

Communication of Female Relational Aggression in the College Environment

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Relational aggression is a set of direct (e.g., name-calling) or indirect (e.g., spreading rumors) behaviors designed to harm a target's social relationships and status. Interviews conducted with 30 college women revealed that relationally aggressive episodes involved small groups of women, took on common forms, included key content issues, occurred through face-to-face and mediated communication, and were managed in limited ways.

Keywords: College Women; Communication Aggression; Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is described as “behaviors that harm others through manipulation or damage to social relationships or feelings of acceptance and inclusion” (Xie, Cairns, & Cairns, 2005, p. 109) and includes direct, overt, and confrontational behaviors, such as name-calling, cruel teasing, ridicule, and verbal rejection; and indirect, covert, and nonconfrontational behaviors, including spreading rumors, gossiping, and social exclusion (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Coyne, Archer, Eslea, & Liechty, 2008). These behaviors can occur face to face or through mediated channels, such as e-mail, instant messages, and social networking sites (for detailed analyses of past research on relational aggression and related constructs, see Archer & Coyne, 2005; Xie et al., 2005). The purpose of this study

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was to understand what relational aggression looks like among college women—that is, to describe the communicative behaviors enacted and the issues that precipitate relational aggression, as well as the parties involved, channels used, and how episodes were managed.

Research has focused on relational aggression among preadolescent and adolescent girls. Some studies have found that females engage in these behaviors more frequently than do males (e.g., Coyne et al., 2008; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), whereas others have classified gender differences as trivial or less significant as once believed (e.g., Archer, 2004; Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). Regardless of actual gender differences, there is a public perception that females engage in more relational aggression, most likely influenced by media depictions of female characters being rewarded for these behaviors (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Coyne & Archer, 2004).

Although female identity is closely tied to their friendships, women are more likely than men to fight with close friends, and their aggression tends to be more expressive than instrumental (Letendre, 2007). Relational aggression, for women, therefore, is based on the importance of their relationships (Archer & Coyne, 2005), as reflected by women's use of third parties (e.g., acquaintances and bystanders) and social networks (e.g., friends) to enact these behaviors (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Merten, 1997). In conflict with friends, women are often deterred from directly expressing their feelings and needs (Letendre, 2007; Marini, Dane, & Bosacki, 2006). As Letendre argued, female peer groups reinforce the message that females should employ verbal, but indirect, relationally aggressive behaviors, such as gossiping, name-calling, and spreading rumors. In addition, physical aggression among women is often viewed as taboo (Archer, 2004; Archer & Coyne, 2005; Merten, 1997; Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001); instead, women use relationships as weapons against one another. Relational aggression often allows women to maintain their peer relationships and status, and simultaneously, to establish dominance over the target and to jeopardize the target's relationships and status (Underwood et al., 2001).

Nonphysical, indirect aggression among women may continue beyond adolescence (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992; Werner & Crick, 1999) and increases as women mature (Archer, 2004). Therefore, understanding relational aggression among college women, consequently, may aid in both retention of women in college and their emotional wellbeing. College women's peer relationships influence their feelings of attachment, reassurance of worth, social integration (Lee & Robbins, 2000, p. 487), and college persistence (Gloria & Ho, 2003), with social alienation being a predictor of attrition for students (Daugherty & Lane, 1999) and avoidance and self-punishment, specifically for college women (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). In addition, women's communication of relational aggression has significant consequences for their female friendships and sense of self (Willer & Cupach, 2011). Women value social relationships, perceive indirect and direct relational aggression in them as harmful, and report being hurt when relationships are jeopardized (Coyne et al., 2006), particularly when aggressors involve other people against them (Willer & Cupach, 2008). With these findings in mind, we conducted the following study investigating the communication of relational aggression among college women.

Method

Thirty women who were (a) at least 18 years old, (b) currently attending college, and (c) had experience with relational aggression in college, either as a participant or an observer, participated in the study. Women's mean age was 20.00 ($SD = 2.38$) and ranged from 18 to 30 years. Twelve participants were freshmen, two were sophomores, four were juniors, nine were seniors, and three were graduate students. Women were recruited using network and other convenience sampling, which included announcements made in a variety of undergraduate courses in communication and psychology (e.g., Introduction to Communication, Research Methods, Small Group Communication, and Organizational Psychology) and signs posted around campus. Each person received a \$20 gift card for participation.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with the women, taking place in a private campus conference room and lasting an average of 30 min. Participants were provided a definition of relational aggression and then asked to describe specific instances in which they were directly involved in or observed relational aggression. Participants described, on average, three episodes of college aggression. An episode was broadly conceived as any example of relational aggression with sufficient detail to provide at minimum a brief narrative (i.e., having a beginning, middle, and end). Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and number coded, with pseudonyms used to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

We used Smith's (1995) five-step thematic analysis to analyze transcripts, which involved us independently reading a single transcript, first taking notes in the left margin; second, writing emerging themes in the right margin; third, developing a list of the themes and referring to the transcript when new themes emerged; fourth, creating a master list of themes; and fifth, selecting excerpts to support the themes. The list then was used to analyze the remaining transcripts. When new themes emerged, previously analyzed transcripts were reanalyzed using the new themes. We used rich, thick excerpts and data conferencing (Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to verify data analysis.

Findings

Forms of Relational Aggression

The most common forms were name-calling, gossiping, criticism, ridicule, giving the "silent treatment," and ostracism. Name-calling often involved the use of stereotypical derogatory names for women, such as *bitch*, *slut*, and *whore*; and, occasionally, racial slurs (e.g., *gringa* directed toward a Hispanic participant) or insults (e.g., *stupid*, *ugly*, or *crazy*) were used. Gossip and rumor spreading were also common. Madison discussed an experience in which her roommate told mutual friends that "I'd walk in the room just with a towel on and change in the room, which I never

did.” She received text messages from acquaintances and friends informing her of this gossip.

Criticism and ridicule often involved making fun of other women’s appearances and behaviors. For example, Rachel explained that two of her friends created a Facebook® page using her name, with the profile picture of a cow. She revealed, “They had only had a couple status updates . . . they had liked ‘not running’, ‘eating’, stuff like that. Under ‘books’, it said, ‘I don’t know how to read’ For TV, they said, ‘Fat Camp’.” Jessica recalled an instance of the silent treatment when, after quitting the cheerleading team, her friends from the team “completely stopped talking to me, like wouldn’t say a word to me.” Ostracism involved women expressing that other people did not like the target. Kristin recalled an instance in which a woman living on her dorm floor refused to drink alcohol because of her religion. In response to this behavior that the women deemed strange, they started calling her names (e.g., bitch or skank) “just to kind of ostracize and to annoy her.” Kristin explained that “the intent was to make this girl feel like she didn’t belong There was no purpose to resolve the situation It was just who could do the worst thing.”

Precipitating Issues

The most common precipitating issue was roommate conflict, often occurring during freshman year. One participant, Amanda, said that she came home on Halloween night with a friend and made a lot of noise, upsetting her roommate. As she recalled, “A few weeks later, I find out from, like everyone in my hall, ‘Your roommate has been walking around and, like, talking crap about you and saying you’re the worst roommate ever.’” This relational aggression escalated into more gossiping, name-calling, ridicule, and a confrontation on Facebook, with an intervention conducted by a resident assistant, the roommate moving out, and the termination of the friendship.

Another major precipitating issue was lifestyle differences, often pertaining to sexual behaviors and alcohol consumption. Cynthia recalled a fight with a floor mate about smoking marijuana. When she confronted the floor mate, “She responded back in a really rude way by saying, ‘Oh you’re a bitch, you’re a slut You’re just here to sleep with all these guys’.”

The final issue starting these episodes was peer and romantic relationship triangles. Women reported other women trying to “steal” friends from them. For instance, Diane recalled an instance of relational aggression between two roommates—one who had recently developed a friendship with another woman. She reported: “The other two would tag along and go behind her back and say things to other people, to other friends, that weren’t true or whatever, or call her names . . . and they’re kinda like just tag-teaming behind her back.” Other participants recalled women spreading rumors about them because they were jealous of their romantic relationships. For example, Erin said, “Last semester, I was dating this guy and she [a friend] spread horrible, horrible, horrible rumors about me because she was jealous or something I’m in a sorority, so she’s spreading them to my sisters and it’s getting me in trouble.”

Parties Involved in Relational Aggression

With a rare exception, rather than occurring between two women, all episodes involved a small group of women who had existing relationships, often friendships, with one another. Although one woman in a group may have instigated the relational aggression, other women assisted in it. Allies assisted aggressors by displaying negative nonverbal behavior, gossiping, and screaming or yelling at the target. Gina remembered a girl on her dorm floor that “no one really likes,” who was criticizing her friend’s singing. Gina told her friend, who then “walks over there, knocks on the door, goes ‘Excuse me, is [target] there?’ and was like, ‘You know, keep my fucking name out of your mouth’, slams the door, walks back to her room.” Jenna shared a story in which her friend threw a party, another woman brought a friend who got sick at the party, and the police came. She said, “We were so angry about it, me, my roommates, and all my friends, we, like, scapegoated this one girl for awhile Three months’ silent treatment . . . everyone was really mean to her about it.”

Channels Used in Relational Aggression

Women carried out relational aggression face to face and through mediated channels. Face-to-face aggression occurred between the target and perpetrators. For instance, Cynthia recalled a floor mate opening the door and a group of girls “yelling at [her] and going off about how she’s a slut and how she’s this and how she’s that She was just standing there taking their insults.” Face-to-face relational aggression also occurred among the perpetrators when they engaged in malicious gossiping about the target. In many instances, relational aggression involved perpetrators withdrawing face-to-face communication from the target (e.g., giving the silent treatment). Samantha and her roommates enacted relational aggression against another roommate first by “deliberately talking about her,” but later, “it turned into a situation where we weren’t talking to her and it just so happened that we shared a space.”

A number of episodes relied on mediated channels, such as text messaging, Facebook, and other social networking Web sites (e.g., Formspring and College ACB) that allow anonymity. Gina recalled her roommates having “a text-message fight where they’re just like, ‘I hate you’, like, ‘I’m not going to be your roommate’, and like, ‘You’re starting rumors’.” Facebook and other social networking sites were common media of relational aggression, with women posting rumors and embarrassing photographs, and engaging in name-calling. A graduate student told the story of six female students who had been targeted on the College ACB Web site as “the ugliest girls at [school’s name].” A common medium used for relational aggression was Formspring, a Web site in which people post anonymous questions and users answer them. Cynthia explained her experience on the site: “[It started as] verbal attacking, to people asking me why I hate my roommate, why am I such a bitch, why am I this and that It moved on from there and it went, of course, to Facebook.”

Managing Relational Aggression

Women managed aggression in three primary ways. First, relationships were terminated, often, in the case of roommates, by one person moving out. Other times, women engaged in psychological termination, ending relationships through neglect. Samantha noted that there is “a wall between us that, at least for now, I can’t really bring down [laugh]” when discussing her relationship with her roommates who mistreated her. Other women talked about a lack of communication; and, as one person said, the relationship “just fizzle[d] out.” Second, women sometimes sought intervention from authorities, including the residential life and public safety staffs on campus, to terminate the roommate relationship or to stop the aggression. The third management strategy was to do nothing. When women did not act to manage the aggression, the aggression either continued or just stopped on its own. For instance, Anna, a Hispanic woman who felt that she was targeted due to her difficulty speaking English, said she continues to be ridiculed and publicly corrected by other women for her poor English. In an instance of the aggression stopping, Diane recalled, “I did not respond at all because it was just out of hand, like it wasn’t true so I didn’t want to confront her about it, I had no need to. There was nothing for me to say, really.” The aggression then ceased.

Women rarely apologized or sought to repair the relationship. Lesley recalled that a group of women who enacted relational aggression against her said, “You know, what I said was mean. I’m sorry that we attacked you . . . we were just going along with it.” In a couple of instances, women reported using mediated channels to apologize. Gina remembered that a woman she and her friends targeted “would send each of us Facebook messages like apologizing, and we’d see her around, but it was just always through Facebook or like texting; it was never face-to-face.” However, women rarely sought to repair the relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand relational aggression among college women. Episodes of relational aggression included ridicule, criticism, ostracism, and seeking allies, but most often employed name-calling and gossiping. The content of relational aggression revolved around roommate conflicts, often during the first year, as well as differences in lifestyles and relationship triangles. Episodes involved small groups of women with existing relationships and occurred via face-to-face and mediated channels. Relationship termination often occurred, although some were resolved through authorities’ intervention. In some instances, parties took no action to resolve the situation and the aggression continued or gradually diminished. In rare instances, women apologized or sought to repair the relationship.

These findings suggest several conclusions. First, female relational aggression frequently occurs in college, as women provided multiple instances of being the target, perpetrator, or observer of it during college. This phenomenon warrants attention because of the impact that it can have. For instance, the stress associated with having to move physically to another dorm room to manage the relational aggression may result in problematic adjustment to college, particularly in the first year of school. These experiences also potentially harm female college students’ reputations on campus.

Second, communication of relational aggression can be classified along a continuum from deliberate withdrawal (i.e., the silent treatment), to direct confrontations (e.g., screaming and accusations). The most common forms were gossiping and name-calling, which were not surprising given that gossip can harm and destroy relationships, but it can also act as a “social glue” (Jaeger, Skelder, & Rosnow, 1998, p. 116). The small group nature of relational aggression demonstrates that gossip was not only used to attack the other women, but also to form a connection among the perpetrators. Given that women often engage in relational aggression with close friends (Letendre, 2007), it is disappointing to uncover the maliciousness of the gossip and name-calling employed. James (1998) found that women often used derogatory terms that related to promiscuity (e.g., slut) and mistreatment of others (e.g., bitch) with each other, which is also supported in this study.

Third, mediated communication plays a large role in relational aggression among college women, via the posting of insulting messages, pictures, and rumors; alerting each other that they are targets of these behaviors; and confronting each other. However, although mediated channels overwhelmingly are used to transmit aggressive messages, in some instances, they help to resolve the issues by providing a way for women to discuss the conflict without having a face-to-face interaction. Scholars should further investigate the mediated communication of relational aggression and the resolution to such behaviors.

Fourth, little relationship repair work takes place after relational aggression. Women seemed to view their relationships with other women, particularly with roommates, as disposable and had little investment in them, choosing to terminate as opposed to fixing them. Perhaps this is, in part, a function of age in that women at this age may perceive that they have many opportunities for friendship-making due to the large pool of potential friends a college environment provides. Women recalled few instances of managing aggression through private, face-to-face interactions with the perpetrators. Instead, women often turned to third-party assistance, not so much to mediate a relational repair attempt, but to assist in the termination of relationships.

Finally, “targets” of relational aggression also engaged in aggressive communication. Participants’ punctuation of episodes (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967)—that is, labeling the other party’s behavior as stimulus and one’s own behavior as response—provided women an opportunity to assign blame and behave in similarly aggressive ways. The difference in punctuation, as well as the small group nature of relational aggression, allows women to diffuse their responsibility for the aggressive communication. When talking about gossiping, many participants framed it as something they “just do” in normal conversation with their friends, thereby minimizing its significance and impact. By engaging in such behavior, female peer groups often perpetuate and normalize relationally aggressive communication (Letendre, 2007; Merten, 1997), thus ensuring its continued use as a way of dealing with conflict.

The fact that women used gossip, rumors, ostracism, and criticism when confronted with conflict reveals that educators, residential life staff, and parents need to provide education to young women on effective conflict resolution. This education may include (a) reframing women’s views of peer relationships as ongoing and not

disposable, (b) using mediated channels for conflict resolution, (c) managing conflict one on one and not eliciting the help of allies, (d) viewing relational aggression as a set of interactions that occurs between people who are equally responsible for the communication and management of it, and (e) attempting to break the cycle of normalized relational aggression in their individual peer groups (e.g., by reframing gossip as a negative behavior, and not as a form of peer connection).

Although this study revealed some important findings about relational aggression, they need to be interpreted in light of a few limitations characterizing this study. These limitations include reliance on recall—and, thus, their perceptions—of experiences that, for some women, occurred at the start of freshman year; limited generalizability due to small sample size, nonrandom sampling, and a focus on the specific population of college women; and recruitment at a single university. Future research needs to determine if similar results are obtained with other, more diverse, samples.

Relational aggression among women in the college environment has largely been ignored, although findings reveal that gossiping, name-calling, giving the silent treatment, and similar aggressive behaviors are common among the women interviewed. The enlisting of allies to support and participate in the relational aggression rewards the parties in conflict with social attention, conveys acceptance of these behaviors, and normalizes aggression as a way to manage conflict. Conflict is no longer a dyadic, face-to-face phenomenon in which attempts are made to negotiate an agreement, but instead becomes a group experience, often enacted through mediated channels, with the effect of ruining women's reputations and social standing. College women's views of relational aggression as normative and acceptable, compounded with the negative impact of these experiences on them, signals an important need to further understand, and ultimately help women resolve, this negative communication phenomenon.

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