*Emotionality of victim as a trigger.* Victims were described as too *emotional*. They may exhibit excess nervousness and/or be easily hurt and upset. The victim was also typically described in terms of passivity, with words used such as *weak, quiet, shy, unconfident, and scared to speak up*. At times, some described victims to be emotionally reactive, such as through aggressiveness, anger, and revenge, when provoked by relationally aggressive acts.

*Positive victim characteristics as a trigger.* There were exceptions found among reasons for victimization. Some interviewees noted victims could be very nice and may be normal to high in popularity status. At times, they may be really good at something, resulting in others' jealousy. This may include being good at their academic work, sport, music or creativity, or even being good looking, having nice belongings, or a privileged family. One boy described,

The ones who are the more academic kids will get teased and make them feel bad, and the academic kids will be thinking "why am I wasting my time on this? If I was cool like the other kids, that would get me further" . . . but obviously in the long term it won't. (HAA, HAV)

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to summarize boys' and girls' experiences and understanding of relational aggression. We primarily contrasted the descriptions of boys and girls, and secondarily those with and without extensive direct experience with aggression and/or victimization. This study is unique

because of its focus on early adolescent girls and boys (aged 11 to 13 years), and because of the inclusion of participants based on their known history of aggression and/or victimization. Previous qualitative studies, which focused on peer-group dynamics and relational aggression in combination, have either included only girls and/or older adolescent samples (Card, 2007; de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Eder, 1985; Goodwin, 2002; Owens, Slee, et al., 2000). Our analysis of the semistructured interviews will be useful for future measurement development to assess aggression and victimization among both boys and girls and to guide interventions. Keenan (2007) recently suggested that definitions of relational aggression require the inclusion of intentions (e.g., seeking revenge) and not simply the behavioral observation on its own (e.g., exclusion). Findings from the current study can assist in this endeavor and also extend the findings of a recent meta-analysis of gender and aggression (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008).

The participants described multiple forms of relationally aggressive behaviors, and some differences did emerge when the reports of girls and boys were compared. In addition, all of the interviewees immediately understood the behaviors of interest, suggesting that there was a shared understanding among both boys and girls of relational aggression and victimization. Despite participants having varying status combinations of relational aggression and victimization, very little difference was found in their explanations. It seems that any experience with relational aggression and/or victimization (either observed or experienced) was shared among aggressors, victims, and those who are low or moderate in both.

We identified five categories of relational aggression experiences. These included (a) unpredictable and inconsistent friendships, (b) rumors and gossip, (c) exclusion and ditching (cutting) of friendships, (d) social intimidation, and (e) notes and cyber and technological aggression. As has been prominent in the media and literature lately, adolescents did describe relational aggression via technology. This included the use of phones, e-mail, and social networking sites. However, these forms of aggression were overshadowed by the descriptions of in-person interactions. According to recent research, the use of technology to enact aggressive behavior has escalated in the past 5 years (Beran & Li, 2005; Campbell, 2005; Li, 2007; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Nevertheless, as we found in the current study, others methods of aggression still seem most prominent among young people (Smith, Mahdavi, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008). Future research should compare the salience and impact of technological forms of relational aggression to other forms and test whether these forms have different implications for mental health and social relationships.

Another aim of this study was to examine sex differences. Although boys and girls could provide exemplars of each sex engaging in each category of behavior, there was some support for sex differences. There was evidence that relational aggression and victimisation take on different forms for girls as compared to boys. Furthermore, interviews revealed that relational aggression tends to be targeted at attacking the relationship structures that are salient to each gender (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Maccoby, 2002, 2005; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). For example, boys were more likely to use relationally aggressive behaviors at a larger group level to exclude those who exhibit less stereotypically masculine behaviors or low athletic abilities (such as not allowing them to play team activities at lunchtime). Girls seemed to engage in behaviors to manipulate best-friendship status or feelings of inclusion in close friendship groups (such as talking behind the back of a group member to the other group members).

These findings support sex differences in relational orientation suggested by past theory and research (Borelli & Prinstein, 2006; Cyranowski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000; Oldehinkel, Rosmalen, Veenstra, Kornelis Dijkstra, & Ormel, 2007; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Girls have been described as possessing a stronger orientation to interpersonal affiliation and affection (e.g., feeling included in the friendship group) than boys. In contrast, boys are described as more oriented toward social hierarchy factors (e.g., being admired by the broader peer group) than girls. Goodwin (2002) theorized that boys practice their aggression within lunchtime games in large groups of peers, whereas girls practice their aggression in their small, lunchtime seating groups. Our findings support this expectation, as do other recent research findings (e.g., Borelli & Prinstein).

It was evident from the interviews that boys and girls consider girls to be the more prototypical users of relational aggression. Boys were referred to as relationally aggressive at times; however, the level of intensity of their behaviors and the repercussions of their behaviors, such as the level of rumination and grudges that followed from aggression, were described as less explosive and salient. The high level of emotional connection that some girls have in their friendships may make girls' relational aggression more prominent at school and with their peers, whereas boys' relationally aggressive behaviors may be more likely to be overlooked. This supported meta-analytical findings of Card et al. (2008) and Archer (2004), where it was emphasized that boys can also be involved in relational aggression in varying forms. Societal perspectives of girls being more relationally aggressive appear to be weakening with the amalgamation of the current study's findings and these abovementioned reviews. Furthermore, in contrast to the argument that boys

are often unaware of girls' relational aggression practices (Goodwin, 2002), boys were good observers of girls' friendship processes and vice versa in the current study. Some of the behaviors had similar presentation among girls and boys; however, some also had their own gender-specific manifestations.

Overall, the adolescents noted a wide variety of behaviors that fit the definition of relational aggression, and these behaviors occur among boys and girls. These findings make it important for researchers interested in sex differences and the implications of aggression for mental health to closely examine existing measures of relational aggression prior to their use. In addition, the source of information about aggression and victimization may be influenced by sex differences in displays of emotion and the chronicity of behavior or by stereotyped messages about the aggressive behaviors of girls compared to boys. All of these differences were found when the accounts of girls' aggressive behavior were compared to accounts of boys' behavior. This means that acts of aggression may or may not show a sex difference, but the difference may be a result of contextual effects and may be influenced by differing expectations of girls compared to boys. Future research could draw from these findings to assess a broader range of aggressive behaviors, including those that occur in smaller friendship groups and in larger peer groups, and consider context, chronicity, salience, and prominence of behaviors as well as assessing stereotyped views of boys' and girls' aggression.

In addition to asking for descriptions of aggressive behaviors, explanations for aggressive behavior were gathered in the current study. Three predominant explanatory categories were found that, unexpectedly, were similar among girls and boys. *Social dynamics* (including aspects of striving for social dominance and prominence) was the most common reason for relational aggression; *Emotional states* of the aggressor provided a second set of explanations for aggression (including fluctuating moods, jealousy, boredom, anger, and insecurity); *Victim characteristics* were also described as a motivation for relationally aggressive behavior (including lack of social appeal, emotionality of the victim, and positive characteristics). The reasons for relationally aggressive behavior found in this study supported past research with girls (Owens, Shute, et al., 2000a, 2000b; Owens, Slee, et al., 2000) as well as research focused on the strategy-based motivations of aggressive behaviors (Hawley, 2003; Hawley et al., 2007; Hawley & Vaughn, 2003). We found that some early adolescents viewed relational aggression as one way to be successful in achieving goals of harm, status, retribution, and relief of boredom; aggression provided adolescents with one avenue to attempt to modify their friends' behaviors and maintain/increase their social status. These potential rewards gained from being relationally aggressive

further illustrate what Hawley and Vaughn described as “the bright side to bad behavior.”

What stood out in this study were victims’ characteristics as an explanation for relational aggression. These explanations for aggression provided a list of factors that place some children and adolescents at higher risk for victimization as well as the reasons why some children and adolescents continue to be victimized, even when they change schools (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2003; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). This is supported by past research that describes victims as more socially anxious, more sensitive to peer provocations, and different in some way from many of their peers (e.g., Lopez & DuBois, 2005; Olweus, 1994; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005). Olweus, for example, used the term *passive or submissive victim* to describe the prototypical child at risk of victimization. In addition, we identified another group of victims who were perceived to have many positive attributes, which adolescents believed made them targets of victimization. Researchers do not often characterize this group in studies of victimization, but they are more often described in popular literature (e.g., Simmons, 2002). In future research, it will be important to examine both of these groups of victims, in addition to focusing on the vulnerabilities and strengths of each group.

Before concluding, one limitation of this study should be mentioned. The hypothetical vignettes used in the interviews were based on previous studies that may have been focused on more female-typical forms of relational aggression. This could have impacted upon the motivations for aggression reported in the interviews and shaped behavior patterns that are considered to be more female-typical (Card et al., 2008).

In conclusion, the results of the current study show the usefulness of interviewing both boys and girls to understand peer social interactional systems and early adolescents’ ways of thinking about and describing relational aggression. In contrast to the argument that boys may be often unaware of girls’ relational aggression practices (Goodwin, 2002), boys were very often the observer of girls’ friendship processes and vice versa, supporting recent notions by Card et al. (2008). Some of the behaviors had similar presentation among girls and boys; however, some also had their own gender-specific manifestations and different frequencies.

The results of the current study also illustrate that relational aggression and victimization can be focused on individuals, friendship groups, or larger peer groups. An understanding of groups-based aggression could be improved by using peer network assessments (e.g., Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988) or friendship nomination strategies (e.g., Werner & Crick, 2004)



coupled with peer- or self-reports of relational aggression and victimization. Perhaps with the peer/friendship network approach, future research would be able to better assess the give and take dynamics of aggression within groups (Card, 2008). It seems warranted to explore this in future research, as relational aggression can occur at many levels of the peer context, serves many purposes, and meets many individual and social goals.

## Appendix

### *Vignettes Used for Interviews*

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1. During class, a classmate passes you a note that says "No one wants to be your friend."
  2. You are walking up to your group of friends before class. You hear them talking about a movie they saw on the weekend. When they see you, they stop talking and turn away from you.
  3. You hear two classmates talking about a party someone in your class is having. You overhear them saying that they don't want you to be invited. They plan to tell everyone that you did something awful in hope that you won't be invited anymore. They notice you nearby and laugh, saying "Shhh, it's a secret!"
  4. Your teacher says that she will be assigning partners for a class project. She tells you and another classmate that you will be working together. The classmate looks at you and says "Oh no!" then rolls their eyes and makes a face in front of all your friends. All your friends then laugh.
  5. During lunch, a group of kids are organizing teams to play a game. When you ask them if you're allowed to play, they say "You? I don't think so." Then they start laughing and walk away.
  6. You find out that a close friend has spread a rumor about you that is not true. Everyone thinks it is true, including your other friends.
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### **Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interests with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

### **Financial Disclosure/Funding**

The authors declared they received financial support for their research and authorship of this article by Dr Pronk's PhD Griffith University Scholarship, an authorship grant received from the Griffith Psychological Health Research Centre (GPHRC) and a Griffith University Research Grant to Dr Zimmer-Gembeck titled, 'Using multiple methods to develop a gender-based assessment of relational aggression among adolescents'.

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