



Family relationship quality, gender role orientation, and relational aggression in adolescence

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Recent research has identified a relational form of aggression in which harm is inflicted through the manipulation and destruction of peer relationships, as opposed to behaviors in which harm is inflicted through physical damage (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Examples of relational aggressive behavior include malicious gossip, social exclusion, and threats to withdraw friendship. Relational aggression has been shown to be associated with significant social and psychological maladjustment among both boys and girls. Research has begun to focus on identifying intraindividual, interpersonal and contextual processes that contribute to the development of relational aggression. Most of these studies have examined processes within the school or peer contexts. Relatively little is known about the contribution of the family to the development of relational aggression (except see Hart et al., 1998). The purpose of this study was to examine associations between relational aggression, parenting style, and other socialization processes within the family.

Another focus of this study was to explore the association between gender role orientation and engagement in relational aggression. Some theorists have explained gender differences in physical and other overt forms of aggression in terms of cultural norms and social roles (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Specifically, gender differences in aggression are presumed to reflect differences in normative expectations society holds for men and women. We hypothesized that children who hold more traditional gender role expectations will engage in higher levels of gender normative aggression. That is, boys who endorse a more traditional gender role should engage in higher levels of physical aggression, and girls who endorse a more traditional gender role should engage in higher levels of relational aggression.

The data for this study are part of a longitudinal study with a quasi-experimental de-sign currently conducted with 341 students (57% girls, 43 % boys, mean age = 14) in grade 8, 9 (time I) and 9,10 (time II) in Berlin, Germany. Students filled out questionnaires in class. The survey includes questions on students perception of family processes (e.g., family climate, parenting), gender role attitudes, and measures of relational aggression. Bivariate correlations and binary logistic regressions suggest that the more positive the family climate is perceived, the less relationally aggressive behavior boys and girls exhibit. A significant, inverse relationship was also found for measures of perceived parental control, support and maladjustment within the family context. Also, both boys and girls engaged in higher levels of relational aggression when they held more traditional gender role attitudes. Results will focus on the gender specificity of processes within the family context and their association with relational aggression during adolescence.