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RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AS A SOCIAL TOOL OF CHOICE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AS A SOCIAL TOOL OF
CHOICE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Donald Patrick Cox

June 2016

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the knowledge and use of relational aggression in a college population, reasons for use if occurring, and perceptions on the effectiveness of relational aggression to attain one's social goals.

The methods used in the study were a self-administered survey questionnaire using a Likert scale to measure the results. This survey had an opening statement that gave a brief definition of relational aggression. The survey was administered at a Riverside County community college; the sample size was 42 students. Data analysis provided a percentage-based tabulation of those results.

The key findings were that more than half the students surveyed claimed they had no prior knowledge of relational aggression, and the vast majority of the students surveyed also claimed that they did not use relational aggression. Of those surveyed that admitted to the use of relational aggression: more than a third indicated they had other reasons for using it that they did not elaborate on, and more than 14% of the participants indicated they believed relational aggression was an effective method to use to achieve their goals. Interestingly, far more than half the participants also indicated that they would not continue to use relational aggression, yet more than a third indicated they would continue to use relational aggression. Another key finding

was that more than half the participants – above 60% – indicated they believe that other students were using relational aggression.

The implications of the study are that relational aggression is used by students as a social tool of choice to achieve certain goals, and this is thoroughly in line with other research done on relational aggression in a college population. In addition, previous researchers determined that relational aggression in a college population was – at its simplest – a continuation of relational aggression behaviors carried on in high school. However, an additional unexpected implication growing out of the current study was that once the participants were made aware of what constituted relational aggression – through only the simple administration of a survey containing a brief definition – a significant amount of the participants claimed they would not use relational aggression in the future. Though additional research is certainly desirable – especially in the area of relational aggression use amongst college students – this researcher believes that the current study clearly indicates that relational aggression is being used in the college population and that simple psycho/social education intervention efforts could be effective in promoting a more prosocial stance towards the understanding and use of relational aggression as a social tool of choice amongst college students.

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESSMENT

Introduction

The focus of this research study is the use of relational aggression amongst college students, the prevalence of its use, and reasons why it is used. Because relational aggression is generally viewed under the umbrella concept of bullying, efforts to research it within the educational environment have typically only taken place in school settings where the student population consists of underage children, not young adults in a college campus setting. Relational aggression can be defined as any effort to negatively impact another person's relationships by attacking that person – either verbally or in writing – in order to damage the person's reputation and consequently other people's views of them. Relational aggression between students in a grade school setting has so frequently been a topic of research – particularly amongst educators and behavioral scientists – and the cause of this is not difficult to ascertain: the Safe Schools Act legislation that has reappeared almost continuously for the last decade has called for violence free schools, and many studies that have arisen from that have shown that recurring school-place violence is often the culmination of a pattern of peer victimization that is frequently characterized by bullying behaviors, Larkin (2007). However, studies of university students making use of what is commonly considered a bullying behavior more frequently observed in the K-12 grade school setting

are not as common, Delgado (2011). This research effort aims to add to that small body of research.

Research Focus and Questions

The focus of the research was to determine if college students make use of relational aggression as a tool of choice to affect something in an area of their social concern, and if they do so why, and do they perceive relational aggression as an effective tool of choice for obtaining the social goal(s) being pursued. This study involved a researcher interacting with members of a college student body using simple Likert type questionnaires, informed consent forms which also briefly explain the nature of the research – along with debriefing forms – as approved by the CSUSB Institutional Review Board. A Riverside county community college campus was the chosen research site to engage the appropriate research population that the study sought to examine. Because this study aimed to acquire a greater understanding into the use of relational aggression by college students in a college setting, any number of local college campuses might have been chosen; however the demographic makeup of a local community college – along with its accessibility to the researcher – appeared to make this a good choice. The campus chosen is a two-year – almost entirely less than four year – community college campus which was established in 1965 and has a campus student population of approximately 14,000; given this it provided ample amounts of people from which to draw a sample of research subjects. The

study sought to gain a greater understanding of the use relational aggression as a social tool of choice by college students.

Hypothesis or Research Questions

It was hypothesized that college students would use relational aggression as a social tool of choice in direct proportion to the degree they believe and/or perceive that it is effective in attaining their social goals. After obtaining a desirable volunteer sample of the student population through the use of an advertisement (poster board signs), the researcher provided the participants with an informed consent document (appendix B) that also contained a brief definition for relational aggression. The researcher then asked participants to read, initial and date the informed consent document at which point those were returned by the participants to the researcher and the researcher then provided the participants with an eight question, primarily five point Likert scale type instrument where each question is related to some aspect of relational aggression and has a range of five possible answers ranging from definitely no to definitely yes categories with undecided in the middle and probably yes or no categories on either side of the undecided category (example attached, appendix A). The voluntary participants completed the questionnaires, returned them to the researcher, and then were offered a debriefing document. The questionnaire example is available for review in appendix A.

Paradigm and Rationale for Chosen Paradigm

A Positivist approach was followed while conducting this research project. Students were interviewed in order to determine if they used relational aggression, why they do so, if they thought it was effective, and if they believed other students were using it. In addition, demographic information was solicited as well. A quantitative data-gathering approach using a correlational design was followed in order to provide a simple format for use by the students participating in the study to answer the questions as readily as possible; this was aimed to facilitate a more user-friendly interface for the questionnaire thereby hopefully opening the way for better insights not only into the prevalence of the use of relational aggression, but also why the students choose to use it.

The Positivist theoretical orientation is well suited for the research theoretical perspective because that orientation uses a data collection approach that is typically experimental or correlational and design (Morris, 2006). The positivist approach assumes a worldview that posits an objective reality that follows reliable and unchangeable principles and mechanisms (simple cause and effect); because the research hypothesis is that students choose a particular behavior in the belief that it is effective the positivist approach appears most suited as a research paradigm to use as a lens through which to view a research effort along with the hypothesis, experimental design, instruments used in that, etc. The research questionnaire

instrument was focused upon gaining an understanding of not only the prevalence of student use of relational aggression; it also aimed to provide some insight as to why students choose to use relational aggression. This research effort could provide a basis for more detailed future inquiries into the prevalence of relational aggression amongst college students and the reasons that those students may resort to using it as a chosen behavior.

Literature Review

Though there have been a considerable amount of research inquiries into relational aggression in grade school age children and to a much lesser degree within adult workplaces: comparatively very little research literature has been developed in the area of relational aggression amongst college students. Because this area of inquiry has not been a topic of a great deal of research the literature review had to rely in part upon other research efforts used in studying relational aggression amongst adolescents. The studies referred to found relational aggression to be a pervasive issue amongst adolescent children and even younger school-age children as young as preschool age, (Young, Nelson, & Hottle, 2010).

It can be safely argued that college campuses are full of adolescent students; therefore, the use of such research literature to gain a better understanding of the best research focus is relevant. It appears there have been precious few studies of relational aggression in a college setting and those have been included in this research literature. One of the best examples

– a PhD dissertation for the New York graduate school of educational psychology, Delgado (2011) – makes the very artless and simple observation that most of the research efforts in the area of bullying and/or relational aggression have been made either in the K-12 school setting or within the workplace social environment: and the interim experience of moving out of high school through college before one enters their career path has been almost completely overlooked as an area for research: as if, by leaving grade school, adolescent people would suddenly no longer engage in grade school like behaviors – behaviors acquired over several years of social interaction – when they move into the college setting. The same research author points out that there is a research gap between relational aggression in grade school and relational aggression in the workplace; and that gap consists of the college population, Delgado (2011). This same author also points out that as late as 2011 there continued to be disagreement amongst researchers regarding the very term relational aggression, Delgado (2011). Other literature reviewed was a concept analysis of relational aggression Gomes (2007) which also supported the prevailing perception that females engaged in relational aggression at a higher rate than males, research on cyber bullying in a university population, Faucher, Jackson, and Cassidy (2014), literature on relational aggression assessment tools published by the Center for Disease Control, Hamburger, Basile, and Vivolo (2011), literature on prevention programs, Crawford and Gross (2014), psychopathology and its relation to

relational aggression research efforts, Holdship (2012), and literature on the effects of relational aggression amongst adolescent females, McBride (2011). Summarizing the literature review: relational aggression is used by all kinds of people; both males and females, young students and older ones, and it is used amongst adults within workplaces. Statistics indicate that more females than males use relational aggression as a social tool of choice – in some cases at an approximate rate of 2 to 1.5 ratio, Delgado (2011). Relational aggression has gained national attention as a workplace problem that resulted in laws aimed at protecting the workplace environment, and research indicates that relational aggression is generally used to bring about some desirable social outcome – whether it is aimed at increasing one’s own popularity or trying to decrease someone else’s. The literature review appears to support the perspective that relational aggression permeates the social landscape, and that it is negative. In summary: currently the bulk of the literature strongly appears to suggest that relational aggression is a problem that begins as soon as children are able to communicate with each other and continues through every developmental milestone of life up to and including adulthood; because of that relational aggression certainly bears the social work researcher’s consideration.

Theoretical Orientation

The theoretical orientation of the study will be Social Learning theory; this theory best affords a framework from which to understand the use of

relational aggression as a tool of choice to effect a desirable social goal.

Social learning theory was developed by Albert Bandura during the latter half of the 20 century as a way of explaining why people choose certain behaviors; the basic theory is that all behavior is learned behavior – learned by observing others. Because Social Learning theory proposes that all of our chosen behaviors in the social realm are ones that we have learned from our observations and interactions with others that theory will be the most useful organizing principle in the research effort to gain insight into college student choices of using relational aggression as a social tool.

Potential Contribution of Study to Micro and/or Macro Social Work Practice

One of the most important concepts recurring throughout the literature review was that relational aggression resulted in harm to others, in fact the harm appeared to be pervasive; those that chose to make use of relational aggression behaviors suffered reduced self-esteem, the targets of the relational aggression were often deeply impacted in their relationships, and even bystanders observing these events were not left untouched by them, Young, Nelson, and Hottle (2010). Understanding relational aggression as a social phenomenon – one that appears to be pervasive in American society – is an important area of inquiry that could lead to better prevention methodologies for those seeking to address it from a proactive point of view, as well as for providing a better understanding on the development of

intervention services – such as counseling for people who have felt the negative sting of this culturally pervasive hurtful behavior. Because of this, it certainly has significance for current and future social workers in the provision of services to those clientele that they would come in contact with who have been involved in the damaging fallout from relational aggression situations.

Summary

We considered the focus of this research effort: a better understanding of the use of relational aggression in a college population. A positivist paradigm approach was used throughout the research effort. The literature review supports that this is a worthwhile area of research inquiry, that it has not been researched nearly as much at the college level as it has within grade school and workplace settings, that relational aggression amongst college students does take place, it is harmful to those involved, and it appears to be a quickly learned social phenomenon that people from all walks of life might use to bring about a desirable social goal. Therefore, a better understanding of it could lead to more effective efforts to both prevent it and intervene in order to assist those that have experienced harm from being exposed to it.

CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

In this section we will cover our chosen research topic, the target population of the study, the selected research site, our current engagement strategies, and the measures we have taken in preparing ourselves for this study. In addition, some time will be spent considering the demographic makeup of the chosen research site and addressing any diversity issues anticipated that might arise because of those. After that, there is a review of possible ethical issues and suggested methods of protecting the study from any negative impact those could bring if not anticipated. Finally, this section will close with a brief consideration of the possible political issues that have occurred to this researcher.

Research Site

The research goal was to study relational aggression amongst a college population. Relational aggression is a social behavior that is marked by derogatory communication patterns aimed at negatively affecting the social standing of others so targeted by those negative communications. There have been very few published studies of relational aggression amongst a college population and this study aims to add to those. This study involved a researcher interacting with members of a college student body, using simple

questionnaires (example attached, appendix A), informed consent forms (example attached, appendix B), and debriefing forms (example attached, appendix C) as approved by the CSUSB institutional review board. The researcher used a Riverside County community college campus to engage the research population that the study sought to examine. Because this study aimed to acquire a greater understanding into the use of relational aggression by college students in a college setting, any number of local college campuses might have been chosen; however the demographic makeup of this particularly community college appeared to make this a good choice. This college is a two-year – almost entirely less than four year – community college campus, which was established in 1965, and has a campus student population of approximately 14,000; this provided ample amounts of people from which to draw a sample of research subjects. The demographic makeup of the college will be considered under the diversity issues heading.

Engagement Strategies

Because of the nature of the study – student social behavior – the researcher contacted the Dean of student affairs as a starting place for discussing the research proposal and its use of the campus for data-gathering purposes. This researcher successfully went through an institutional review board under the oversight of both the University and community college administrators in order to gain access to the college campus. Student participation was sought by setting up a table with a large sign indicating what

the research was about and requesting participation. This researcher provided the participants with informed consent documents (example attached, appendix B) that also contained a brief definition of relational aggression, the researcher then asked the participants to read, initial and date the informed consent document at which point those were returned by the participants to the researcher and the researcher then provided the participants with an eight question, five point Likert scale type instrument where each question is related to some aspect of relational aggression and has a range of five possible answers ranging from definitely no to definitely yes categories with undecided in the middle and probably yes or no categories on either side of the undecided category (example attached, appendix A). The questionnaire also contained three questions related to demographics; gender, age, and ethnicity. After initialing and dating the informed consent form the voluntary participants completed the questionnaires, and then returned those to the researcher, and a debriefing form was then offered to the student. Any relevant questions the students had before or after completing their participation were answered by the researcher. The entire interactive process with the individual students participating in the research effort generally took no more than 5 to 10 minutes per student volunteer.

Self-Preparation

In preparation for this research effort the researcher made use of available research literature that had similar participant populations as their

sampling source for studying relational aggression; these resources were thoroughly reviewed in order to develop the best possible questionnaire instrument(s) to use in order to gain the most relevant information from which to provide data for analysis. A detailed investigation of the research site was undertaken by the researcher in order to become thoroughly familiar with the policies, procedures, necessary permissions/applications to be applied for and granted; and the overall cooperation of campus personnel was pursued and established prior to entering the campus for the research effort. The proposed research project was submitted to the CSUSB School of Social Work institutional review committee for evaluation and the necessary approval or necessary corrections. In order to develop an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation this student researcher continued to interact with campus research site authorities to be certain of any necessary information required for pursuing such an approved study. The continual review of all campus policies that might be relevant to the research effort on the campus was also undertaken as deemed necessary.

Diversity Issues

At the selected research site the majority of the campus student body is made up of almost 2/3 Females (at 62%) versus 38% for the males; the majority of the students there are under 25 years old. Current student ethnicity of that community college campus are generally reflective of the demographics of many other California community colleges; student ethnic numbers reported

from the 2007/2008 school year indicate that students consisted of approximately 29% Hispanic, 45% white, 7% Asian, 7% African-American, less than 1% Native American, and slightly more than 1% Pacific Islander – with the category of unknown/other coming in at 9%. With the exception of the white and Asian populations – where Asians student population was roughly half of the amount representative of other California community colleges and white students were represented at approximately 10% higher than those numbers for most other community colleges in California – the other student ethnic categories reported on were almost identical. Because there does not appear to be anything substantially out of the ordinary regarding the ethnic makeup of the student population, this researcher sees no pressing ethnic diversity issues that might arise. The lack of current published studies on relational aggression in a college population have not supported this researcher's ability to clearly ascertain any possible ethnic issues that are in any way either unique to and/or in any way complicated by the ethnic identity of the students engaging in relational aggression. The ratio of female to male students is also typical of most other California community colleges – roughly 3 to 2 – but no possible concerns that could arise in the course of the research due to this were noted. Additionally, the literature review does contain published research which clearly maintains that reliable studies have indicated that relational aggression occurs more often amongst females than males; however that was not findings from a study of relational aggression in a

college population, rather it was studies of the K – 12 school system and was part of the literature review referenced in one of the few studies of relational aggression in a college population (Delgado, 2011). Nevertheless, this researcher recognizes that because of the 3 to 2 correlation of females to males on this particular campus some statistical considerations could become necessary in analyzing the data due to this factor; however the data didn't appear to support that. Because relational aggression is typically a communication behavior – and all students communicate – the only other area that might be of concern would be while encountering deaf and/or hard of hearing students as I conducted the research. This researcher discussed this issue with the then research advisory/supervisory personnel (Dr. Teresa Morris) in order to determine whether or not I should focus my research efforts only on those students who are able to communicate verbally without experiencing impairment that might hamper the research data-gathering effort; it was determined that it would not be an issue.

Ethical Issues

Because relational aggression can be such an emotional topic for some people, an informed consent document was developed that made clear that if at any time in the course of the research data gathering efforts the participants became uncomfortable they were free to terminate the interview at that point. All this was communicated to the participants through the informed consent form and by the researcher in a calm, quiet, and friendly, conversational style.

Political Issues

Because this research effort is not concerned with any specific political affiliation and/or concepts the researcher saw no need to make any adjustments to the study for these reasons.

The Role of Technology in Engagement

It is obvious that we currently live in an age in which there is almost wall-to-wall technology on every college campus. From smart phones to tablets to laptops; most students are usually well equipped with some form of electronic technology. This research effort relied upon simple forms and a conversational style of communicating the details of the research effort along with a simple questionnaire, which followed the administration of informed consent documents. Because the goal was to have the student participants openly answer the questions about their experiences of relational aggression, the researcher made every effort to put the students at ease. In practice it was determined that cooperation might better be obtained by the researcher not having anything of a technology device in hand that could create an atmosphere which would possibly cause the students to be concerned that their words and/or images were being recorded. Given that the researcher did not make use of technology during the engagement phase.

Summary

In this section we have looked at the research topic and chosen site, strategies for engaging the people at the site, and self-preparation efforts that

the researcher perceived would be necessary as the study moves forward. Diversity issues have been considered, plans to address those issues in a constructive way were in place. The obvious ethical issues were covered along with the steps necessary to preserve the ethical character of this research effort. It was concluded that political issues would not be a concern, however the role of technology – in this case not making use of it – was deemed crucial in maintaining an atmosphere of privacy and trust between the researcher and participants.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

This research endeavor was pursued at a Riverside County public higher education facility that provides an undergraduate curriculum – typically two-year degrees and certificates – to a wide demographic makeup of student population. The research participants were students attending that college campus who volunteered to take part in the research. This researcher sought to maximize the sample size by going onto the campus multiple days to invite student participation; appropriate introductory materials were provided, informed consent was obtained, appropriate questionnaires were used to gather data, any questions the students had were answered by the researcher, debriefing forms were offered after the data gathering, and the data was gathered and placed in a secure place for safe keeping until it was entered into an SPSS data file. Data analysis was completed at a later date.

Research Site

Because this research effort is aimed at studying relational aggression amongst college students clearly one of the best places to do that is a college campus. In line with this the researcher chose Mt. San Jacinto Community College (MSJCC) as the research site; because this researcher was familiar with the campus geography – along with campus policy and procedure – this

appeared to be the best research site to choose. In addition, because the researcher didn't attend classes on campus – nor was acquainted with anyone who did – the researcher believed it further facilitated an atmosphere of privacy and confidentiality because the researcher and student participants were very unlikely to know each other to any degree. In addition, this research site had indications of being an excellent choice because of the favorably large student population, also because the student demographics of this particular campus lined up very well with the student demographics of other California community colleges.

Study Participants

The study participants were a sample of the student body gathered from a wide population representing the overall campus demographics. Because of this no effort was made to select one group of students over another (for example, the researcher did not focus upon seeking participation from only behavioral and/or social science students as is commonly the practice in undergrad research endeavors on college campuses). The researcher wanted to interview as many different students as possible in order to have every opportunity to eliminate problematic sampling practices and downgrading of gathered data. The selected site was considered an appropriate representative example of most California community colleges in the gender, age, and ethnic makeup of the approximately several thousand students it serves in providing two-year and transfer to four-year college

curriculum in the majority of Liberal arts and biological, physical, social and behavioral sciences.

Selection of Participants

The researcher sought a random sampling of participants through the posting of a sign identifying the nature of the study and requesting participation. The only criteria for being a participant in the study was current enrollment at the community college and a willingness to participate and maintain confidentiality so as not to impact other students who might also be participating in the study. The sample aimed at was at least 50 student participants with an additional goal of approximately ½ male and one half female; however, there was no usable procedure available for pursuing either that or an ethnic balance in the sample population.

Data Gathering

The researcher used the survey questionnaire instrument attached in appendix A for the data-gathering procedure.

Phases of Data Collection

After providing an informed consent document for the participants to read, initial and date, the researcher provided the participants with the survey questionnaire, simple marks with a pen were used to answer it quickly, it was collected again by the researcher, and the students were offered debriefing forms and thanked for their participation. The researcher also had additional

copies of the informed consent document and offered those to students if they wanted a copy of their own, only two students requested an additional copy of the informed consent document. No students were interested in receiving any of the available debriefing documents, nor did they express any interest and/or concern with the research procedure.

After obtaining a desirable volunteer sample of the student population through the use of setting up a table in the student free speech area together with a large sign in front of the table indicating the type of research and requesting participation, the researcher provided the participants with informed consent documents (example attached in appendix B) that also contained a brief definition for relational aggression. The researcher then asked the participants to read, initial and date the informed consent document at which point those were returned by the participants to the researcher and the researcher then provided the participants with an eight question, five point Likert scale type instrument where each question is related to some aspect of relational aggression and has a range of five possible answers ranging from definitely no to definitely yes categories with undecided in the middle and probably yes or no categories on either side of the undecided category (example attached, appendix A). The questionnaire also contained three demographic information-seeking questions – gender, age, and ethnicity – which followed the eight question section on relational aggression. The voluntary participants completed the questionnaires, returned them to the

researcher, were then offered a debriefing statement form, and any questions they had were answered by the researcher. A brief exit discussion took place between the researcher and the participants; the entire interactive process with the students participating in the research effort never took more than 5 to 10 minutes per student survey completed, in most instances it was less.

Data Collection

The survey questionnaires using the five point Likert scale would be scored with appropriate numerical values corresponding to the selected possible responses, this would simplify data collection and analysis.

Summary

In this section, we reviewed the selection of the research site, characteristics of that site, the characteristics of the research participants, and the methodology considered for the selection of those participants. We also considered the important aspects of data-gathering for this particular research, what would be involved with that, what would be done with the data after collection, and how the data would be recorded for statistical analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION

Introduction

In this chapter we will cover the data results, beginning with ethnicity, gender, and then age. From there we will review actual responses to the relational aggression questionnaire, followed by our selected methodology for data analysis, the interpretation of that data, and implications for micro practice.

Data Analysis

There was a total of 42 participants in the study. Of those participants, more than 40% were white, approximately 31% were Latino-American, and more than 11% were African-American, about 2.5% were Asian/Pacific Islander – with an equal amount of Native American. Just over 7% identified themselves as of other ethnicity group. More than half – about 60% – of the participants were male; the rest of the participants were female. Almost all of the participants were under 30 years of age, with the highest percentile – approximately 27% – identifying themselves as 20 years of age. About 17% identified themselves as 19 years of age, followed by roughly 12% identifying themselves as twenty. The next largest represented age group were the 23-year-olds, followed by the 22-year-old; together this group was about 16% of the responding participants. From there 25 and 26-year-old participants were

tied – at 2.4% – with the noticeable uptick for the 27-year-old participants. From there all participants' ages which were from 31 to 60 years of age had exactly the same participation rate of almost 2 ½%.

Table 1 presents the results of the eight questions on relational aggression items. As can be seen in Table 1, more than one half of the participants indicated no prior knowledge of what relational aggression was compared to approximately one third that claimed – to some degree – knowing what relational aggression was.

Table 1. Participants' Responses on Relational Aggression Item

	Definitely Not	Probably Not	Undecided	Probably Yes	Definitely Yes
Prior knowledge of relational aggression.	38.1%	16.7%	9.5%	21.4%	14.3%
Your personal engagement in relational aggression.	26.2%	71.4%		2.4%	
Having a goal in mind when engaging in relational aggression.	8.3%	25%	16.7%	41.7%	8.3%
Goals in mind	Get back at someone	Make myself appear popular	Undecided	Other	
Relational aggression goals.	36.4%	9.1%	18.2%	36.3%	
Is relational aggression effective?	28.6%	35.7%	21.4%	7.1%	7.1%
How effective is relational aggression?	28.6%	21.4%	21.4%	21.4%	7.1%
Will you continue to use relational aggression?	35.7%	21.4%	7.1%	14.3%	21.4%
Do you believe that other students make use of relational aggression?		12.2%	24.4%	48.8%	14.6%

More than one fourth – about 26% – claim to definitely not ever engage in relational aggression, followed by two thirds that claimed that they had probably not engaged in it; less than 3% admitted to engaging it. Yet of those that did admit to engaging in relational aggression exactly half – 50% – agreed to have some kind of a goal in mind; with one third indicating no specific goal and almost 17% undecided. 45.5% indicated no relational aggression goals, 18.2% were undecided, and little more than one third (36.3%) claiming another unspecified relational aggression goal. Of the participants, more than a fourth (28.6%) claimed that relational aggression was definitely not effective in attaining their goals, more than a third – 35.7% – indicated that it was probably not effective, more than a fifth (21.4%) were undecided; whereas approximately 7% in responding in either category of probably yes/definitely yes – thereby indicating that at least 14% believed relational aggression was effective in reaching their goals. When asked how effective relational aggression was in attaining the goals aimed at, those participants responded similarly in claiming that it was definitely not effective, or they were undecided; but from there many of the participants expressed that it was to some degree effective. When the participants were asked if they planned to continue to use relational aggression to attain their goals, more than a third (35.7%) claimed definitely not, followed by more than a fifth (21.4%) claiming they would probably not. Only 7.1% were undecided, followed by 35% indicating that they would be willing to use relational aggression in the future. When participants

were asked of their beliefs about others using relational aggression: more than 63% indicated they believe that other students used relational aggression and only 12.2% indicated probably not. In short, more than a third – 35.3% – of students surveyed indicated they would continue to use relational aggression, and of those surveyed more than 14% believe it is effective.

Data Interpretation

The study found the sampled students' lack of exposure to the concepts of relational aggression, as well as the claimed infrequent use of relational aggression, were widely varying: 35.7% versus 2.4%. The study also indicated that some of the sampled students perceived that relational aggression was an ineffective way to attain their goals and they did not plan to use relational aggression in the future (14.1%).

The data clearly indicates that the many of the college students surveyed were not that aware of what relational aggression was prior to engaging in the survey; in fact during the course of the survey administration – which drew participation by the placement of a very large sign with the words relational aggression on it – almost every student that approached the research engagement table, whether they took part in the survey or not, asked what relational aggression was: the surveys demonstrate that overwhelmingly the students taking part in the research did not know what relational aggression was. However, once the students did learn what relational aggression was, and had a working definition of it in hand, some of them

admitted to using it. The majority of students did not see relational aggression as an effective way of attaining their goals, and once they knew what it was many of them indicated they would not use it in the future. Nevertheless more than a third of those responding indicated they would continue using relational aggression. In chapter one of this paper it was hypothesized that students would continue using relational aggression to the degree that they believed it was effective; the data appears to support this hypothesis. This is also an indication that relational aggression is a learned behavior, acquired within a social context, used quite often without those using it even realizing that it is being used or how harmful it is; and the research data clearly implies that for the most part it appears to be used by the students in reaction to perceptions that relational aggression is being used by most other students. Social Learning theory posits that behaviors are learned by learners observing those behaviors modeled by others, then learners mirroring those behaviors within the perceived social setting; this researcher believes the research data demonstrates that. However just as clearly, there does not appear to be a significant number of students who believe that it is an effective way of attaining their goals, and once they have a grasp of what relational aggression truly is, and its ineffectiveness in attaining their goals, they might be ready to set relational aggression aside as a social tool of choice.

Implications of Findings for Micro and/or Macro Practice

The research results are very encouraging from a social work micro perspective: a population that is engaging in a learned social behavior that is clearly harmful to both themselves and others, who quickly decide that they will not use it in the future once they are made aware of what it is and have taken time to reflect upon their use of it and its ineffectiveness in attaining their goals, clearly demonstrates that education about relational aggression could in itself be one of the most effective interventions in seeking to mitigate its pervasiveness and harmfulness. The implications are that further research should be undertaken to determine just how effective an education intervention would be in a college population, and perhaps even what the most effective education tool is. In this case the administration of a simple two-page survey made enough of an impression upon the research participants that many of them concluded that relational aggression was not an effective way of attaining their goals and they chose not to use relational aggression in the future. Clearly this is a significant unintended outcome of the research endeavor and bears further inquiry and consideration.

Summary

In the previous section we covered the data results, data analysis, significant data findings, the interpretation of that data, and its implication for micro practice. The conclusion was that the data provided indications that the majority of those completing the surveys did not know what relational

aggression was, that there was a use of relational aggression by students within a college population, and that those choosing to use relational aggression did not always believe it was an effective way of attaining their goals. It was also determined that the data indicated that upon reflection, those college students that had decided to use relational aggression were not satisfied with the outcome; and in many cases this may have led them to a decision not to want to use it in the future. The implication for micro practice is that these are excellent indications that the college population could be receptive to an appropriately introduced psycho/social education intervention aimed at informing that population about the realities of relational aggression, its negative effects on both those that use it, the targets, and even the bystanders, and the findings from any other studies which indicate that the majority of college students do not find relational aggression to be an effective way of attaining their goals.

CHAPTER FIVE

TERMINATION AND FOLLOW UP

Introduction

In this final section we will consider how the research was terminated, the decision not to do any follow-up, and the reasons the researcher chose to end the research project this way. We will also look at a brief overview considering the value of the study and its obvious impact upon the research participants. Finally, we will present plans for disseminating this study and its findings for consideration by other researchers, social workers, and academic institutions.

Termination of Study

As previously indicated, participants in the study were assured of confidentiality, provided with ample explanations of the research as well as an informed consent document, offered a debriefing form, and given an opportunity to either end the participation at will or engage the researcher and research questions with any questions of their own that could be discussed with the researcher if it was determined to be appropriate. After completing the surveys, debriefing forms were offered to the participants and a brief exit discussion took place between the researcher and the participants as an appropriate way to end their participation; during that time they were thanked for participating and asked if they had any further questions or concerns: in all

cases the students expressed no concerns. Along the entire research project every effort was made to consider the emotional well-being of both the researcher and participants, at no time did any participating student express any concerns or reservations about participating in the study. From the researcher's perspective this indicates that the study was in no way disturbing to any student participating, and because of that a simple brief exit discussion was all that was deemed necessary for appropriate termination. Based on the researcher's interpretation of the data, the participating students learned about a harmful method of damaging other people's relationships through negative communications – something that the data indicates the majority of them were either not aware of nor reflective about – and many of them concluded that they would not use relational aggression in the future and that they did not believe that relational aggression was an effective tool to accomplish their goals. From the researcher's perspective that is an unintended beneficial outcome of this research effort that was not foreseen and which clearly establishes a basis for the researcher's position as communicated in the section on implications for practice.

Follow Up

Because this is not a longitudinal study, no follow-up with the research participants was deemed necessary. The nature of the research survey administration and collection itself was such that no apparent difficulties arose in the experience of the research participants taking part in the research

survey. There appeared to be no ethical demands to do any form of follow-up as there was no further data to collect, no risk to assess, and no apparent negative outcomes to mitigate. Throughout the research process the researcher noted that all of the students that willingly took part did not express any concerns about any aftereffects when a brief exit discussion took place between the researcher and the participants, and no students wanted a debriefing form. Because of all these factors no follow-up was deemed to be necessary, nor did any ethical standard require a follow-up procedure.

Communicating Findings to Study Site and Study Participants

Enough participation in the research effort took place at the research survey site, which was a Riverside County community college, to provide a suitable amount of responses for statistical analysis. Because of the significance of the research findings the researcher believed that it would be worthwhile to consider offering to provide the behavioral science division of that community college with copies of the completed and accepted thesis. Efforts will be made to do that once the thesis has been accepted for the requirements of the awarding of the Master of Social Work credential. The researcher believes it should be up to the administration of the community college to determine whether or not they will release this thesis to individual students; because the study was entirely confidential – with no records of any student identities – it would be impossible to actually provide this thesis to any of the individual participants unless they came forward on their own and

identified themselves as such. In addition, the researchers believes that because of the sensitive nature of the subject: the way that the findings are communicated must be handled in such a way that they are not viewed as simply an academic expression of highly educated people engaging in a sophisticated form of relational aggression themselves. Because of that the researcher will work with University advisors before making any efforts to reach out to the community college administration with copies of this thesis.

Ongoing Relationship with Study Participants

As is clear from the previous sections, there is no ongoing relationship with the study participants: their identity remains forever confidential because no useful identifying information – beyond gender, age, and ethnicity – was collected during the course of the research effort. As also indicated in the previous sections: if it is determined that this thesis will be offered to the community college administration for dissemination to their faculty, staff, or student body, that dissemination will be under the authority of that community college and not the researcher.

Dissemination Plan

Upon successful completion of the MSW program, it is the researcher's intention to seek to have this thesis project reviewed by the appropriate peers, published, and made available to any and all appropriate educational databases.

Summary

In this final section the researcher concluded this thesis by outlining the termination and follow-up process which followed once the gathering of data was completed. Justification for the termination and follow-up decisions was offered, possible communication of the findings to the study site and participants through offering the accepted thesis to the community college administration upon completion of the MSW program was discussed, and the researcher's determination to not pursue any ongoing relationship with the study participants was also discussed and explained. In addition, the dissemination plan for publishing the completed and accepted master's thesis as a peer-reviewed article was also considered and explained.

APPENDIX A
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Survey Instrument

Please complete the following survey choosing only one answer to each question, please use either an X or a checkmark to make your selection; if you cannot decide then please choose undecided.

This survey is designed to learn more about relational aggression in college students. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers will remain anonymous. Please circle the answer what is right for you. After you complete the survey please return it back to the researcher.

Definition of Relational Aggression: any effort to negatively impact another person's relationships by attacking that person – either verbally or in writing – in order to damage the person's reputation and consequently other people's views of them.

1. Do you know what relational aggression is?

1. Have you heard about "relational aggression"?

Definitely Not___ Probably Not___ Undecided___ Probably Yes___ Definitely Yes___

2. Knowing what relational aggression is, Have you ever engaged in it?

Yes (If Yes, go to Question 3) No (If No, skip to Question 8)

3. When you do engage in relational aggression do you have a goal in mind?

Definitely Not___ Probably Not___ Undecided___ Probably Yes___ Definitely Yes___

4. Of the following suggested goals, which one do you feel comes closest to the goal you aim at when using relational aggression? Please choose only one answer.

1. Get back at someone by harming their reputation_____
2. Trying to make myself appear more popular to my peers by undercutting the perceived popularity of others_____
3. I'm undecided_____
3. Other (please specify) _____

5. Do you believe that relational aggression is effective for attaining your goals?

Definitely Not___ Probably Not___ Undecided___ Probably Yes___ Definitely Yes___

6. How effective do you believe relational aggression is in attaining the goals you aim at when used?

Definitely Not Effective___ Probably Not Effective ___ Undecided___ Probably Effective ___ Definitely Effective ___

7. Do you plan to continue to use relational aggression to attain your goals?

Definitely Not___ Probably Not___ Undecided___ Probably Yes___ Definitely Yes___

8. Do you believe that most other students use relational aggression?

Definitely Not___ Probably Not___ Undecided___ Probably Yes___ Definitely Yes___

Background

9. What is your gender? 1. Male 2. Female

10. How old are you? _____ years 11. What is your ethnicity?

1. White American
2. African American
3. Latino American
4. Asian/Pacific Islander
5. Native American
6. Other: Specify _____

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate the use of relational aggression amongst college students. Relational aggression can best be described as a social behavior that is marked by negative communication patterns aimed at negatively impacting the social standing of others so targeted by those negative communications. The communication method used when engaging in relational aggression can either be spoken or published through some other medium (such as a text, website post, email, other written communication, etc.). Its essence is an attack on a person's relationships through undermining the person's reputation.

This study is being conducted by Donald Patrick Cox under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, professor of social work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: the purpose of this research is to examine to what degree relational aggression is a chosen behavior amongst college students.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked questions regarding relational aggression and some demographic questions.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may skip or not answer any questions and can freely withdraw from participation at any time.

ANONYMOTY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: the time it takes to read and agree to the informed consent and complete and return the survey should be no longer than 10 to 15 minutes duration.

RISKS: since this is an entirely voluntary research effort that will maintain anonymity of the research participants this researcher foresees absolutely no risks to the participants whatsoever.

909.537.5501 · 909.537.7029

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The California State University · Bakersfield · Channel Islands · Chico · Dominguez Hills · East Bay · Fresno · Fullerton · Humboldt · Long Beach · Los Angeles
Maritime Academy · Monterey Bay · Northridge · Pomona · Sacramento · San Bernardino · San Diego · San Francisco · San Jose · San Luis Obispo · San Marcos · Sonoma · Stanislaus



College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, the study of relational aggression could have far-reaching implications for better understanding of the social dynamics within a college setting.

CONTACT: any questions about the research and/or research subjects' rights should be directed towards Dr. Janet Chang, School of Social Work, jchang@csusb.edu ; (909) 537-5184.

RESULTS: results from this study may be obtained by contacting the California State University, San Bernardino School of Social Work. Phone: (909) 537-5501. Email: socialwork@csusb.edu .

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT:

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study. I signify so by initialing and dating this form below.

Initials: _____ Date: _____

California State University, San Bernardino
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee
APPROVED 2/12/16 VOID AFTER 6/30/16
IRB# 2015-005 CHAIR [Signature]

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APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Research Debriefing Statement

The research survey you have just completed was designed to investigate relational aggression amongst college students. In this study we hypothesized relational aggression would be a chosen behavior for college students if they felt it was effective in attaining the desired goal while choosing that behavior; the questionnaire you completed was designed with the goal of obtaining useful information in order to examine that hypothesis.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of the questionnaire with other students. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Donald Patrick Cox or Dr. Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Dr. Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184 at the end of Spring Quarter of 2016.

APPENDIX D
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee

Researcher(s) D. Paul [unclear]
Proposal Title Relationships among [unclear]
college students
SW1568

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

Proposal is:

- approved
- to be resubmitted with revisions listed below
- to be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

- faculty signature missing
- missing informed consent debriefing statement
- revisions needed in informed consent debriefing
- data collection instruments missing
- agency approval letter missing
- CITI missing
- revisions in design needed (specified below)

[Signature] _____ 5/24/15
Committee Chair Signature Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

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