

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Relational Aggression in Adolescents at Selected Schools in Lusaka Urban

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ABSTRACT

Background: School bullying and aggression among children and adolescents have been a source of concern for many researchers globally in the past few decades. Limited research exists regarding relational aggression, largely because research has focused historically on direct verbal and physical aggression, which is more commonly perpetrated by boys.

Methodology: The aim of the study was to explore relational aggression in selected schools of Lusaka. This was achieved by exploring the prevalence and assessing gender differences in relational aggression and evaluating the relation between relational aggression and the psychological well-being of perpetrators. This was a cross-sectional study. A sample of 86 (51%) boys and 84 (49%) girls in grades 6 and 8 was recruited from Lusaka urban schools. Measures used were Peer Experiences Questionnaire and self-report Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire - Youth version.

Results: Results from the study show that relational aggression is prevalent in the selected schools with boys and girls reporting involvement in relational aggression at least once or a few times in a month. More than a third (36 %) of participants reported high involvement in relational aggression. Gender difference in relational aggression was not significant. A significant positive relationship existed between relational aggression and

psychological well-being of perpetrators with perpetrators showing more conduct problems, peer problems and hyperactivity.

Conclusion: The study concluded that relational aggression was prevalent in the selected schools, boys and girls engaged in relational aggression to the same degree and relational aggression was related to psychological well-being of perpetrators. An anti-bullying policy and counselling interventions should be developed to address relational aggression in schools.

INTRODUCTION:

School bullying and aggression among children and adolescents has been a source of concern for many researchers globally. Unfortunately, research on bullying in an African context, is scarce as most studies have been done in developed countries¹. In a comparative study of bullying-related behaviours of English and Zambian students, Nabuzoka¹ asserted that bullying can take many forms, including nasty forms of name-calling, social exclusion, intimidation and ridicule, and extortion as well as physical violence. As defined by Roland² bullying "as a long standing violence, physical or mental, conducted by an individual or group and directed at an individual who is not able to defend himself in the actual situation." In the past two decades, relational aggression has emerged in literature as another form of bullying. Crick and Grotpeter³ coined the term *relational aggression* (RA) to describe aggression that is directed at damaging relationships.

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It is vitally important to note that although relational aggression can be used in many contexts (e.g. schools, work places, families) and among different age groups (e.g. preschoolers, adolescence, adulthood), many researchers have been particularly interested in relational aggression among adolescents⁴. Adolescence is a period of significant cognitive, social and behavioural transitions. Socially peer relationships become increasingly significant during adolescence⁵. Peer relationships are especially important for adolescents' healthy psychological development as peers provide many new behavioural models and feedback essential for successful identity formation and development of one's sense of self⁶.

Prevalence of relational aggression has been reported in various studies. Swit⁷ found 38% of the children involving themselves in average relational aggression while 21% involved themselves in high level relational aggression in an Australian sample. Quoting from Dutton⁸, "In a recent national survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute of 1000 fifth to twelfth graders, two-thirds of the students reported that in the past month they had experienced some form of "emotional violence", defined as "being teased or gossiped about in a mean way" (p. 58). Bosworth (1999) has also reported that 81% of the respondents reported at least one act of bullying behavior in the last month in Kenny, McEachern, and Aluede⁹.

Previous studies have yielded mixed results concerning gender differences in bullying behaviour. A number of reviewers have shown that research does not yield consistent gender difference patterns on the topic of gender differences and aggression^{10:11}. But in a comparative study on bullying between Zambian and English pupils, Nabuzoka¹ found that gender differences were reflected at primary school level and not at secondary school level for both English and Zambian students. According to Nabuzoka, boys scored higher on behaviours that reflected physical aggression which is synonymous to boy's bullying than on other behaviours that were more

psychological in nature. Other studies have concluded that girls engage in relational aggression more often than boys^{12:13} while some have reported the opposite¹⁴.

More recently, research in this area has shifted focus toward the impact of relational aggression on perpetrators and victims, particularly with regard to their psychosocial adjustment¹⁵. As observed by Herrenkohl, Catalano, Hemphill, and Toumbourou¹⁶, both physical aggression and relational aggression increase the risk of future problem behaviours and other research studies have found that perpetrators and victims of relational aggression tend to experience more depression, social isolation and lower self esteem than their peers. Aggressors in particular, tend to be rejected by peers and experience more antisocial personality features than non aggressors and victims of aggression^{17:18:19}. This suggests that exposure to relational aggression may be associated with negative effects on an individual's mental health and well being.

The current study was conducted to explore relational aggression in adolescents at school in terms of prevalence, gender differences and the relationship between relational aggression and the psychological well-being of perpetrators. The foregoing analysis of previous research studies led to the formation of the hypotheses that relational aggression would be prevalent in the selected school; girls would be more relationally aggressive than boys and those perpetrators of relational aggression would report poor psychological well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Study design and Sampling:

A cross-sectional study comprising a sample of 84 (49%) girls and 86 (51%) boys with an age range between 10 and 16. All the participants were adolescents in grades 6 and 8 in school. The schools were identified through the Lusaka District Education Board Secretary's office. The study

comprised 170 pupils from both government and private schools. The distribution was as follows: 86 (51%) boys and 84 (49%) girls. The education level of the participants was Grade 6 (86) and Grade 8 (84) from private (97) and government (73) schools. Their age range was between 10 and 16.

Instruments:

Demographic information

Demographic information such as gender, age, education level was collected using a questionnaire prepared by the researcher.

The Peer Experiences Questionnaire (PEQ)

The self-report PEQ developed by Vernberg, Jacobs, and Hershberger²⁰ to measure frequency of aggressive behaviors both from the victim and aggressor point of view. The measure includes 9 questions in each of the three sections asking about the frequency of various physically or relationally aggressive behaviors. The questionnaire uses a five-point response scale to indicate the frequency of experiencing any of 10 types of victimisation and perpetration of aggressive behaviours during the past 30 days (6 months in the case of this study): 1 = never, 2 = once or twice, 3 = a few times, 4 = about once a week, 5 = a few times a week. Medium to high frequency included once a month, once a week, and a few times a week. Four items of the behaviours listed in PEQ relational aggression subscales were summed up to get a total relational aggression score. It is important to state that in this study, the item *"I teased another pupil in a mean way, called him or her bad names or said rude things to him/her"* was treated as a relational aggression behaviour. Respondents who scored 1 standard deviation or more above the group mean for these items were categorized as being relationally aggressive. The four behaviours summed up included *"I teased a pupil in a mean way, called him or her bad names or said rude things to him or her"*, *"I told put downs or rumours about another pupil"*, *"I helped leave a pupil out of an activity or conversation that he or she really wanted to be included in"* and *"I played a mean trick to scare or*

hurt another pupil." This study utilised only one subscales namely: Victimization of Others (VO). The VS and VO scales were previously tested and found to have high internal consistency, with Cronbach's α 's VS=.85 and VO=.78;²⁰.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire - Youth version

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ-Y) was used to assess psychological well-being. The SDQ-Y is a self-report behavioural questionnaire administered to adolescents. Besides covering common areas of emotional and behavioural problems, it also enquires whether the key informant thinks that they have a problem in these areas and so, asks about the distress and social impairment. It comprises 25 items (some positive others negative), with answers being rated on a 3-point scale. The SDQ-Y provides total difficulties score (TDS) as well as five (5) individual subscale scores of emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity or inattention problems, peer relationship problems and pro-social behaviour. With the exception of the pro-social subscale, the sum of the other subscales generates the TDS. The scores are classified as normal, borderline and abnormal. Good reliability and validity of the SDQ has been well documented^{21; 22}. A study with Zambian adolescents conducted by Menon²² reported that Chronbach's alphas for the total score approached good internal consistency ($d = 0.66$).

Procedure

The data were collected by a trained research assistant and the principal researcher. The participants were met in classrooms, after obtaining informed consent from their caretakers and verbal assent from participants. The questionnaires were then distributed to students who assented to take part in the study and given instructions on completing them.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Zambia Social Science Research Ethics Committee.

Informed written consent was obtained from parents and assent from participants. In addition, anonymity codes were assigned to all participants to protect personal and organizational identity. All data obtained were kept under strict confidence.

Data Analysis

The Software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse quantitative data. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the data because the goal was to know the prevalence rate of relational aggression in the selected schools in Lusaka urban. Mann-Whitney tests were used to measure gender differences and correlation tests (Bivariate-Pearson's correlation) were used to test the relationship between relational aggression and the psychological wellbeing of perpetrators.

RESULTS

The Study Group

As shown in Table 1, the 170 cases recruited for the study constituted pupils in grades 6 and 8 from the selected schools in Lusaka District. The age range was 10-16 years. Girls were 84 accounting for 49.4% and boys were 86 accounting for 50.6%.

Table 1: Gender, Age, Type of School, Grade levels and Results for Chi-square Tests to determine variable differences

		Number	Percentage	χ^2	P value
Gender	Boys	86	50.6	0.24	.88
	Girls	84	49.4		
	Total	170	100		
Age	10 to 12	117	68.8	115.8	.000*
	13 to 15	50	29.4		
	Above 15	3	1.8		
	Total	170	100		
Grade Level	Grade 6	86	50.6	.02	.88
	Grade 8	84	49.4		
	Total	170	100		
Type of School	Government	73	42.9	3.4	.07
	Private	97	57.1		
	Total	170	100		

The Chi-square tests revealed no significant difference between the genders of participants

($\chi^2 = 0.24, p = .88$); and grade level of participants ($\chi^2 = 0.02, p = .88$). However, significant difference existed between age groups of participants ($\chi^2 = 115.8, p = .000*$). There were more pupils from the age group 10 to 12 compared to the age groups 12 to 14 and Above 15 respectively.

Prevalence of Relational Aggression

The results in Table 2 show that from 32.5 to 65.1 percent boys and from 35.7 to 54.8 percent girls never perpetrated aggressive behaviours in the past six months. Meanwhile 17.4 to 44.2 percent boys and from 28.6 to 48.8 percent girls reported having engaged in the relational aggressive behaviours once or twice in the same period of time. However, more boys (from 4.7 to 14.0 percent) than girls (from 1.2 to 7.1 percent) reported to have engaged in the behaviours at least a few times a week.

Kruskal-Wallis χ^2 tests were conducted to determine if there were any significant gender differences in the responses given by boys and girls. Results from Table 2 show no significant differences in the responses by boys and girls: I teased a pupil in a mean way ($\chi^2 = .97, p = .33$); I told rumours or put downs about another pupil ($\chi^2 = 1.89, p = .17$); I helped leave a pupil out of an activity or conversation ($\chi^2 = .83, p = .36$) and I played a mean trick to scare or hurt another pupil ($\chi^2 = 1.29, p = .26$). These results show that boys and girls responses were the same. See table 2 on the next page.

Gender Differences in Relational Aggression

On average, boys engaged more in relational aggression (M = 7.8, SD = 3.6) than girls (M = 7.2, SD = 3.0) although as can be seen, the difference was very small (0.6) and not statistically significant. Table 3 describes the total relational aggression for both boys and girls. The mean ranks of the two groups were compared. Boys had slightly higher mean ranks than girls. The Mann Whitney U test was performed to determine if the differences in the mean ranks were significant at alpha 0.05. The results were Z = -0.756; p = 0.450 indicating no significant difference between boys and girls.

Table 2: Kruskal-Wallis tests and Frequencies (in percentages) of All Response Categories on the Relational Aggression subscale over a period of 6 months reported on the Peer Experiences Questionnaire by gender

	n	Never	Once or twice	About once a month	About once a week	A few times a week	χ^2	P value
I teased a pupil in a mean way								
All Pupils	170	34.1	46.5	6.5	4.7	8.2		
Boys	86	32.5	44.2	9.3	1.2	12.8	.97	.33
Girls	84	35.7	48.8	3.6	8.3	3.6		
I told rumours or put downs about another pupil								
All Pupils	170	57.6	26.0	4.1	2.3	10.0		
Boys	86	65.1	17.4	3.5	0	14.0	1.89	.17
Girls	84	50.0	34.5	4.8	4.8	6.0		
I helped leave a pupil out of an activity or conversation								
All Pupils	170	51.1	33.5	9.4	2.9	2.9		
Boys	86	48.8	32.5	11.6	2.3	4.7	.83	.36
Girls	84	53.6	34.5	7.1	3.6	1.2		
I played a mean trick to scare or hurt another pupil								
All Pupils	170	50.6	30.0	5.9	5.3	8.2		
Boys	86	46.5	31.4	7.0	5.8	9.3	1.29	.26
Girls	84	54.8	28.6	4.8	4.8	7.1		

Relational Aggression and Psychological Well-being.

Bivariate correlations were conducted to examine whether perpetrators of relational aggression would report poor psychological wellbeing including emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer relationships problems and hyperactivity problems.

Table 4 shows correlations coefficients analyses between relational aggression and psychological well-being of perpetrators. There was a significant weak positive relationship between relational

aggression and psychological well-being (total difficulties) as evidenced by the results: $r = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$ for both boys and girls. This means that relationally aggressive boys and girls are likely to experience difficulties including emotional symptoms (e.g. worrying a lot), conduct problems (e.g. fighting) and peer relationship problems (e.g. loneliness). A further analysis of the same revealed a significant moderate positive relationship between psychological well-being (total difficulties) and boys ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$) showing that boys are more likely than girls to experience poor well-being.

Table 3: Gender Differences in Total Relational Aggression and All Response Categories of the Relational Aggression Subscale by Perpetrators

Case Items (n = 61)	Mean Rank		Test Results	
	Boys (n=32)	Girls (n=29)	Z	p value
Total Relational Aggression	88.29	82.64	-0.756	0.450
I teased a pupil in a mean way	34.05	27.64	-1.50	0.14
I told rumours or put downs about another pupil	31.02	30.98	-0.01	0.99
I helped leave a pupil out of an activity or conversation	32.50	29.34	-0.73	0.46
I played a mean trick to scare or hurt another pupil	31.39	30.57	-0.18	0.85

There was no significant correlation between relational aggression and hyperactivity scores for the whole group ($r = 0.19, p > 0.05$) but a significant moderate positive correlation for boys ($r = 0.60, p < 0.01$) existed as shown in Table 4. This means that relationally aggressive boys are more likely than girls to experience hyperactivity problems. There was a negative but non-significant relationship with prosocial scores ($r = -0.17, p > 0.05$) for all pupils and particularly a negative but non-significant correlation ($r = -0.28, p > 0.05$) for boys only.

Meanwhile, there was a significant weak positive relationship between conduct problems and relational aggression for the whole group ($r = 0.29, p < 0.05$, two-tailed), also a weak but significant positive relationship between relational aggression and peer relationships problems ($r = 0.29, p < 0.05$). The results mean that aggressive children are likely to experience conduct problems such as fighting and stealing as well as peer problems such as rejection and isolation than their non aggressive peers. However, separate correlations for boys ($r = 0.26, p > 0.05$) and girls ($r = 0.25, p > 0.05$) yielded positive but non-significant relationships for relational aggression and conduct problems.

Table 4: Results of the Pearson's Bivariate Correlations Between Relational Aggression and Subscales of Well-being by gender

Variables Correlated	N	r	p value
Relational Aggression with Emotional Symptoms			
All Pupils	61	.02	.87
Boys	32	.08	.65
Girls	29	.08	.68
Relational Aggression with Conduct Problems			
All Pupils	61	.29	.02*
Boys	32	.26	.15
Girls	29	.25	.20
Relational Aggression with Hyperactivity			
All Pupils	61	.19	.14
Boys	32	.60	.001**
Girls	29	-.19	.32
Relational Aggression with Peer Problems			
All Pupils	61	.29	.03*
Boys	32	.45	.01**
Girls	29	-.01	.95
Relational Aggression with Prosocial			
All Pupils	61	-.17	.19
Boys	32	-.28	.12
Girls	29	.07	.73
Relational aggression with Total Difficulties			
All Pupils	61	.29	.03*
Boys	32	.51	.003**
Girls	29	.01	.95

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted with an objective of determining if relational aggression was prevalent in selected schools in Lusaka Urban and exploring gender differences and the relation between relational aggression and psychological well-being of perpetrators.

About one third of the total sample reported involvement in high levels of relational aggression (i.e. 1 SD above the mean) while about two-thirds reported average involvement in relational

aggression indicating that relational aggression is quite prevalent in these schools. These current findings are higher than those found by Swit⁷ in an Australian sample where he found 38% of the children involving themselves in average relational aggression while 21% involved themselves in high level relational aggression.

The findings indicate that pupils in both grade 6 and 8 were involved in relational aggression including 'teasing' and 'name calling', 'spreading rumours' and using 'put downs', 'excluding peers from conversations or activities' as well as 'playing mean tricks on others to make them feel bad'.

Findings in the current study also show that more than half of the girls in the sample and about a third to two-thirds of boys reported engaging in the behaviour one or more times a month in the past six months. This is consistent with the findings that an average of about 50% children and adolescents in grades 5 through to 12 have experienced relational aggression at least once a month²⁴. Also Crick and Grotepeter³ found that girls engage in relational aggression more than boys. Findings indicate that on average, girls involvement in relational aggression was more prevalent than boys although this difference was not significant. These findings indicate that relational aggression is prevalent in the selected schools in Lusaka. It has also provided prevalence statistics for relational aggression in the selected schools particularly in the Zambian context. Findings also indicated that on the relational aggression subscale, 'mean teasing' was the most common behaviour for both boys and girls followed by 'playing mean tricks to make others feel bad', then 'spreading rumours or put downs' and 'leaving other pupils out of conversations or activities'.

In the current study, relational aggression did not show any significant gender differences between boys and girls just like Hayward and Fletcher²⁵ found no significant differences between Australian boys' and girls' engagement in relational aggression at the primary and high school level. On the contrary,

other studies have found gender differences in relational aggression^{26;12}. These studies found that boys were more physically aggressive than girls, and when levels of physical and relational aggression were compared, girls were more likely to use relational aggression only, whereas boys often use both physical and relational aggression. Similarly, girls were found to be more relationally aggressive than boys²⁷ whereas David and Kistner¹⁴ found the opposite.

Gender differences in relational aggression may be caused by methodological assessments variations²⁸. The current study only used a sample of 170 participants as opposed to studies like that of Crick who use larger samples. Questionnaires administered to larger samples will make even fairly small mean differences become statistically significant, whereas these do not achieve significance in smaller samples. The magnitude of the gender difference for relational aggression is almost always substantially smaller than the corresponding difference for physical aggression²⁸. Perhaps, this explains why some studies like the current one found no gender difference but may however not explain why other studies, for example, find boys to be more relationally aggressive than girls.

Inconsistencies in gender differences for relational aggression may be due to stereotypes²⁹. Children acquire complex knowledge of gender stereotypes as soon as they learn to label gender by age 3 or so. These researchers have noted that when gender differences appear in studies, they may be due to gender stereotypes and not actual differences in behaviour per se. The findings in this current study indicate that boys and girls engaged in relational aggression to the same degree and this has contributed to the knowledge base on the existence of relational aggression in the Zambian context.

From the self-report strengths and difficulties questionnaire, there was evidence that relational aggression is significantly related to psychological well-being (e.g. conduct problems, hyperactivity

disorder and peer problems). These findings are consistent with several studies^{3,30} which found significant relationships between psychosocial maladjustment and relational aggression. Relationally aggressive children tend to display emotional and behavioural maladjustment as well as problems in their peer relationships.

Further correlations revealed that pupils who were relationally aggressive reported higher levels of conduct problems. These children are likely to engage in fights, stealing, temper tantrums or generally display disobedience acts. This parallels Werner and Nixon's²⁴, findings that relationally aggressive children tend to have conduct problems. In addition, findings of this current study parallels the reports of researchers who found consistency in the externalising behaviour of children^{30,31}. Similarly, frequent engagement in relationally aggressive behaviours leads to problems when interacting with peers³. However, it may also be that peer problems may also lead to relational aggressive behaviours towards those peers.

The results of this current study show that there were gender differences between boys and girls in the way they experienced difficulties. Girls were more likely than boys to experience emotional symptoms. These are consistent with past research that suggest that girls are more likely than boys to express emotions such as anger in direct verbal communication³². These findings indicate that relationally aggressive girls worry a lot, feel unhappy, experience fears and nervousness. Findings on gender differences also indicated that boys were more likely than girls to experience conduct problems. Both boys and girls experience conduct problems although boys tend to development more conduct problems than girls³³. Our findings indicate that boys in this current study experienced conduct problems such as fighting, stealing or display of temper tantrums.

The current findings also indicate that grade 6 boys are more likely than grade 8 boys and girls to experience hyperactivity problems (e.g. attention problems, restlessness) and peer relationships

problems (e.g. loneliness, peer rejection). Findings from the self report SDQ indicate that relational aggression is significantly related to total difficulties (conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and emotional symptoms). These findings indicate that relationally aggressive children feel unhappy, depressed and may be rejected by their peers. Findings also indicate that these children may indulge in fights with peers and cheating.

One limitation of this study was the use of self-report measures. In gathering data via such measures, the possibility for inaccuracy and dishonesty exists. The participants' responses to the questions depended on their level of honesty, their memory and their ability to respond. Another limitation was the use of a small group of respondents. This study was confined to grades six and eight pupils aged 10 to 16 from the selected schools. Participants were limited to those who voluntarily agreed and whose parents gave permission to participate in the study.

This study had the strength of being the first study known to measure relational aggression in selected schools in Zambia. It has highlighted prevalence of relational aggression and its relationship with the psychological well-being of perpetrators. Prior researchers in the Zambian context have focused on physical or overt bullying in school children. This current study points to the importance of considering gender and psychological well-being as relational aggression is investigated. Relational aggression is seriously related to psychological difficulties¹⁷. It is hoped that such research will eventually help in the development of effective relational aggression intervention strategies in schools.

CONCLUSION

The current research provides insight on a topic that has become popular in recent years but one not researched in the Zambian context. Results obtained show that relational aggression is prevalent in the selected schools with boys and girls reporting involvement in relational aggression at least once or a few times in a month. Gender differences between

the boys' and girls' involvement in relational aggression were not significant. Results also indicated a significant relationship between relational aggression and psychological well-being of perpetrators. Therefore it would be expected that relationally aggressive children are more likely to present hyperactivity, conduct and peer problems. Collectively, these findings indicate a need to further explore relational aggression and its impact on the development of pupils.

Recommendations

It is recommended that when policy makers and school administrators attempt to understand the use of harmful behaviours by students, relational aggression should also be considered among other bullying behaviours to address. Schools may also need to implement programs so pupils are offered psychosocial support and continuously learn how to deal with aggression; and continue to assess the prevalence of relational aggression in schools.

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