The Differential Role of Relational Aggression and Victimization in the Academic Experiences of Middle School Girls

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Background
- Relational aggression and victimization increase in prevalence in early adolescence and can be particularly challenging for girls (Crick, Casas & Nelson, 2002)
- Relational aggression is related to decreased academic functioning and school connectedness (Risser, 2013; Preddy & Fite, 2012).
- Being a victim of relational aggression is also connected to negative school performance. (Glew et. al, 2005; Risser, 2013)
- Relational aggression has been linked to future relational victimization in middle childhood (Ostov & Godleski, 2013)
- Relational aggression and victimization are not always examined simultaneously, so it is unclear how they associate with academic outcomes when both are considered together

Purpose
The current study examines relational aggression and victimization simultaneously to determine if they have similar associations with academic performance, school connection and academic self-esteem among early adolescent girls.

Sample
- 109 seventh grade girls (M age=11.99) and one corresponding parent or guardian (M age = 39.1)
- Predominantly from ethnic minority backgrounds (Fig. 1)
- Majority of parents/guardians had not completed college (Fig. 2)

Measures

**Predictors:** Problem Behavior Frequency Scale (PBFS; Farrell, Kung, White & Valois, 2000) assessed frequency of behaviors from never (0) to twenty or more times (6) over 3-months of school
- Relational aggression (e.g. “spread a false rumor about someone”),
- Relational victimization (e.g. “had someone spread a false rumor about you”) • Delinquency (e.g. “stolen something from someone”)

**Outcomes:** Youth Outcomes Survey (Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America) assessed:
- Academic self-esteem (e.g., “I do very well at my class work”– MSG and PG; from “not at all true” (1) to “very true” (4)
- Academic performance (e.g., “how are you doing in math?”– MSG; from “not good at all” (1) to “excellent” (5)
- Educational Aspirations (“how far would you like your daughter to go in school?”)– PG; from “leave before HS” (1) to “graduate school” (4)
- Attachment subscale (e.g., “I like school”, “I like my teachers”)– MSG; from “NO!!” (1) to “YES!!” (4)

**Covariates:** Parent education (Fig 2) and ethnicity (Fig 1). Girls’ open-ended responses regarding ethnicity were recoded into six categories and then dummy-coded using African American/Black as the reference group.

| Table 1. Regression Models for Academic Outcomes |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSG Academic Performance β</th>
<th>MSG School Bonding β</th>
<th>MSG Academic Self Esteem β</th>
<th>PG Academic Self Esteem β</th>
<th>PG Academic Expectations β</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Parent Education</td>
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<td>-.043</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.341**</td>
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<td>.149</td>
<td>.208</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>.111</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>.016</td>
<td>-.192</td>
<td>-.264*</td>
<td>-.344**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.080</td>
<td>-.064</td>
<td>-.183</td>
<td>-.121</td>
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<td>Relational Aggression</td>
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<td>.031</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.083</td>
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<td>Relational Victimization</td>
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<td>-.263**</td>
<td>-.482***</td>
<td>-.234*</td>
<td>.049</td>
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<td>Delinquency</td>
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<td>-.269*</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>-.133</td>
<td>-.252*</td>
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<td>R²</td>
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<td>.178**</td>
<td>.298***</td>
<td>.154*</td>
<td>.220*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001; MSG = Middle school girl; PG = parent/guardian

Analyses
- Linear regression analyses were conducted for each outcome
- Parent education and ethnic group were entered first as covariates, given evidence showing they are related to aggression and academic outcomes (Blake et. al, 2013). Relational aggression, relational victimization and delinquency were entered in step 2

Results
Regression coefficients are reported in Table 1:
- Relational aggression was not associated with any outcome variables

School Bonding and Academic Performance
- Both were lower among girls who reported higher levels of delinquency and relational victimization

Academic Self– esteem
- Those who experienced victimization and parents of those who experienced victimization reported lower levels of academic self esteem

Parent/Guardian Academic Plans
- Parents reported lower academic future expectations when delinquency reports were higher

Discussion/Implications
- Contrary to previous literature, relational aggression was not a significant predictor of poor academic outcomes; the trend towards a positive relationship suggests further study is needed
- Victimization overall seems to be the strongest predictor of the outcomes, and is related to negative academic experiences
- Parents and middle school girls seem to maintain similar negative ideals regarding their academic competencies if the girls have experienced relational victimization
- Future research should examine profile analyses of girls focused on the frequency of relational aggression and victimization and its association with academic outcomes

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