

‘Mean Girls & Mean Boys’: A Comparative Study of Relational Aggression in Students School and College Students across Gender

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Abstract

In adolescence, relational aggression can lead to emotional-behavioral problems and consequently mental health issues later in adulthood that would impair the mental health, relations with family, friends, colleagues, romantic relations, and parental rearing styles. It is suggested that there is progression from relational aggression to verbal aggression to physical aggression. The purpose of the study is to explore the gender differences in relational aggression amongst public and private school and college students. It was hypothesized that both girls and boys depict relational aggression in South Asian collectivistic culture. A sample was selected through stratified sampling from public and private schools and colleges. A total number of students (N=400) (n=200 boys and n=200 girls) completed a Demographic Proforma, and the Diverse Adolescent Relational Aggression Scale (DARAS) to assess relational aggression. Data was analyzed through descriptive statistical analysis and Two-way Analysis of Variance. The findings showed the intercept and interaction of gender and educational level indicated a significant difference between school and college in relational aggression. The results have important implications for mental health practitioners, educators, and policymakers in executing techniques to promote the alliance of sources that establishes students’ networking as tangible and operable actions.

Keywords: relational aggression, gender differences, cultural differences, wellbeing, mental health, school psychology, college students, educational psychology.

Introduction

“The white zone is for cool people only, no geeks.” (Cinderella Story, 2004).

“If you break any of these rules, you can’t sit with us at lunch.” (Mean Girls, 2004).

Though identified as early in 1969, relational aggression (RA) has received limited attention, but for the past two decades a significant literature body has developed (Li et al., 2023). Historically, awareness of the harmful impact of physical aggression has been a sole focus for long time, but only recently have the detrimental effects of RA received recognition. Different psychosocial adjustment issues and characteristics that are exclusive to relational aggression are explored in recent research (Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2018, 2019). First, RA exhibit exclusive features pertinent to their social environment, for instance, positively related with jealousy in friendships (Wang et al., 2024). Secondly, individuals who displayed RA behaviors usually are perceived as highly socialized individuals, for instance, high on popularity and friendliness or affiliation rated by their teachers and peers (Azad & Carlsson, 2023). RA peers are more skillful in exhausting manipulation for exertion of power in the group, unlike physically aggressive youth (Goering & Mrug, 2021; Mukhtar, 2019). Overt aggression such as fighting and shoving can be identified easily. Relational aggression, on the other hand, is not as conspicuous as physical aggression. It is eventually aimed at hurting feelings and destroying reputations of others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression (RA) can be displayed in two forms: direct and indirect. Direct form of relational aggression includes name calling, negative facial expressions or body language (Zhou et al., 2022). Indirect forms of relational aggression include harming through gossiping or rumor spreading (Syahputra et al., 2024). Initially girls had appeared to be more relationally aggressive than boys, however growing empirical evidence indicated similarities between both genders’ relationally aggressive behaviors (Jiang et al., 2024; Heizomi et al., 2021).

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Traditionally, aggression was viewed only under the physical form of aggression referred to as the use of physical force to harm others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Upon that measurement criterion, girls considered less on an elevated level of aggression as boys and hence believed less aggressive until the identification of social alienation and ostracism (Rajchert et al., 2022). After this discovery, more emphasis has been redirected on indirect forms of aggression, in particular, relational aggression (Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2018; Mukhtar et al., 2022). Relational Aggression (RA) can be defined as intentional activities to hurt an individual with purposeful interpersonal manipulation or social exclusion within the context of peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although with slight similarity to indirect aggression where an unknown aggressor cause harm in a circuitous way (Syahputra et al., 2024), RA can be overt and manipulative, and it can be overt and confrontational like threatening a friend or exclusion unless the aggressor's demands are met (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2023). In adolescent's perspective, RA is defined as an act of manipulating relationships to wield control over another child/adolescent or harming other child/adolescent by damaging their friendships (Schiff & Lee, 2024).

The dramatic prolific importance of relational aggression (RA) is not just ostensible from the number of research published in various psychology journals but also from the mainstream media (print, electronic, social) of music, books, movies, TV programs, blogs, and video logs (vlogs). Though there are few empirical evidences so far on developmental trends in RA, many researchers (Huang et al., 2023) believed that it mounts during late childhood and early and late adolescents because of the developmental milestones (high verbal abilities, better social sophistication) they experienced during this phase (Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2018; 2019). The present research emphasized adolescents for two reasons.

First, as socialization changed adolescents, which offers a fertile space for the adolescents to individuate and start developing a sense of self distinct from their family and friendship relationships, where social standing has a greater impact (Perhamus et al., 2024). During the adolescent period, social relationships become emotional with more intimate sharing, alongside social status and acceptance from friends, which becomes a more important constituent of self-identity for an adolescent. One of the most distinctive features of RA, in adolescence, is the establishment of close friendships that become the most principal element of development, and this framework provides a vital opportunity for the display of RA (Kim et al., 2022).

Second, multiple researches (Dewi & Kyranides, 2021) proposed that RA is a more sophisticated way of manipulation because it entails indulgence of peers' mental state. In adolescents, comprehension of social situations arose with better indulgence of others' motives and emotions through perspective taking and emotional regulation (O'Connor, 2021). With social-cognitive abilities, individuals perceive manipulative and detrimental sophisticated methods to withdraw specific relationships. RA is more influential on relationships with friends than on others, people are more likely to demonstrate RA behaviors in intimate friendships (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Zhou et al. (2022) found that when adolescents were questioned to reflect on the reason victims think they have been the target of relationally aggressive behaviors, they answered that the relational aggressor was seeking revenge or making them mad. Another study in which two more extensive answers indicated an insightful finding, when adolescents were asked why a fictional character in a story engaged in relationally aggressive behaviors (with inclusion or exclusion in a group involving friendships). The teenagers responded that 1) it was amusing to ease boredom, and 2) relational aggressors were seeking attention or revenge, and trying to create jealousy or protecting own self-centered agendas (Heizomi et al., 2021).

An important feature that distinguishes RA is the role of gender. In physical aggression, males consistently display more physical aggression (Raffee et al., 2021), in comparison, RA is often regarded as the female's expression of anger (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) but the results are inconsistent. For instance, in two recent meta-analytic reviews, one by Martins and Weaver (2019) found that most of the literature is consistent with RA being more common among females. Conversely, another review (Dewi & Kyranides, 2021) examined slight gender differences in the rates of relational aggression. Current study with gender differences on the study variable may help in resolving the contradiction existing in scientific literature about

relational aggression, at most to cultural relevance. Academic setting and peer group are contributing factors as reputations and popularity hold significant importance among adolescents and thus serve as suitable targets for RA (Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2018; Lyu et al., 2024). Furthermore, RA exhibits particular psychological traits not observed in physical aggression. Collison and Lynam (2022) found relational aggression exclusively associated with borderline personality features. RA has a high correlation to these personality traits which involve manipulation and interpersonal harm, similar to characteristics displayed by borderline personality disorder (Collison & Lynam, 2022). O'Connor (2021) found a significant gender difference in relational aggression among relational aggressors and victims in their examined relationship between relational aggression and psychosocial problems.

The aim and objective of the present research was to explore gender difference across public and private schools and college students. Literature review has indicated a significant gender difference on relational aggression in children but not among adolescents. Given the differences in societal opinions about display of aggression, aggression often differs between cultures, however, girls being more relationally aggressive and boys being more physically aggressive is often identified across Western culture's research (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2023; Yu et al., 2021). In examining relational aggression between German students, Port Rico and Hungarian cultures, they found higher ratings according to teachers' rating but no gender difference was found on relational aggression across these cultures (Jiang et al., 2022) as culture has impact on the expression on relational aggression and South Asians being a diverse, collectivistic and multicultural found boys to be as relationally aggressive as girls (Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2018). During adolescence, given the heightened salience of relational aggression, this development period is considered to be highly relevant for the study of interplay of study variable by taking sample from public and private schools and colleges setup in due regard of cultural difference as per account the target sample taken from exclusive girls' and boys' institutes to gather the cultural peculiarity.

Significance of the Study

This study provides a significant insight into the phenomenon of relational aggression among students at different educational levels, emphasizing gender-based differences and contextual variations. Given the increasing prevalence as well as awareness of non-physical aggression in educational institutions, this research serves as a timely and necessary contribution to educational psychology, social behavior, and gender studies. By exploring relational aggression among school and college students, the study aims to offer theoretical, practical, and social contributions that can inform academic discourse, policymaking, and intervention strategies. This research increases the educational and psychosocial understanding of relational aggression as a covert yet instrumental form of peer aggression, to foster a safer and more inclusive school and college environment, which is often overlooked compared to overt physical aggression. While existing literature has largely focused on direct forms of bullying, this study explores the psychosocial mechanisms underlying relational aggression, highlighting how it presents in adolescent and young adult peer interactions. Furthermore, the study assesses gender differences in relational aggression, to contribute to gender-sensitive approaches in aggression management and inclusive conflict resolution trainings, integrating theories in developmental and social psychology regarding how males and females engage in social manipulation, exclusion, and verbal aggression.

Methodology

Research Design and sample participants

This study employs a comparative, cross-sectional research design to examine the prevalence and patterns of relational aggression among school and college students across genders. A mixed-methods approach is utilized, integrating both quantitative survey and qualitative proforma to gain a comprehensive understanding of relational aggression.

The study sample consisted of 400 students from public and private academic institutions, including 200 boys and 200 girls. The study sample, which was selected through G-Power analysis, includes 200 secondary school students (grades IX and X) and 200 college students (grades XI and XII). A stratified

random sampling technique was employed, initially dividing participants into two primary strata: schools and colleges. Each of these was further categorized into public and private institutions, followed by subdivision into four subgroups based on grade levels. Finally, a systematic random sampling method was used to select participants from each class to ensure a balanced representation.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the study encompasses that the students must be enrolled grades IX to XII, within the age range of 14-19 years, and show willingness to participate in the study. Whereas, the exclusion criteria require that students with known psychiatric disorders affecting aggression levels and those who have recently transferred institutions, cannot be included in this study.

Measures

There are two measures used in this study; first being the Demographic Questionnaire, which is a self-reported demographic form used to collect data on age, gender, grade level, school/college type, and socioeconomic background. The second measure, Diverse Adolescent Relational Aggression Scale (DARAS) (Horton, 2020) is a 28-item scale used to assess relational aggression in familial and peer relationships among adolescents with an age range of 14-19 years. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (4) "Strongly Agree." All items described relational aggressive behaviors and impacts (i.e., ridicule someone you do not like). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$) and has been validated in previous adolescent aggression studies.

Procedure

To assess the friendliness of the English version of the Diverse Adolescent Relational Aggression Scale, a pilot study was conducted. For this purpose, official permission was taken from the author. Institutional permission was obtained to collect data from a randomly selected sample of school students. Since relational aggression was to be measured through a self-report measure and being a culturally sensitive issue, the language barrier was kept into consideration. The measure was administered in English language as items were less intense and neutral as compared to the Urdu translated version, which could escalate the chance of response bias. A small randomly selected sample from schools participated. Items were reviewed for clarity, comprehension, and cultural appropriateness. The administration took 8-10 minutes of the measure for which neither an item proven to be redundant nor the difficulty level of items was beyond students' level of comprehension. Social desirability response was controlled by implementing an anonymous random model survey and keeping the purpose of the study vague by reversing items. No financial incentives were provided but participants were given the option to inquire about publication results via email. Data was analyzed by IBM SPSS Statistics 21 for statistical analyses.

Data Collection

Ethical Approval & Consent: Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and informed consent was provided to participants.

Survey Administration: The questionnaire was distributed both in paper-based and online formats under researcher supervision in classrooms.

Confidentiality Measures: Responses were anonymized, and data were securely stored to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality.

Results

The data is analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The foremost aim of the study was to explore gender differences in relational aggression across public and private schools and colleges. Two-way ANOVA was conducted to simultaneously test between groups for the effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable and also identifies an interaction effect. Post Hoc comparison using the Tukey test indicated the differences on the group level. Table 1 shows the two-way analysis of variance for educational level (school/college) and gender (boy/girl). The results showed that school boys have higher relational aggression than school girls. However, college girls have higher relational aggression than college

boys. The total score indicated that regardless of school and college, overall gender wise, boys have higher relational aggression than girls.

Table 1. Two-Way Analysis of Variance of Two Levels of Educational Level (School and College) and Gender (Boys and Girls)

Educational Level	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
School	Boys	73.35	7.85	100
	Girls	67.61	8.60	100
	Total	70.48	8.70	200
College	Boys	72.78	9.24	100
	Girls	75.51	9.09	100
	Total	74.15	9.24	200
Total	Boys	73.07	8.56	200
	Girls	71.56	9.67	200
	Total	72.31	9.15	400

Table 2. Means (M), Significance Level, Degree of Freedom (df), and F values of Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	SS	<i>df</i>	MS	F	<i>p</i> <
Corrected Model	3363.24	3	1121.08	14.77	.001***
Intercept	2091639.06	1	2091639.06	27563.06	.001***
Gender	226.50	1	226.50	2.99	.085
Educational Level	1343.22	1	1343.22	17.70	.001***
Gender * Educational Level	1793.52	1	1793.52	23.64	.001***
Error	30050.69	396	75.89		
Total	2125053.00	400			
Corrected Total	33413.93	399			

Note. *df*=399, ****p*<.001

Table 2 indicates the findings that educational level (school and college) showed a significant difference between these two educational levels. Moreover, the intercept and interaction of gender and educational level indicated a significant difference between school and college in relational aggression.

Table 3 shows the two-way analysis of variance for private and public levels and gender (boy/girl). The results show that girls from a private educational level have higher relational aggression than boys of a private educational level. However, public level boys have higher relational aggression than girls with public educational level. The total score indicated that, regardless of private and public, overall gender wise, boys have higher relational aggression than girls.

Table 3. Two-Way Analysis of Variance of Two Levels of Institute Level (Private and Public) and Gender (Boys and Girls)

Institute Level	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Private	Boys	73.41	9.86	100
	Girls	73.67	9.72	100
	Total	73.54	9.77	200
Public	Boys	72.72	7.05	100
	Girls	69.45	9.20	100
	Total	71.09	8.34	200
Total	Boys	73.07	8.56	200
	Girls	71.56	9.67	200
	Total	72.31	9.15	400

Table 4. Means (M), Significance Level, Degree of Freedom (df), and F values of Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	SS	df	MS	F	<i>p</i> <
Corrected Model	1140.72	3	380.24	4.66	.003**
Intercept	2091639.06	1	2091639.06	25664.91	.001***
Gender	226.50	1	226.50	2.77	.096
Institute Level	602.70	1	602.70	7.39	.007**
Gender * Institute Level	311.52	1	311.52	3.82	.05*
Error	32273.21	396	81.49		
Total	2125053.00	400			
Corrected Total	33413.93	399			

Note. *df*=399, ****p*<.001, ***p*<.01, **p*<.05

The findings in table 4 of the private and public levels showed a significant difference between these two. Moreover, the intercept and interaction of gender and institute level indicated the significant difference between private and public educational levels in relational aggression.

Discussion

A major issue in academic institutions, especially in schools and colleges, is the students' interactions in the educational environment that can sometimes turn aggressive. In consideration with the influences and development of aggression, it is sufficient to suggest that there is a progression from relational aggression to verbal aggression to physical aggression (Schiff & Lee, 2024). Moreover, relational aggression can undermine the school/college environment and interfere with both perpetrator and victims' functioning and could compromise their mental health and well-being. School and college students fall under most crucial periods of adolescence, either being a victim of relational aggression or an aggressor (Lyu et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2021). In adolescence, comprehension of social situations arose along with better understanding of motives and emotions of others by perspective taking and emotional regulation and hence presents higher chances of relational aggressive behaviors (Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2018).

In physical aggression, males consistently display more physical aggression (Raffee et al., 2021), in comparison, RA is often regarded as the female's expression of anger but the results are inconsistent so the current research was meant to figure out the gender difference in cultural and socioeconomic context (private schools/colleges being self-funded or public schools/colleges being government-run schools). For instance, in two recent meta-analytic reviews, some found in the literature by Schiff & Lee (2024) consistent with RA being more common among females. Conversely, other reviews examined (Dewi & Kyranides, 2021) slight gender differences in the rates of relational aggression. The present study represents the study variables on gender differences that could help in resolving the contradiction existing in the literature on relational aggression. At most cultural relevance given the account that, unlike Western culture, where girls display more relational aggression, Eastern culture, where boys are equally susceptible to relational aggression and even a tad higher in the gender comparison in adolescents' level. In the literature, several factors proposed that may influence the development of RA. The media is viewed as a leading source since magazines, reality shows, serials, movies portray characters and celebrities exerting RA (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2023; Martins & Weaver, 2019; Coyne et al., 2019).

Adolescent years are highly imperative for maintaining friendships, keeping appearances, seeking acceptance, and fitting in among their peers to explore the relational aggression (Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2019). Research has shown that the 15 to 18 age range of adolescents are either victims of relational aggression or aggressors (Lyu et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021). Development changes occur in peers at the time of adolescent years, and this justifies the relational aggression and its criticality (like time spent with friends), growing influence of friends' opinions, and recognition of social stereotypes became central issues of an adolescent's life (Aizpitarte et al., 2017). Current emphasis of research on youth's social development, in general, and in particular, relationally aggressive behavior in adolescents has witnessed a rise in interest in relational aggression (Zhou et al., 2022). Relationally aggressive behavior in adolescents, especially in girls to get social status, is also another proven motive (Crick et al., 1999). The

yearning to attain acceptance and high social standing among peers is the reason RA is operative in hurting other peers (Feijoo et al., 2021; Mukhtar & Mahmood, 2019). Relationally aggressive children experienced more jealousy and conflict in their friendships at school level with their best friends than their other peers (Grotmeter & Crick, 1996).

Relational aggression may also continue to be a common strategy for individuals later in life and can be associated with adult psychosocial problems that would impair their relationship with friends, colleagues, romantic relations, and parental rearing practices (Hafetz & Kyranides, 2024; Kamaluddin et al., 2024). Few researchers have recommended the efficacy of psychological and mental health practices like Cognitive-Behavioral therapy and help-seeking behaviors for youth who have experienced relational aggression and who are perpetuating onto others as well (Mukhtar et al., 2024; Mukhtar, 2024). This makes understanding of relational aggression all the more imperative for identification, intervention, and prevention purposes.

Limitations of the study

A few limitations have been reported in the current study that have contributed to expounding the critical role of relational aggression across gender in public and private academic institutes' students. Data collected for the study have generalization limitations as data were collected around one city's schools and colleges. This study could be replicated on the countryside institutes and a more culturally diverse population of other provinces for a more representative sample of the general population.

Future Suggestions

To contribute to preventive and reactive interventions to relational aggression at academic institutes and at home, further research must investigate the protective and risk factors alongside the role of support in the psychosocial adjustment of relationally aggressive adolescents. Future researchers could follow present research along with a similar framework to explore the gender difference from a rural adolescent's sample in determining the relationship of relational aggression in account of the country and city's comparison.

Conclusion

The present study explored the gender differences in students in a comparison of public and private schools and colleges. In collectivistic South Asian culture, it would help in executing techniques to promote the alliance of sources that establishes students' networking as tangible and operable actions. The current research findings have cultural, educational, and counseling implications.

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