



Empirical Research

A pilot of an acceptance-based risk reduction program for relational aggression for adolescents[☆]Christina Theodore-Oklota^{*}, Susan M. Orsillo, Jonathan K. Lee¹, Peter M. Vernig

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ABSTRACT

Psychosocial consequences of relational aggression have garnered significant attention. Although most adolescents are targets of relational aggression at some point, only a sub-group experience significant psychological distress and impaired functioning, with research linking experiential avoidance to negative outcomes. The present study sought to develop and pilot a school-based risk-reduction program informed by acceptance-based behavioral theory aimed to reduce experiential avoidance and increase acceptance- and action-based coping to reduce psychosocial distress. Eight 7th grade classrooms comprising of 210 participants with a mean age of 12.45 were group-randomized to either immediate or waitlist condition. Multiple regressions were conducted on baseline and three-month follow-up measures of peer victimization, peer aggression, experiential avoidance, psychopathology, and coping style. Baseline experiential avoidance was significantly associated both the extent to which a student engaged in, and was the victim of, both relational and physical aggression. The program group engaged in more problem-solving coping compared to the waitlist group at follow-up. Change in experiential avoidance predicted negative outcomes at follow-up across domains regardless of group assignment. Implications and recommendations for future studies are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Peer aggression has become a significant concern over the last decade (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002; Stassen Berger, 2007), with increasing attention given to social or relational forms. Relational aggression involves harming an individual through the manipulation of relationships and overall social status (Crick et al., 2002; Galen & Underwood, 1997), using behavioral (e.g., exclusion), verbal (e.g., rumors), or cyber (e.g., social networks) means. It is the most common form of aggression reported by adolescents (Crick et al., 2002; Williams & Guerra, 2007) and tends to be moderately stable during this time (Zimmer-Gembeck, Geiger, & Crick, 2005). A national survey of 6th–10th graders found prevalence rates of 53.6% for verbal aggression and 51.4% for social

aggression compared to 20.8% for physical aggression (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Being the victim of relational aggression has been shown to be associated with significant academic difficulties and psychosocial distress well into adulthood (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Grills & Ollendick, 2002; Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Taylor, Sullivan, & Kliewer, 2013).

Although there is evidence of relational aggression among preschoolers (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Crick et al., 2001; Ostrov, 2008), the prevalence seems to increase during late childhood/early adolescence (Olweus, 1994; Werner & Nixon, 2005; Williams & Guerra, 2007). During middle school years, children gain a better understanding of the value and power of social situations and how to use relationships as a more subtle tool to achieve and maintain social influence (Crick et al., 2001; Leadbeater, Boone, Sangster, & Mathieson, 2006; Roecker Phelps, 2001; Underwood, 2003). Students who engage in relational aggression often view themselves as strong, in charge, and accepted by peers (Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998) and are rated by others as “popular” (Leadbeater et al., 2006) contributing to significant influence within social groups (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Puckett, Aikins, & Cillessen, 2008). In contrast, during adolescence, physical aggression is viewed as less socially acceptable, with fewer benefits (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Leadbeater et al., 2006)

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and greater social and legal costs (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; De Los Reyes & Prinstein, 2004). Thus, relational aggression may be viewed as an acceptable outlet to express the anger and frustration towards others that adolescents continue to experience as they grow older (Prinstein et al., 2001), and as a tool to increase social status (Leadbeater et al., 2006; Salmivalli et al., 1998).

Historically, relational aggression was viewed primarily as a female behavior; however, research has produced mixed findings (e.g., Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). A meta-analysis found that although boys were more physically aggressive, there were negligible gender differences for relational aggression across various assessment methods, age, and ethnicity (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). Nelson, Mitchell, and Yang (2008) found there were gender differences in the forms of relational aggression used; girls were more likely to use covert forms of relational aggression (e.g., gossiping, spreading rumors) whereas boys utilized more overt tactics (e.g., direct name calling, mocking masculinity). Further, the social rewards of being relationally aggressive are present for both genders (Hoff, Reese-Weber, Joel Schneider, & Stagg, 2009; Puckett et al., 2008). Regardless, the evidence indicates that both boys and girls suffer psychosocial consequences (Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006; Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005), highlighting the need to address relational aggression across gender.

Although most children are exposed to peer aggression at some point, only a minority experience repeated targeting and/or long-term negative consequences (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Ladd & Ladd, 2001). Research suggests that coping style may be an important moderator. Specifically, styles of coping that involve experiential avoidance in response to relational aggression, involving denial or minimization of the impact of the internal experience aggression, appears to be a risk factor for both future victimization and poorer outcomes. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) found that even infrequent victims of aggression suffered negative outcomes when they used strategies that involved avoidance. A second study expanded on this research, finding those who attempted to avoid aggression through either cognitive distancing or ignoring the aggression were at greater risk for revictimization and the development of internalizing disorders (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004). Lodge and Feldman (2007) found the use of avoidant strategies in response to appearance specific relational aggression mediated the relationship with low self-esteem. This reduction in self-esteem could lead to greater victimization as research has found a circular relationship between relational aggression and low self-esteem where the internalization of aggressive statements further reduces self-esteem leading to repeated victimization (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Further, the use of avoidant strategies by adolescents to cope with general stressors has been shown to be associated with depressive symptoms, which increases the risk for being the target of relational aggression (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000).

Interestingly, the use of avoidant coping strategies to deal with interpersonal aggression may increase with age, (Roecker Phelps, 2001) suggesting these strategies may be particularly prevalent among adolescents. This may explain why in middle school-aged adolescents, high levels of relational victimization has been associated with substance use, which has been conceptualized as a form of coping through experiential avoidance (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006).

Although experiential avoidance strategies are ineffective in reducing peer victimization and its associated consequences, denying or minimizing the occurrence or impact of relational aggression can be associated with an immediate reduction in distress which negatively reinforces experiential avoidant behavior (Mahady Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000). Victims report that trying to suppress their distress or “acting tough” helps them to

feel stronger (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000) and parents and teachers often recommend “avoidant” responses (i.e., “don’t let it bother you”, “ignore it”), despite the long-term ineffectiveness of this strategy (Roecker Phelps, 2001).

Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals who are significantly distressed by relational aggression may engage in strategies to cope with the aggression though avoidance which despite the perceived reduction in distress, may actually increase their risk for future victimization and poor psychosocial outcomes. These findings are consistent with recent theories linking attempts to avoid internal experiences with a broad array of psychological problems (e.g., Bieling et al., 2012; Chiesa & Serretti, 2011; Hayes Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996), as well as experimental research demonstrating the paradoxically negative effects of suppression of thoughts (e.g., Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001) and emotions (e.g., Gross & Levenson, 1997). This suggests a program aimed at teaching individuals to understand their emotional responses to relational aggression, targeting the automatic and habitual use of experiential avoidance, and encouraging active problem-solving might be effective in reducing the negative outcomes of relational aggression.

As a result of the growing attention given to relational aggression, many schools are augmenting their “anti-bullying” policies by providing school-based programs aimed at reducing peer aggression and there has been an increase in the number of interventions targeting relational aggression (see review by Leff, Waasdorp, & Crick, 2010). However, most are focused on the aggressors and little attention is paid to the victims or how to cope with aggression. In fact, we were only able to find one intervention that focused exclusively on victims of relational aggression, the Walk away, Ignore, Talk, and Seek help program [W.I.T.S.], a large scale community-based program designed for children in kindergarten through third grade (Leadbeater, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003). Many have argued that school-based interventions need to empower the targets of aggression by teaching them the skills they need to respond to challenging social behaviors and adaptively cope with the consequences of relational aggression rather than focusing solely on changing the behavior of the perpetrator (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2001; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2005; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Although aiming to reduce the frequency of relational aggression is important, given its widespread prevalence and covert nature, programs aimed at building adaptive coping skills among potential victims of aggression are also needed (Salmivalli et al., 2005).

Additionally, several studies have found an association between relational victimization and relational aggression (Crick et al., 1999; Sullivan et al., 2006), suggesting that some victims may resort to aggression to reestablish their own social position (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2007) and there may be a false dichotomy between the aggressors and victims of relational aggression (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Crick et al., 1999; Owens et al., 2000; Yeung & Leadbeater, 2007). This has caused some to rightfully suggest the best way to prevent relational victimization is through empirically and conceptually based programs that address both victims and aggressors (Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004).

The aim of the current study was to develop and pilot a school-based program aimed at decreasing the negative consequences associated with relational aggression. Given the hypothesized role of experiential avoidance in increasing negative outcomes, we developed an acceptance-based behavioral program aimed at helping students to understand their emotional responses to relational challenges, decrease their automatic and habitual use of experiential avoidance, and engage in active problem-solving. Acceptance-based approaches have demonstrated efficacy across a range of problem areas (e.g., Ruiz, 2010) and there have been

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