Correlates of Relational Aggression in Young Adults

Relational aggression refers to a range of behaviours intended to inflict emotional distress upon another person. These behaviours can include spreading untrue rumours about a person, talking behind someone’s back, exclusion from group activities, and other behaviours in which social relationships are used as a means of harm. These behaviours, sometimes referred to as indirect, covert, social or psychological aggression, have been studied quite extensively in the context of childhood bullying. In children and adolescents, relational aggression is associated with other aggression (such as physical bullying), difficulties with emotion regulation, and peer problems generally. Children and adolescents who are relationally aggressive are also often themselves victims of relational aggression. Some research suggests that girls are more likely than boys to use and experience relational aggression, but this is not a consistent finding.

Relational aggression during young adulthood has received less research attention. However, at this critical developmental transition, young people experience social relationships in many new settings, including in the workplace and with romantic partners. It is important to understand the risk and protective factors for relational aggression during young adulthood, in order to inform prevention efforts. Negotiating workplace relationships is an important developmental task for young adults, with the potential for victimisation and conflict, which may increase opportunities for relational aggression. Male gender and heavy drinking tend to be associated with physical violence in young adults, but this has not been explored for relational aggression. Finally, young adults living out of home may engage in more relational aggression.

Therefore, the present study examines how relational aggression in a sample of Australian young adults is related to workplace stress, alcohol consumption, living situation, and gender.

The following research questions are addressed:

1. To what extent do young adults report relational aggression, and how does this vary by gender and living situation?
2. After controlling for drinking frequency, gender, and living situation, do young adults experiencing more workplace stress also tend to report more relational aggression?

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Participants were members of a study examining violence and victimisation in the ACT. The young people in the study had previously been involved in a study during primary school. Of the 181 participants, 101 (55.8%) were female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years, with an average age of 20.

Participants completed a mail-back survey between December 2005 and March 2006. The study received ethics approval from the [university ethics committee] and participants provided written informed consent.

**Measures**

***Relational Aggression***

Relational aggression was measured with 18 items tapping aggressive behaviours that were not physically violent. Participants were asked how often in the past 12 months they had engaged in each behaviour, responding never (1), once or twice (2), sometimes (3), about once a week (4) and several times a week (5). Items were: making comments about someone’s private life, bullying someone, leaving someone out of things, bitching about someone, sending an abusive text message, blaming someone for something they didn’t do, talking down to someone, betraying a confidence, spreading untrue rumours, making someone look stupid, insulting someone, ignoring someone, talking behind someone’s back, giving someone dirty looks, yelling or swearing at someone, walking over someone’s feelings, giving threatening looks, making jokes about someone. Items were averaged to form a scale ranging from 1 to 5, where higher values represented more relational aggression. Internal consistency was excellent (Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

***Drinking Frequency***

Drinking frequency was assessed with the question ‘In the last 12 months, how often did you have an alcoholic drink of any kind?’ with response options every day (6), 5-6 days a week (5), 3-4 days a week (4), 1-2 days a week (3), 2-3 days a month (2), about 1 day a month (1) and less often (0).

***Workplace Stress***

Workplace stress was assessed with 12 statements tapping perceptions of victimisation, isolation, and lack of control over working conditions. Participants were asked to indicate how true each statement was for them at the moment, on a scale from ‘Definitely true’ (1) to ‘Not at all true’ (7). Examples of items include: My boss constantly criticises my work; I don’t feel able to speak up about problems; I have to work more hours than I’m supposed to; there is someone to help me with unfamiliar tasks. Negatively-worded items were reverse-coded such that higher values represented more perceived stress. Items were averaged to create a scale ranging from 1 to 7 with good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.77).

***Living Situation***

Participants were asked ‘Which of the following best describes your household at present?’, with response options living with one or both parents, living with friends or in a sharehouse, living with spouse or partner, living in college. Due to low responses to ‘living in college’ (3 participants, 1.5%), this option was recoded to ‘living with friends or in a sharehouse.’ For data analyses addressing the research questions, this variable was further recoded as living at home vs not living at home.

***Gender***

Gender was described as male or female. For analysis, male was coded as one and female as zero.

**Missing Data**

There were missing data for 25 participants. There was one missing case on drinking frequency, two missing cases for living situation, and 23 missing cases for work stress. Of these, 20 participants were not currently working. Differences between the 25 participants with missing data and the 156 complete cases were examined for drinking frequency, gender, and relational aggression using chi-square tests and t-tests as appropriate. Participants with missing data reported more frequent drinking than complete cases (mean = 2.5 for incomplete cases and 1.8 for complete cases, *t*(178) = 2.11, *p* = 0.037), but there were no other significant differences between the groups. Pairwise deletion was used for bivariate analysis (e.g. correlations), and listwise deletion was used for multivariate analysis.

**Data Analysis**

In a preliminary step, descriptive statistics were examined for all the study variables. The bivariate correlations between the study variables were also examined.

To address the first research question, descriptive statistics for relational aggression were examined. The means of relational aggression were examined for males and females, and young people living at home vs those not living at home, and the difference between means was tested with an independent samples t-test.

The second research question was addressed using a multiple regression model where the dependent variable was relational aggression, and the independent variables were workplace stress, drinking frequency, gender, and living situation. Two models were estimated. In the first model, only workplace stress was entered as an independent variable. In the second step, drinking frequency, gender and living situation were entered.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and range for relational aggression, drinking frequency, and workplace victimisation. On average participants reported a low level of relational aggression, with the average response for the scale falling between ‘never’ and ‘once or twice’. The standard deviation indicated that most responses were within half a point of the mean, indicating that most respondents reported none or infrequent relational aggression. Moreover, scores on the relational aggression scale ranged only as high as 4, showing that no participants scored the maximum.

The average drinking frequency was between 1-2 days per week and 2-3 days per week. The standard deviation showed that the typical distance of responses from this mean was about 1.5 points on the responses for the item. Therefore, most participants reported drinking between the lowest category (‘less often’ than once a month) and about 3-4 days per week.

The mean for the workplace stress scale indicated that, on average, the participants in the sample reported low levels or workplace stress. The standard deviation indicated that the typical distance from the mean was about one point on the scale, showing that most scores fell between no workplace stress, and a moderate level of workplace stress. Moreover, no participants scored the highest possible score for the scale.

Table 2 shows the percentage of participants in each living situation. Almost three-quarters of participants reported living with one or both parents, and only 10% were living with a partner.

Table 3 shows the bivariate correlations among the study variables. Relational aggression was positively correlated with drinking frequency and workplace stress, indicating that as drinking frequency and workplace stress increased, relational aggression also increased. Workplace stress was positively correlated with drinking frequency, showing that participants who reported more workplace stress also reported more frequent drinking, although this did not reach statistical significance. Correlations with gender showed that males reported higher levels of relational aggression, drinking frequency and workplace stress than females. The correlations between living out of home and relational aggression and workplace stress, were negative, indicating that participants living out of home reported less relational aggression and workplace stress, but these correlations were not statistically significant. Participants living out of home reported more frequent drinking, but this was also not statistically significant.

**Relational Aggression by Gender and Living Situation**

As shown in Table 1, relational aggression was infrequent on average in the sample. The mean for males was 1.72 (SD = 0.06) and the mean for females was 1.57 (SD = 0.04). A t-test showed that this difference was statistically significant (*t*(179) = -2.11, *p* = 0.036). Therefore, males reported significantly higher levels of relational aggression that females.

Figure 1 shows the means of relational aggression for young people living at home (Mean = 1.65, SD = 0.49), with friends or in a sharehouse (Mean = 1.75, SD = 0.44) and with a partner (Mean = 1.42. SD = 0.34). A t-test was used to test the difference between means for participants living out of home (with a partner or with friends/in a sharehouse) and those living with parents. Although those living at home reported slightly higher relational aggression (mean = 1.65, SD = 0.49) than those living out of home (mean = 1.63, SD = 0.43), the difference between these means was not statistically significant, *t*(177) = 0.31, *p* = 0.757.

**Multivariate Analysis of Relational Aggression**

Table 4 shows the results of a multiple regression model with relational aggression as the dependent variable, and workplace stress, drinking frequency, gender, and living situation as independent variables. In Model 1, with workplace stress only in the model, workplace stress was positively associated with relational aggression. For each unit increase in workplace stress, there was a 0.16 unit increase in relational aggression, equating to a 0.30 standard deviation increase in relational aggression for each standard deviation unit increase in workplace stress.

Drinking frequency, gender and living situation were added in Model 2. Workplace stress was still significantly associated with relational aggression after controlling for drinking frequency, gender and living situation, although the size of the coefficient was reduced slightly. The results of Model 2 also showed that drinking frequency was positively associated with relational aggression. Looking at the standardised coefficients from Model 2, it can be seen that the magnitude of the effects of workplace stress and drinking frequency were similar: relational aggression increased by 0.26 standard deviations for every standard deviation increase in workplace stress, while relational aggression increased by 0.22 standard deviations for each standard deviation increase in drinking frequency. With all variables in the model, neither gender nor living situation were significantly associated with relational aggression. Model 2 explained 14% of the variance in relational aggression.

**Discussion**

This paper examined correlates of relational aggression in young adults. Relational aggression during adolescence and young adulthood is a growing concern, but risk and protective factors for this behaviour among young adults remain poorly understood. In the present study the focus was on understanding differences in relational aggression according to gender and living situation, as well as examining the association between workplace stress and relational aggression.

The results showed that on average, reported levels of relational aggression in this small sample were low. Consistent with the literature on aggression more generally, males reported more relational aggression than females. One reason for this may be that males also reported more frequent drinking and more workplace stress, both of which were correlated with relational aggression, and which may provide opportunities for relational aggression. Living situation was not significantly related to relational aggression in the present study. However, both ‘living out of home’ categories were collapsed for data analysis, and this may have obscured differences between young people living in shared accommodation compared to young people cohabiting with intimate partners.

Multiple regression showed that workplace stress was positively associated with relational aggression, after controlling for drinking, gender and living situation. The suggests that young adults who experience victimisation, exploitation, and lack of autonomy in the workplace also tend to report more relationally aggressive behaviour. The results cannot shed light on whether this behaviour was linked to the workplace, but the literature suggests this may be possible. It might also be possible that workplace stress creates anxiety and negative mood, which may ‘bleed through’ to social relationships and increase aggression.

**Limitations**

The sample size was small, and non-representative of the broader population of young adults in the mid-2000s. Therefore, the levels of relational aggression reported may be lower than in the general population. Moreover, while the measure of relational aggression captured a wide range of behaviours, the contexts for these behaviours was not assessed. Therefore, it is not possible to say whether young people were aggressive mainly towards workmates, or family, or their intimate partners. This limitation should be addressed in future research.

**Conclusion**

Relational aggression is a serious problem amongst children and adolescents. The present study suggests that many young adults also behave in ways that are socially aggressive. Given the potential for this behaviour to be perpetrated in domestic settings as young adults grow older, it is important to continue to investigate the developmental precursors of these behaviours.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Relational Aggression, Drinking Frequency, and Workplace Stress*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean (SD) | Range | N |
| Relational aggression | 1.64 (0.47) | 1 - 4 | 181 |
| Drinking frequency | 2.41 (1.44) | 0 - 6 | 180 |
| Workplace stress | 2.51 (0.93) | 1 - 5 | 158 |

*Note:* SD = standard deviation, N = number of participants with non-missing data

**Table 2**

*Living Situation*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | % |
| One or both parents | 130 | 72.63 |
| Friends or sharehouse | 30 | 16.76 |
| Partner | 19 | 10.61 |
| Total | 179 | 100 |

**Table 3**

*Correlations between the Study Variables*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1. Relational aggression | - |  |  |  |
| 2. Workplace stress | 0.30\*\*\* | - |  |  |
| 3. Drinking frequency | 0.25\*\*\* | 0.12 | - |  |
| 4. Male gender | 0.16\* | 0.18\* | 0.25\*\*\* | - |
| 5. Living out of home | -0.02 | -0.06 | 0.08 | -0.04 |

Note: \* *p*<0.05, \*\*\**p*<0.001

**Table 4**

*Multiple regression examining relational aggression*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Model 1 |  |  |  | Model 2 |  |  |  |
|  | Coef. (95% C.I.) | S.E. Coef. | Std. Coef. | *p*-value | Coef. (95% C.I.) | S.E. Coef. | Std. Coef. | *p*-value |
| Workplace stress | 0.16 (0.08-0.23) | 0.04 | 0.30 | <0.001 | 0.13 (0.05 - 0.21) | 0.04 | 0.26 | 0.001 |
| Drinking frequency | - | - | - | - | 0.07 (0.02-0.13) | 0.03 | 0.22 | 0.006 |
| Male gender | - | - | - | - | 0.06 (-0.09-0.21) | 0.08 | 0.06 | 0.420 |
| Living out of home | - | - | - | - | 0.01 (-0.17-0.15) | 0.08 | -0.01 | 0.887 |

Note: Model 1 *R2* = 0.09, *F*(1, 156) = 11.69, p < 0.001. Model 2 *R2* = 0.14, *F*(4, 151) = 6.31, *p* < 0.001

Coef. = regression coefficient. C. I. = Confidence Interval. S.E. = Standard Error. Std. Coef. = standardised regression coefficient.

**Figure 1**

*Relational Aggression by Living Situation*