

Fragile Friendships: Exploring the Use and Effects of Indirect Aggression

Among Adolescent Girls

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### Abstract

This study investigated the roles of relational and social aggression in the friendships of adolescent females. Using qualitative methodology, twenty-eight 8<sup>th</sup> grade female students from a predominantly white, rural, junior high school were invited to discuss how they respond to and cope with conflict in their friendships, identify and describe social and relational aggression, interpret expectations from significant adults regarding conflict management, and use relational and social aggression with peers of equal or greater social status. Themes are presented and discussed as well as implications for school counseling interventions.

## Fragile Friendships: Exploring the Use and Effects of Indirect Aggression Among Adolescent Girls

Adolescence is often described as a period of ongoing growth and transformation, with the early stages of this period reflecting many of the more profound changes of this developmental phase. In explanation, Pipher (1994) wrote that: “early adolescence is a time of physical and psychological change, self-absorption, preoccupation with peer approval and identity formation” (pp. 23-24). Ongoing physical, emotional, cognitive and physiological changes in an adolescent contribute to the complexity of developing an identity or sense of self. To further compound this process, personal metamorphosis occurs just as most adolescents are distancing or gaining a sense of independence from their parents or guardians.

As means of compensation, adolescent friendships often serve as much-needed support systems or safe havens that assist girls in processing the complex dynamics between self and environment. Girls’ friendships intrigue many of those who have sought to understand the nature of their functioning and how they contribute to female psychological well-being and personal development. Borysenko (1996) explained that during adolescence, female friendships are “a precious link to the world outside, a lifeline to hold on to while crossing the sea of change” (p. 77).

While Chesler (2001) asserted that: “girls are social beings who need to belong” (p. 80), Gilligan (1982, 2003) and Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer (1990) have discussed the important role that girls’ friendships play in navigating the hardships of adolescence, developing a sense of identity, and emerging from this life stage psychologically intact. Youniss and Haynie (1992) have posited that friendships are fundamental to the

development of social maturity and have explained that sociometric status, a measure of how accepted a girl is by peers, may be associated with adjustment during adolescence. Researchers have also demonstrated that adolescents who believe their friendships to be positive or supportive are more likely to have increased perceived social acceptance, stronger self worth, and decreased perceived social stress than peers who had more negative friendships (Berndt, Laychak, & Park, 1990; Frankel, 1990).

Yet, despite the beneficial aspects of girls' relationships, many researchers have become interested in understanding the tumultuous aspects of female friendships, which are notorious, to say the least. When adolescent females may want to rely on friendships or peer support the very most, female dyads or peer circles can become unstable or fragile due to a variety of social dynamics. Further, friendships among adolescent females often require a great deal of energy, self monitoring and interpersonal compliance due to emotional intensity, expectations of loyalty, deep sense of responsibility, need for belonging and few socially sanctioned tools to overtly deal with conflict and competition (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005).

During the last decade, researchers have named the constructs of relational and social aggression to describe the maladaptive behaviors primarily associated with female friendships, particularly as girls try to manage disagreements while possessing a need for peer status, acceptance and belonging. In contrast to physical aggression, the use of relational and social aggression implies a lack of directness and overt aggression when girls encounter conflict, and instead social intelligence is used to manipulate

relationships, damage the reputations of others or seek social vengeance (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002).

Relational aggression usually occurs inside of an established friendship and may encompass a range of emotionally hurtful behaviors including threatening to sever a friendship unless a friend is compliant, distancing emotionally, including the “silent treatment”, and spreading rumors about an individual rendering their social status temporarily or permanently vulnerable in broader social circles (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression is often used when girls cannot or will not assertively discuss their thoughts or feelings related to an event or conflict that may affect the relationship. Relationally aggressive acts are meant as retaliation against a friend for an alleged wrong or demonstration of greater social power, as well as functioning as a simultaneous coercion of a friend to comply with particular beliefs or behaviors.

Friendships of relationally aggressive girls appear to be characterized by relatively high levels of intimacy, exclusivity/jealousy, and relational aggression within the dyad (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996) rendering them restrictive and controlling. Individuals who use relational aggression may lack perspective taking skills or the ability and willingness to use empathy in their relationships (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999).

Socially aggressive behaviors are somewhat different in that they typically occur between acquaintances and include behaviors such as gossiping, social exclusion, social isolation, the stealing of friends or romantic partners, or the use of public confrontational strategies to achieve maximum social damage (Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). The impetus for social conflict may include a difference of opinion

between girls, competition to earn social status or obtain a particular dating partner, or conscious or unconscious angst associated with interpreting one's social value or self worth. Extreme closeness, emotional dependency and jealousy are all indicative of female relationships that require friends to fill emotional voids resulting from the experience of negotiating adolescent development without the proper assistance or the adolescent's willingness to rely on supportive adults.

Relational and social aggression can deprive girls of opportunities to meet their needs for friendship, closeness, acceptance and affirming the self, which ultimately is harmful to their emotional health (Chesler, 2001; Crick et al., 2002). Moreover, girls rate relational aggression as being significantly more distressing than do boys, likely because their sense of identity is so strongly dependent upon their ability to establish close, intimate connections with others (Crick, 1995). Chesler (2001) wrote that evolutionary theory highlights females' need for social intimacy and when adolescent females experience the threat of or actual state of being emotionally cut off from others, "a primal and painful terror is evoked" (p. 83).

Prolonged use or exposure to relational and social aggression may have a negative impact on the development of adolescent females. In a study examining the relationship between self-other representations and relational aggression in adolescent girls, negative self-representations were predictive of relational aggression (Moretti, Holland & McKay, 2001). Further, social-psychological adjustment and development is often interrupted or adversely impacted in adolescent females who perpetuate or are recipients of relational and social aggression (Crick et al., 1999). Finally, Werner and Crick (1999) found that relational aggression is significantly correlated with different

indicators of maladjustment. Unfortunately, when adolescent females do not become aware of why and how these approaches to female relational conflict are used, maladaptive interpersonal skills such as relational aggression may continue into adulthood. Researchers have found that girls actually increase their use of relational aggression as they age, even though their understanding of relational aggression as being normative and more hurtful likewise expand (Crick, 1995; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Henington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1998; Hipwell et al., 2002; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999).

These findings are disturbing as they suggest that girls may come to believe that relational aggression is inevitable among female friendships and confound the development of meaningful, supportive friendships they may so desire. Yet despite these behaviors being more distressing to its recipients, use of social aggression may offer social rewards as these approaches to aggression encompass indirect methods of dealing with conflict, which allows females to express anger without veering too far from traditional gender role stereotypes (Crothers et al., 2005). Often times, assertive methods for dealing with conflict are not consistently reinforced by one's peers or significant adults who may instead expect girls to be compliant, friendly, and invested in social harmony with others, even if this equates to personal subversion.

After a review of the literature, it was noted that researchers have named the problem of relational and social aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), described the specific behaviors associated with each type of aggression (Xie et al. 2002), measured the incidents of relational and social aggression of boys and girls through a peer nomination process (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997), monitored developmental usage of

relational and social aggression from childhood through adulthood (Crick et al., 1999; Werner & Crick, 1999), and begun to explore the long term consequences of these maladaptive conflict resolution skills (Crick et al., 1999).

This study is therefore a unique contribution to the literature as the concepts of relational and social aggression are entrusted to adolescent females for exploration. Through their own unique voices, meaning making, and story telling, adolescent females were given the opportunity to examine the purpose and effects of relational and social aggression, as well as how these young women handle conflict in their friendships with others. The specific goals of this research were to explore how female adolescents respond to and cope with conflict with others, identify and describe relational and social aggression, view the expectations of significant adults regarding the range of behaviors deemed socially acceptable in dealing with conflict, and evaluate the use of relational or social aggression with peers with equal or greater social status.

## Method

### *Research Questions*

This qualitative study was undertaken to obtain girls' perceptions of the ways in which they handle conflict in their friendships with others, with an emphasis upon understanding the dynamics of social and relational aggression. Based upon this orientation, the following research questions were posed: 1) How do adolescent females think and feel about anger and conflict?; 2) How do adolescent females respond when they are angry with others?; 3) What strategies do adolescent females use to handle conflict in their friendships?; 4) Do adolescent females' responses to conflict differ depending upon the sex of the individual?; 5) Does the approach of adolescent females

to conflict depend upon the social status of the girl with whom they have the strife?; 6) What do adolescent females perceive to be the expectations that their friends have of them when their friends are angry with another person?; 7) What do adolescent females believe to be the expectations of parents and teachers in handling conflict in friendships? and; 8) What social conditions need to be in place for adolescent females to feel comfortable in being assertive?

### *Sample*

Participants included twenty-eight 8<sup>th</sup> grade female students from a predominantly White, rural junior high school in the Mid-Atlantic United States. The mean age of the participants was 13.5 years, and 93% of the participants were Caucasian, while 7% of the participants were bi-racial. Although socioeconomic data was not collected for the individual participants, U.S. Census (2000) data indicated that this city is of middle class socioeconomic status (\$34,666 median household income [1999]) with 82.9% of residents being high school graduates and 17.3% achieving a Bachelor's degree or higher. Study participants reported a mean length of time of 6.14 years in attending school in this district, a mean number of friends of 4.44, and a mean number of arguments with friends on a weekly basis of 3.23.

### *Instruments*

Subjects first completed a demographic questionnaire in which they answered questions about their age, grade level, ethnicity, how long they had attended school in the district, their number of friends, and how often they argued with friends each week. The researchers, for the purpose of answering the questions posed in this study, developed a second instrument. Using a phenomenological approach, sixteen open-

ended prompts were used to generate data related to the research questions. Examples of the open ended prompts include: (1) *When my close friends are angry with me, I often think;* (6) *When I have a disagreement with my friends, my parents expect me to;* (8) *When I have a fight with my friends, I deal with it by;* 11) *When I disagree with someone who is equal to me in power (equal level of popularity), I will...* No reliability and validity data are available for this measure, since it was developed to answer the questions specific to this study.

### *Procedure*

This study occurred during an annual “Girls Night Out” program at the junior high school, in April 2004. Organized by the school counselor, the program featured a series of workshops designed to improve female eighth grade students’ skills in a number of areas: expressive arts, promotion of healthy lifestyles, communication and relationship skills, and conflict resolution skills. All girls secured parental permission to participate in the evening’s events, including participation in data collection for this research. Two university researchers (the primary and secondary authors) asked subjects to respond to a demographic questionnaire, and then to answer 16-open ended prompts, the completion of which took approximately 20 minutes. After the participants had answered all of the questions, the researchers collected the forms. The researchers then conducted a workshop on social and relationship skills, including a number of skill-building exercises designed to promote awareness of and sensitivity to the problem and effects of social and relational aggression as well as specific assertiveness skills to be used to achieve open, honest communication.

## Results

Data from the sixteen open-ended prompts were consolidated into the eight research questions previously described. Using a constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), common themes were sought among the adolescent females' responses to the open ended prompts in order to make sense of the data. After an independent review of the data by each of the researchers, a collective effort yielded identified themes for each research question. The core components to each question were listed and then reviewed to eliminate redundant responses. From this revised listing of core components, responses were categorized into major themes.

### *How do adolescent females think and feel about anger and conflict?*

Most of the respondents indicated that their experience with conflict and anger within a female relationship provoked fears about the potential disconnection and dissolution of the friendship, exemplified in the following young woman's statement, "Will we ever be friends again?" Several equated conflict with loneliness in that tension not only resulted in disconnection from the relationship in question but also led to social isolation as disputants used relational and social aggression to destroy other friendships. Many respondents perceived conflict to be incongruent with friendship. For example, one individual claimed that in response to conflict she would often think, "If they are true friends, why would they be fighting with me?" Girls' statements included the contrasting themes of internalization and externalization. Internalization was reflected in assuming complete responsibility for the conflict and feeling angry or upset with themselves. Those who reported internalizing also exhibited decreased self-esteem and loss of self, which is reflected in the following responses: "I feel like an important

part of me is missing,” “I feel untalented because they [my friends] make up a big part of my life,” “I feel downsized and awkward,” and “I want to die because they are everything...without them...it’s just weird.” Those reporting externalization expressed anger, and some feared that their anger might result in hurting others, which they would eventually regret. For example, one participant reported that when she expresses her anger, she fears that “we will never talk again and I will never find someone like them.” Additionally, several participants noted a loss of control of the situation or powerlessness, with one respondent stating, “I didn’t do anything, it was just rumors.”

*How do adolescent females respond when they are angry with others?*

Many of the respondents reported initially seeking out friends for both support and advice when angry with other friends. Others indicated engaging in a period of temporary distance either for the purpose of clarifying their thinking and eventually confronting the person with whom they were in conflict or decreasing their emotional intensity to gain composure. Several participants described decreasing their emotional intensity through the use of distraction. One girl stated that she will “ignore it for the first day and after a couple days – spend time with family and try to keep busy.” Others stated that they used writing to help them clarify their feelings. Another theme was of overt verbal aggression, with several respondents noting that they were likely to yell and be verbally abusive to the person with whom they were angry or overpowering another to achieve a social victory, both of which are behaviors consistent with the definition of relational aggression. Two responses that demonstrate this theme included: “Get mad and ignore them, just go to my friends.” “Greatly overpower them, rally people to my side and embarrass them.”

*What strategies do adolescent females use to handle conflict in their friendships?*

All of the same themes for how the participants responded to anger with others were evident in the responses regarding how they handled conflict in relationships, but there were some unique themes for this research question. One was the participants' desire and expectation that they had a right to receive an explanation regarding why the other person was angry. As one individual noted, she had a right to: "Ask why, what did I do, I deserve to know." Many of the respondents believed in their right to communicate their perspective, which many of them described in terms of being true to themselves. Girls who believed in their right to share their opinions generally also recognized the other person's right to her viewpoint, thus requiring either compromise or accepting that there were differences between the disputants. Finally, several participants reported suppressing their opinions for fear of escalating the conflict and creating greater emotional distance in the relationship.

*Do adolescent females' responses to conflict differ depending upon the sex of the individual?*

Several themes were evident in participants' responses regarding the manner in which they dealt with anger with female peers. Interestingly, these themes were not evident in reports in which the young women conveyed how they handled anger with male peers. One theme of dealing with female friends when angry included assertively confronting the peer in an attempt to resolve the conflict. Another theme girls revealed was of dispassion; trying to stay neutral until enough time had passed that the argument would resolve itself. However, several young women described either verbally lashing out at a female peer, such as crying, yelling, or screaming, or using relational

aggression to manage the negative feelings and power differential that stemmed from the conflict. One girl noted that she would “talk about them [the peers with whom she was angry] a lot and try to make other girls mad at them too.” This public “shunning” of the peers with whom the individual was in conflict seemingly was initiated to decrease the others’ social status and invalidate their position or argument.

*Does the approach to conflict depend upon the social status of the female with whom she has the conflict?*

Analysis of participants’ responses regarding their strategies for dealing with conflict with a person perceived to have a similar degree of social status and a person with greater social status essentially revealed the same themes, which included the diametric options of relational aggression and assertive communication. However, some respondents did note that they would acquiesce when arguing with a more popular girl, which was a theme not evident in the girls’ responses concerning conflicting with a perceived equal.

*What do adolescent females perceive to be the expectations their friends have of them when their friends are angry with another person?*

The respondents perceived their friends as seeking support from them the way in which they used their own friendships when angry with another person. Individuals reported that their friends desired emotional support and communicated with their companions for the purpose of clarifying their feelings. Two themes emerged that were unique to this research question. One was that respondents saw their friends expecting them to actively insert themselves between the disputants, some specifically identifying the role they were to assume as that of mediator. Another unique theme was that some

young women reported that their friends expected the participant to be aligned with them against the person with whom they were angry, with one girl noting, "They want me to take their side no matter what they are angry about." Interestingly, whereas many of the participants admitted to engaging in relational aggression by using indirect verbal aggression (attacking the reputation of a person with whom they were angry), none of the respondents claimed that they expected their friends to side with them against another peer.

*What do adolescent females perceive to be the expectations that parents and teachers have regarding how the girls handle conflict in friendships?*

Many of the respondents perceived their parents as expecting them to handle conflict assertively, reflected in the following response: "Put in my ideas and thoughts with them [the disputants] because mine count too." A related theme was girls reporting their parents expecting the respondent to assume responsibility and reconcile the dispute. One individual noted that she believed her parents expected her to be responsible for reflecting upon the conflict and basing her decision on what was healthy for her to do. Others believed their parents expected them to disclose the conflict to mom or dad, with many respondents expressing a disinclination to do so. Finally, a few young women perceived that their parents expected them to resolve the matter quickly, even if it meant assuming a submissive "one down" position to satisfy the needs of the other party.

Interestingly, respondents' perceptions regarding what teachers expected of them in responding to conflict revealed different themes in comparison to the participants' views of their parents' expectations. Many presumed that teachers were

unaware of friendship conflicts between girls, and further, were uninterested in learning about such conflicts. Several girls believed teachers expected them to handle conflicts through the use of assertive communication, which, for example, might entail seeking services from the school counselor. A common theme was that of teachers expecting respondents to either ignore the conflict or resolve it outside of school in order to focus purely on academic matters, with one respondent noting: “They [the teachers] want me to still participate in class. Just because I have an argument doesn’t mean I shouldn’t pay attention.”

*What social conditions need to be in place for adolescent females to feel comfortable being assertive?*

A common theme was the desire to discuss the matter with a friend to obtain advice or to help with processing the feelings about the conflict. Other respondents expressed a desire for individual reflection, either to think about how to communicate with the disputant, or to better understand their own feelings, with one young woman noting that this helped her to: “understand why I’m angry.” Several individuals wanted the person with whom they are in conflict to acknowledge their thoughts and feelings, reflected in the following statement: “I want friends who understand me and not just ignore me when I tell them things.” A similar theme expressed by some of the participants was a desire to trust the peer with whom they were in conflict to not use relational aggression against them (i.e., seeking to establish allegiances against them).

### Discussion

This research study has provided a unique view of conflict among adolescent females. Through the use of a qualitative approach, several themes emerged which

provide greater understanding of the way in which adolescent females handle conflict among friends and peers. In reviewing this research, it is first interesting to confirm girls' fear of isolation and the threat of being separated from peer connection and support. In several of their responses, participants clearly expressed a need for support and understanding when facing peer conflicts, which often include relational and social aggression.

Constructively addressing this fear may be particularly difficult for adolescent females who do not have supplemental sources of support, such as invested parents, caregivers, or educators who are taking an active interest in their intrapersonal development. As girls mature into adolescence and demonstrate a developmentally appropriate need to individuate and define themselves apart from parents and other adults, it is nevertheless important that emotional support continues to be provided to them to help them negotiate the often complicated social world in which they must function. As vigilant advocates of healthy student development, school counselors are in the ideal position to assist parents, teachers and administrators with understanding the challenges of adolescent friendships as well as imparting effective, supportive communication strategies, which may be used to intervene with victims or perpetrators.

Second, it seems many adolescent females would benefit from reframing conflict, or understanding that conflict is not something to fear, but rather is a normal aspect of relationships. It is concerning that female adolescents may compromise their glorious capacity for strong, female intimacy and instead construe female relationship skills as stereotypical, catty behavior with childlike qualities that undercuts the propensity for adolescent females to consolidate their personal power and potential for the betterment

of their social contexts. In contrast, teaching young women to work through conflict in an assertive manner may actually strengthen trust and confidence in their friendships. Finally, girls may benefit from envisioning conflict as a shared responsibility between both disputants. The capacity for perspective taking, honoring healthy relationship boundaries and listening to the perspectives of others will only serve to enrich adolescent female relationships. Classroom guidance lessons which focus on effective communication, assertiveness and personal boundaries will benefit both female and male students in learning about healthy relationship skills.

Additionally, in analyzing girls' responses regarding their use and experience of relational aggression, it may be helpful to view this process as developmental and contextual rather than being representative of an intrinsic female tendency toward the perpetration of hurtful social behaviors. We propose that the use of relational aggression in relationships is reflective of general emotional intensity that characterizes adolescent relationships, instead of being indicative of a static state that is the embodiment of female relationships. Just as skills that are used in early romantic encounters may not be healthy or adaptive for those involved, employing relational aggression may be a preliminary attempt to manage the negative feelings in female friendships that will eventually evolve into more sophisticated, functional patterns of managing relational conflict that value and maintain female friendships. School counselors may become proactive in this developmental process by facilitating classroom guidance lessons or small groups that specifically name, define and challenge the social usefulness of bullying and relational and social aggression. Students can become actively involved by role-playing different approaches to conflict

(i.e., passive, passive-aggressive, aggressive and assertive) and discussing potential personal and social outcomes of each approach.

Raising girls' conscious awareness of the dynamics involved in relational and social aggression is the first step in diminishing these behaviors. Relational aggression takes place in a social and cultural context that limits the range of relational expression used by females. Just as males come to acknowledge and understand social taboos of exhibiting sadness, hurt and other soft emotions, so too do adolescent females often internalize strict boundaries for confronting relationship problems while functioning within the boundaries of socially appropriate female conduct or behavior, which includes an emphasis upon refraining from demonstrating "negative" emotions such as anger and envy. Dismantling the tendency toward using relational and social aggression beyond adolescence may be a more likely consequence when adolescent females understand that ingesting societal expectations for female sanctioned behavior limits their opportunity to find their own voice or ability to practice assertiveness. School counselors can assist with this problem by monitoring the school context for systemic messages and practices that categorize acceptable forms of aggression according to gender and leading discussions with administrators and teachers about these issues.

### *Implications*

By allowing girls to analyze their unique stories related to peer conflict, various implications for school counselors have been revealed. Healthy social and emotional development requires guidance and support, which includes an identification and discussion of the phenomenon of relational and social aggression as well as an exploration of the negative short- and long-term effects of engaging in such behavior.

School counselors can play a pivotal role in educating parents about social and relational aggression as well as suggesting specific parental strategies to assist young females who struggle with these challenges. Despite participants' beliefs that parents want them to resolve conflict assertively, young women need opportunities to critically examine their conflict resolution skills. Parents can assist adolescents by giving their daughters time and space to discuss peer conflict. This includes active listening, exploring different plans of action and their subsequent consequences and avoiding the dissemination of direct advice unless solicited by the young woman. Most importantly, parents who model assertive conflict resolution will provide their children with a conceptual framework that may include how to use positive self talk and emotional regulation when preparing for and processing conflict with others. Finally, parents may need to proactively create opportunities to discuss the potential for conflict inherent in peer relationships with their daughters, as the respondents in this study were unsure if they would tell parents about peer conflicts for fear of disappointing them or compromising their need for identity differentiation.

Schools also have a stake in educating adolescents about relational and social aggression as a part of establishing clear expectations for student conduct while in school. School counselors can lead these initiatives through school wide assemblies, grade level meetings and classroom guidance lessons. Additionally, school counselors can develop, implement and /or maintain peer programs, such as peer mediation or peer listeners, to provide support to all students facing conflicts. Peer mediation is a process that is particularly beneficial in helping disputants feel safe and knowledgeable in working through conflicts that might otherwise escalate. Participants in peer

mediation follow specific ground rules, state their perspectives on the particular conflict, and rely upon a trained peer to assist with devising a workable solution to the problem. Another constructive aspect of participating in peer mediation includes having the disputants return to their respective peer circles to explain that the problem has been resolved, which helps to eliminate social aggression and “ganging up” on particular students.

Finally, as a part of supporting efforts at home and at school, school counselors can conduct educational programs and training sessions that assist parents, teachers and administrators in developing effective communication patterns with adolescents as well as helping them navigate through common teenage dilemmas. Including information and strategies to support victims or provide alternative relationship skills to perpetrators of relational and social aggression could be included. Since many schools already offer anti-bullying or anti-violence programming, using a broader definition of aggression will thereby serve to constructively address the similarly important topics of relational and social aggression, as well.

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