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Bidirectional pathways between relational aggression and temperament from late childhood to adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Relational aggression is linked to numerous adverse consequences. However, we know little about how temperament leads individuals to become perpetrators/victims of relational aggression, or how being a perpetrator/victim influences the development of temperament. We used longitudinal data from 674 Mexican-origin youth to examine relations between relational aggression and mother- and child-reported temperament from 5th grade ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.8$; $SD = 0.60$) through 11th grade ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.8$; $SD = 0.50$). Results show that: (a) high Negative Emotionality and low Effortful Control predicted increases in victimization; (b) low Effortful Control predicted increases in perpetration; (c) victims increased in Negative Emotionality and decreased in Effortful Control; and (d) perpetrators increased in Negative Emotionality and Surgency. Thus, temperament serves as both an antecedent to and a consequence of relational aggression.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by rapid maturational changes, shifting societal expectations, conflicting role demands, and increasingly complex relations with parents and peers. One hallmark of the transition from childhood to adolescence is a shift away from the family context and toward the peer context, which is often precipitated by youth spending more time away from home and expanding their peer networks. As youth attempt to fit into this new environment, the need to be accepted by peers becomes increasingly salient, as well as the sometimes competing need to define the self in unique ways (Galambos & Costigan, 2003). Together, these increasingly complex transactions between the child and his/her interpersonal environments may profoundly influence pathways that lead to maladaptive forms of interpersonal behavior as well as the development of basic personality traits.

Relational aggression is one interpersonal transaction that becomes particularly important during the transition from childhood to adolescence (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Cote, Vaillancourt, Barker, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2007; Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Ettekal & Ladd, 2015; Murray-Close,

Ostrov, & Crick, 2007; Underwood, Beron, & Rosen, 2011). Relational aggression is a form of bullying that entails an intent to “harm others through the use of purposeful manipulation or exclusion in the context of the peer relationship” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relationally aggressive behaviors include spreading rumors or gossiping about another child, excluding other children or getting someone else to exclude them, and/or verbally picking on someone in order to manipulate their social status or standing. These behaviors become more common in late childhood and early adolescence, in part because youth develop more complex verbal and social-cognitive skills such as perspective-taking and social intelligence (Crick et al., 1999; Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) that allow them to execute more subtle forms of aggression. Although relational aggression was initially thought to be used predominantly by girls, current research suggests that both boys and girls commonly engage in relational aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist et al., 1992; Card, Sawalani, Stucky, & Little, 2008; Coyne et al., 2006; Crick, 1997; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Tackett & Ostrov, 2010; Tackett, Waldman, & Lahey, 2009).

Relational aggression has a wide range of well-documented adverse consequences. Perpetrators of relational aggression are more likely to have poorer friendship quality, poorer academic performance, suicidal ideation, and higher levels of substance use and other forms of antisocial behavior (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Card et al., 2008; Crick, 1997; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick,

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Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Espelage & Holt, 2013; Preddy & Fite, 2012; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Risser, 2013; Skara et al., 2008; Tackett & Ostrov, 2010), although recent research notes that some relational outcomes (peer rejection, acceptance, friendships) may vary by aggression subtypes *within* boys and girls (Ettelak & Ladd, 2015). Interestingly, many of these same consequences are also experienced by the *victims* of relational aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Card et al., 2008; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2001; Espelage & Holt, 2013; Prinstein et al., 2001; Risser, 2013; Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006). In addition, victims are prone to other negative outcomes, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and lower self-esteem (Craig, 1998; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Neary & Joseph, 1994; Spieker et al., 2012; Werner & Crick, 1999).

An important but largely unanswered question is how children become perpetrators or victims of relational aggression. Previous studies have found that poor emotion regulation, inflated self-views, certain forms of internalizing and externalizing psychopathology, media exposure to relational aggression, and experiencing child abuse/maltreatment can influence youth to relationally aggress against other children (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Card et al., 2008; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Coyne, 2015; Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008; Kawabata, Alink, Tseng, van Ijzendoorn, & Crick, 2011; Mayeux, 2014; Miller & Lynam, 2003; Nelson & Crick, 2002; Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012; Ostrov & Houston, 2008; Tackett, Kushner, Herzhoff, Smack, & Reardon, 2014; Underwood et al., 2011). In contrast, researchers have found that *victims* of relational aggression often lack social skills and have difficulty resolving social problems (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Champion, Vernberg, & Shipman, 2003; Cook et al., 2010), but these pathways are complex and more poorly understood than pathways to perpetration. Previous research has shown that children who engage in aggression are more likely to become victims of relational aggression in early and middle childhood (Ostrov, 2008; Ostrov & Godleski, 2013). Thus, although perpetrators and victims of relational aggression experience many of the same adverse consequences, the developmental pathways leading to perpetration and victimization seem to be quite distinct.

An area of research less understood is how normative personality traits differentially predict *who* becomes a perpetrator or victim of relational aggression, and conversely, how perpetrating or being a victim of relational aggression subsequently affects the development of temperamental traits. It is possible that the interpersonal dynamics characterizing relational aggression are manifestations of enduring individual differences in underlying traits. The behaviors that occur within the context of a relationship transaction are *not* generated entirely through dyadic, interactional processes, but rather individuals create the micro-interactional processes that characterize adaptive and maladaptive relational behavior (Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002). In particular, each individual brings to the relational context a set of temperamental tendencies that shape his/her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

1.1. Relational aggression and the development of temperament

Individual differences in reactivity (affective and motivational processes to stimuli) and regulation (top-down control of reactive processes) are fundamental aspects of temperament in childhood and adolescence (Rothbart, 2011). Several studies suggest that traits reflecting heightened reactivity toward negative stimuli (e.g., high Negative Emotionality/Neuroticism) and poor regulatory control (e.g., low Effortful Control, low Agreeableness, and low Conscientiousness) are associated with both perpetrating and being victimized by relational aggression (Bollmer, Harris, &

Milich, 2006; De Bolle & Tackett, 2013; Georgesen, Harris, Milich, & Bosko-Young, 1999; Gleason, Jensen-Campbell, & South Richardson, 2004; Jensen-Campbell & Malcolm, 2007; Marsee & Frick, 2007; Ojanen, Findley, & Fuller, 2012; Tackett, Daoud, De Bolle, & Burt, 2013; Tackett et al., 2014; Tani, Greenman, Schneider, & Fregoso, 2003). However, we know little about the degree to which these traits predict *increases* or *decreases* over time in relational aggression, due to the dearth of longitudinal research. Moreover, even less is known about how relational aggression influences the development of temperamental traits during childhood and adolescence. Past research has shown that relational aggression is related to later symptoms of psychopathology, such as anxiety, depression, psychopathy, and personality disorders (Miller & Lynam, 2003; Murray-Close et al., 2007; Ostrov & Houston, 2008; Tackett et al., 2014), but whether relational aggression shapes normative personality development, especially in tandem with competing reciprocal forces, is not well understood.

Longitudinal associations between relational aggression and temperament could be driven by several transactional developmental processes, including *selection*, *evocation*, and *socialization*. For example, it is possible that adolescents who have poorer self-regulation, get frustrated more easily (i.e., higher Negative Emotionality), or seek out rewarding experiences may *select* into maladaptive bullying roles and increasingly engage in perpetrating behaviors because this allows them to express their dispositional tendencies in the peer context. In contrast, it seems unlikely that adolescents would actually *select* into becoming a *victim* of relational aggression. Instead, it is more plausible that adolescents with certain dispositions *evoke* responses from their peers that lead them to be targeted and victimized. That is, youth who are anxious and irritable, and who lack the self-regulatory skills to refrain from provoking others, may elicit retaliation and subsequent victimization from their peers.

Conversely, the experience of perpetrating and being a victim of relational aggression may lead to changes in temperamental traits. In other words, relational aggression may *socialize*, or reinforce, the development of certain temperamental tendencies. Being a perpetrator of relational aggression may lead to *changes* in socially maladaptive traits, such as higher negative emotionality and poorer regulation, over time. For example, continually aggressing against other children may adversely *socialize* the adolescent's ability to regulate his/her behavior, or make the perpetrator even more frustrated or irritated, which then leads them to relationally aggress against other children even more. Similarly for victims of relational aggression, it is possible that being continually victimized may lead the adolescent to become more anxious and fearful, and with fewer cognitive and emotional resources to regulate his/her behavior. Thus, these dispositions may lead to *increases* in victimization through a vicious cycle, whereby adolescents *evoke* hostile responses from their peers, which then leads them to become even less controlled and more anxious or irritable, and consequently more victimized.

To fully understand which personality traits contribute to increases in relational aggression, it is vital to understand the traits that cause adolescents to *self-select* into or *evoke* relationally aggressive behaviors. Similarly, it is also important to understand how being a perpetrator or a victim *socializes*, or reinforces, temperamental tendencies over time. Given the transitional nature of these years, adolescence is an important developmental period in which to examine the implications of temperamental characteristics for relationship experiences, and it may also be a time during which temperament and relationship experiences are especially susceptible to change and mutual influence (Tackett, Herzhoff, Reardon, De Clercq, & Sharp, 2013). Moreover, the transition from childhood to adolescence is a period when many biological, social, and psychological changes are accompanied by temporary,

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