

Identifying girls who use relational aggression: A proposed model

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This study used mixed methods to compare perceptions of relational aggression (RA) of adolescent girls ($n = 282$) and their teachers ($n = 15$) in New Zealand, and to explore strategies for teachers to effectively manage RA in the classroom. Results indicated that younger adolescent girls view physical aggression as more acceptable than older girls, and that the girls were more likely to view others as engaging in RA, rather than themselves. Teachers' perceptions of RA behaviours overlapped with those of the girls' but perceptions of effective strategies varied. The results led to the development of a model that identifies three types of relationally aggressive adolescent girls. Results are discussed in terms of applying the model and developing strategies for building healthy relationships.

Introduction

They don't like her so they boxed her out of the circle, so then they made the circle so tight so she can't sit in it and then there'll be a circle and she'll just be sitting there by herself like just outside of it.

The scene above was reported by one of the participants in this study as an example of relational aggression perpetrated by a group of girls on another classmate, but it could have taken place in a group of adolescent girls in any number of locations. Relational aggression (RA) was a term first used by Crick and Grotpeter (1996) to describe behaviours that are intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion. A decade later and in a similar fashion, Archer and Coyne (2005) defined RA in terms of its endpoint, that is, to manipulate or disrupt a relationship or friendship. Culotta and Goldstein, (2008) described RA as both similar to and different from other types of aggression, such as physical aggression. Physical aggression and RA are similar in terms of sharing intent and bringing about harm to the victim; however, the mechanisms used to deliver the aggression are different, as are the characteristics of the aggressors. One of the unique characteristics of RA is that it involves perceived popularity, indicating something socially advantageous in relationally aggressive acts (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007; Leadbeater, Boone, Sangster, & Mathieson, 2006; Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006).

Indeed, social context is a prevalent theme in the literature for RA. Hawley (1999) was an early proponent of social dominance theory within the field of RA. Status and group membership, being either in or out of a group, social intelligence, and competence all have been strongly related to incidences of RA. Wiseman (2002) suggested that within a given social context, one strong group defines all others and relational aggressive acts occur as a result of fighting to stay in that group. Crick and Nelson (2002) and Daniels, Quigley,

Menard and Spence (2010) stated that RA occurs inside friendship circles. Alternatively, Simmons (2002) viewed RA as taking place within the social context of the hierarchical clique toward others outside of the clique.

Socio-cultural research into the study of cliques in schools has demonstrated that factors related to socialisation provide one explanation for RA (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). As such, Merrell, Buchanan, and Tran (2006) stated that examining RA in the school context is important, given the social interactions as students negotiate social roles, expectations, and hierarchies within their social groups at school. Recently, Cross et al. (2009) reported that RA reaches a peak as young people transition into early secondary school.

Research has found that adolescent girls largely perceive RA in schools as unjustified aggression (Coyne, Archer, Eslea, & Liechty, 2008), and that students think that teachers generally do not see RA (Collins, McAleavy, & Adamson, 2004). When they do, girls' perceptions are that teacher intervention leads to girls losing power over the situation (Waasdorp, Bagdi, & Bradshaw, 2010).

Although the focus for this study was on girls, it is noted that boys also use RA. Reported gender differences in the amount and expression of RA have varied from no differences (Swit & McMaugh, 2012) to significant differences (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Hayward & Fletcher, 2003; Pronk & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2010; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). Swift (2011) and others (Gorman-Smith & Loeber, 2005; Odgers & Moretti, 2002) hold that the pathways to adolescent aggression are not the same for girls and boys; therefore, the pathways that will lead girls away from aggression need to be different.

Girls' friendships and their peer relationships play a significant part in their psychological development (Crothers et al., 2007; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002; Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004). Putallaz, Kupersmidt, McKnight, and Grimes (1994) and Underwood (2003) contended that when girls are taught to be "nice and not nasty," their actions with their peers are affected. Simmons (2002) posited that dominant patriarchal culture has taught girls to mask overt aggression in favour of more covert actions. Xie et al. (2002) argued that the manifestation of RA can only occur if adolescents are connected in some way to a peer social network. Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals adopt gender characteristics based on the rewards and punishments they receive for their behaviour, and that socially aggressive behaviour will be positively rewarded with increased popularity, power, and/or feelings of satisfaction (Bandura, 2002). As such, girls who use RA are considered (perceived) as popular in the peer group, although they are often not well-liked (Kuryluk, Cohen, & Audley-Piotrowski, 2011).

Besag (2006) suggested an alternative view of those who perpetrate RA, to include girls who fall outside of the feminine construct of the mean girl. These girls, sometimes called "girls in gangs" (p. 66), tend to be anti-authoritarian and more overt in their RA. According to James et al. (2010), this group of girls forms one of three identified groups of aggressors: "girl gangsters" (see Batchelor, 2010, p. 407), who react aggressively to protect their personal status, highly manipulative and controlling girls, and other girls who

mistakenly view RA behaviour as normal. Other researchers have noted the significance of the peer group context and differing social group norms where membership to elite groups predicts higher relational (and physical) aggression (Pokhrel, Sussman, Black, & Sun, 2010; Werner & Hill, 2010).

Although there is increased recognition of the significance that social networks play within the lives of adolescent relationships, a clear path toward understanding RA has yet to be established by researchers. Overall, RA is seen to be indicative of a greater level of social sophistication than other types of aggression (Culotta & Goldstein, 2008). The possession of this more developed level of social skills also plays a part in the difficulty to detect acts of RA, in that behaviours tend to be subtle or covert, and purposefully open to misinterpretation (Goldstein & Tisak, 2006). Related to this, cyber-bullying has emerged as another dimension of RA that carries potentially severe consequences (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Because relationally aggressive behaviours have proven difficult to observe, researchers have tended to rely on self-reports from students interacting in the school grounds (Merrell et al., 2006). Few researchers have specifically investigated RA and its associated classroom variables (Kuppens, Grietens, Onghena, Michiels, & Subramanian, 2008; Werner & Hill, 2010) even though to ensure positive outcomes for student relationships in classrooms, the role of the teacher is crucial both in terms of discouraging inappropriate actions and modelling appropriate behaviour (Iimori, 2002; Kuppens, Grietens, Onghena, Michiels, & Subramanian, 2008). Yet, when aggressive acts occur, students and teachers appear to hold different views on the best methods for intervention (Carroll-Lind, 2009).

It is critical that we understand how adolescent girls view RA, how their teachers' perceptions differ from those views, and what strategies can be used to address the problem of RA at this important time in girls' development. The current research used a constructivist perspective, to acknowledge that many different accounts and meanings can be made of the same event or experience, and that there is no one way of explaining or interpreting the experience (Lynch, 1997). A mixed methods design was used to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of RA for girls in Years 9 and 10 in New Zealand?
 - a. What types of RA do these girls experience in school and in their classrooms?
 - b. What types of RA do these girls employ in school and in their classrooms?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of RA among girls in Year 9 and 10 classrooms in New Zealand?
 - a. What strategies do these teachers report as effective in addressing RA in their classrooms?
3. How do the girls' perceptions of RA compare to the perceptions of their teachers?
4. What are the girls' perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies that their teachers use?

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of $n = 282$ female students in Years 9 and 10 (analogous to grades 8 and 9 in the United States) from four secondary schools in New Zealand. They ranged in age from 12 to 15 years, with a median age of 13 years.

Materials

The materials for this study comprised a brief demographic questionnaire; vignettes about relationships (Basow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2007) modified with the authors' permission; the *Personal Experience Questionnaire* (PEQ; Basow et al., 2007) modified with the authors' permission; and semi-structured interview questions.

Procedure

Prior to the research, the vignettes were adapted to use language and names that reflected New Zealand secondary school settings. One vignette was added to the original complement of 11 vignettes, to permit an even number (12); these were divided into two sets of 6 vignettes. Each set comprised three relationally aggressive, one non-aggressive, and two physically aggressive vignettes. The vignettes described various scenarios that were considered likely for 12 to 15 year old girls, for example, exams, going to the movies, having a part-time job, playing basketball, and dating. Copies of the modified measures are available from the first author. Ethical review and Maori consultation were completed in compliance with University requirements. Written consent was obtained from the participating schools' Boards of Trustees, principals, teachers, student participants, and parents. Also prior to the research, the PEQ was divided into two forms. One form asked participants to respond about their own experiences of RA; the other form asked participants to respond regarding perceptions of others' experiences of RA.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight possible conditions, counterbalancing the sets of vignettes and the forms of the PEQ. A minimum of $n = 35$ participants were in each condition, with roughly equal numbers from each of the participating schools. Following the administration of the vignettes and the PEQ, $n = 15$ girls and $n = 15$ teachers were randomly selected to participate in individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes each. The interviews further explored the results from the vignettes, the PEQ, and the research questions. The female researcher who administered the questionnaires conducted the interviews.

The quantitative data from the demographics, vignettes, and the PEQ were analysed using PASWStatistics 18.0. The primary statistical techniques included descriptive statistics, repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance for the vignettes, and independent samples t-tests for the PEQ. Transcriptions of the interviews were analysed following Straus and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach, with an iterative approach using constant comparisons to responses, in that explicitly defined parameters were produced

for each theme, so that themes could be measured and identified with accuracy. Coded transcripts and detailed overview grids allowed for the comparison of data across and within the interview groups. The themes that emerged were coded and examined in relationship to the findings from the vignettes and the PEQ.

Results

The first research question (What are the perceptions of RA for girls in Years 9 and 10 in New Zealand?) was analysed using the responses to the scenarios. Each vignette was followed by five questions asking how OK, aggressive, hurtful, upsetting, and distressful the actions in the vignette were. Responses to each question were on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). Repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance were computed, with each question repeated for type of vignette (non-aggressive, relationally aggressive, physically aggressive) as the dependent variables, and age, ethnicity, and year level as the independent variables.

There was a main effect for "OK", $F(5, 277) = 45.04, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .45, and no interaction effects. Post-hoc analyses indicated that the non-aggressive vignette was rated OK and the relationally aggressive vignettes were perceived as more acceptable than the physically aggressive vignettes. For "aggressive," there was an interaction effect for aggressiveness and year level, $F(5, 276) = 4.58, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .08, and a main effect for year level of $F(5, 276) = 57.03, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .51. Post-hoc analyses indicated that the Year 9 girls were more tolerant of the physical aggression than the Year 10 girls. For "hurtful," there was an interaction effect for hurtfulness and year level, $F(5, 255) = 2.84, p < .05$, partial eta squared = .05 and a main effect for year level of $F(5, 255) = 8.51, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .14. Again, Year 9 girls viewed the physical aggression as less hurtful than the Year 10 girls. For "upset," there was a main effect of $F(5, 255) = 12.63, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .20. Here, the non-aggressive vignette was seen as benign, but one of the physically aggressive vignettes was viewed as less upsetting than the relationally aggressive vignettes or the other physically aggressive vignette. For "distressed," there was a main effect of $F(5, 255) = 8.52, p < .001$, partial eta squared = .14, with both physically aggressive vignettes perceived as less distressing than the relationally aggressive vignettes.

Responses from the PEQ were used to investigate the two sub-questions of question 1. To explore the types of RA the girls experience or employ, responses to the PEQ were computed using a series of independent samples t-tests using a Bonferroni adjustment (therefore, $p < .002$), with the 13 PEQ items as dependent variables and whether the participant responded in terms of self or others as the independent variable. Individual items were analysed in order to identify the most prevalent relationally aggressive behaviours that were reported as being perpetrated by and experienced by this sample of girls. The results are shown in Table 1. None of the non-aggressive items were statistically significant, nor was hitting. However, the relationally aggressive items (and fighting, which may not have been interpreted as physical) were statistically significant and were attributed more to others than self.

Table 1: Results of t-tests using responses to the PEQ

Item	M	SD	t	p	d
Doing something nice for another	5.43	1.17	0.05	.906	
	5.46	1.23			
Intentionally ignoring someone	0.43	0.97	4.40	<.001	0.90
	1.72	1.77			
Saying you'll think less unless	0.49	1.11	4.86	<.001	0.56
	1.32	1.79			
Yelling at or calling mean names	2.65	2.10	0.28	.741	
	2.72	2.03			
Cheering up when upset	5.31	1.37	-2.01	.029	
	4.96	1.53			
Excluding from activities	1.18	1.49	3.65	<.001	0.44
	1.96	2.03			
Threatening to share personal information	0.57	1.04	7.58	<.001	0.52
	1.38	1.92			
Helping another girl	4.38	1.75	-1.59	.542	
	4.04	1.76			
Giving the silent treatment	2.57	1.82	0.54	.355	
	2.70	1.92			
Hitting	0.67	1.31	1.56	.005	
	0.95	1.72			
Stealing boyfriend/partner	0.24	0.78	3.81	<.001	0.45
	0.83	1.65			
Starting a fight	1.01	1.42	4.57	<.001	0.55
	1.99	2.09			
Passing negative information	1.01	1.38	3.71	<.001	0.44
	1.78	2.03			

Notes: For each pair, first row is *I have done this*, and the second row is *Others have done this to me*. $df = 280$

To further explore the relationship between the PEQ and the data from the Relational and Physical Aggression Scenarios, correlation coefficients were computed between the scores from the PEQ and scenario ratings (see Table 2). Correlation coefficients were calculated for OK (question 1) and a composite aggression/hurtful score from the scenarios (questions 2 through 5), with total scores from the PEQ responses for relational and physical aggressive behaviours broken down by Self or Others. Among the significant correlations it is worth noting that a strong correlation was found between the scores from the Relational PEQ and the Physical PEQ for both self and others.

Six interview questions (see Appendix) were used to address the final three research questions and sub-questions. The most common relationally aggressive behaviour in class reported by both girls ($n = 9$) and teachers ($n = 8$) was direct verbal put-downs. One girl

noted, “In English, she would do things to get you to look up at her, and then she would be like ‘Oh what the f-- are you looking at?’” This was followed by spreading rumours (girls’ responses, $n = 8$). One girl reported, “They started up a rumour that I was a prostitute.” Teachers reported observing exclusion ($n = 7$). Text bullying was not widely reported. Both girls ($n = 6$) and teachers ($n = 5$) talked about RA as being normal; girls also mentioned RA as a means for getting attention ($n = 6$). The girls were more likely ($n = 37$ total statements) to cite occurrences of RA than teachers ($n = 29$ total statements). Three teachers also cited the use of RA as a way of girls gaining power over other girls.

Table 2: Correlations between scores for the PEQ and scenario ratings

Items	Pro Scene	Rel OK	Rel Agg/hurt	Phys OK	Phys Agg/hurt	Pro PEQ	Rel PEQ	Phys PEQ	
PEQ Self	Pro Scenarios	-	-.19*	-.02	.07	.00	-.02	-.19*	-.10
	Rel OK	-.19*	-	-.30**	.29**	-.25**	-.02	.11	.03
	Rel Agg/hurt	-.02	-.30**	-	-.12	.48**	.07	-.16	-.14
	Phys OK	.07	.29**	-.12	-	-.29**	-.04	.16	.12
	Phys Agg/hurt	.00	-.25**	.48**	-.29**	-	-.05	-.08	-.08
	Pro PEQ	-.02	-.02	.07	-.04	-.05	-	.05	-.07
	Rel PEQ	-.19*	.11	-.16	.16	-.08	.05	-	.60**
	Phys PEQ	-.10	.03	-.14	.12	-.08	-.07	.60**	-
PEQ Others	Pro Scenarios	-	.35**	.07	.28**	.04	-.05	-.14	-.07
	Rel OK	.35**	-	-.12	.77**	.07	-.09	.02	.10
	Rel Agg/hurt	.07	-.12	-	-.01	.40**	-.06	.05	-.01
	Phys OK	.28**	.77**	-.01	-	.08	-.25**	-.07	.02
	Phys Agg/hurt	.04	.07	.40**	.08	-	.07	.06	.09
	Pro PEQ	-.05	-.09	-.06	-.25**	.07	-	.08	.12
	Rel PEQ	-.14	.02	.05	-.07	.06	.08	-	.64**
	Phys PEQ	-.07	.10	-.01	.02	.09	.12	.64**	-

Notes: Pro = Prosocial; Rel – Relational; Phys = Physical; Agg/hurt = Aggression/Hurt.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

In terms of strategies for dealing with RA, 14 girls stated that talking to an adult with whom they had a positive relationship was a good strategy. One girl reported, “I could have told the teacher. It depends on who the teacher is, and how you get on with them as to whether you tell them things or not.” However, these girls were unsure whether teacher intervention would improve things or make things worse. One third of the girls reported that the best strategy for teachers is to be vigilant. The teachers also reported that girls need to tell an adult. They stated that RA often gets worse when girls minimise it, hoping

that it will go away. The girls were divided regarding whether a teacher should address incidences of RA with the entire class or with the individuals involved; the teachers preferred talking to the individuals involved. Both girls and teachers cited manipulating class seating as an effective strategy when RA was observed. A range of strategies considered effective by both teachers and girls is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Recommended strategies for teachers to address RA in the classroom

Issue	Strategy
Early intervention	Direct verbal aggression (shouting and yelling put-downs at another) should be immediately stopped to avoid potential escalation.
Addressing the behaviour	Talk to the individual or group about their aggressive behaviour to stop the aggressive behaviour from further developing; however, note that the method and timing for any discussion may depend on the behaviour.
Vigilance	Be attentive and practice good supervision as even the simple presence of the teacher has an impact on the level of RA in the classroom.
Restorative justice	Engage in the restorative justice process or the more simple restorative chat, depending upon the situation.
Physical classroom management	Consider changing seating to manage group dynamics and physically shift girls away from each other.
Teacher engagement	Be willing to get involved, as students expect teachers to keep them safe. Do not minimise RA or dismiss it as a normal stage in adolescent girls' development. Be aware, however, that there is a risk that involvement can make the situation worse, and can lead to negative outcomes for some girls. Therefore, consider potential outcomes to ensure a successful resolution.
Owning the behaviour	Girls are failing to take responsibility for their role as perpetrators of RA and tend to attribute blame to others. Educators need to work on identifying the impact that RA behaviour has on others, and the choices that make relationships more prosocial.
Teaching prosocial behaviour	Teaching prosocial behaviours is likely to have an impact not only on helping girls recognise that RA is not ok, but also that physical aggression is not ok. Girls may be also more likely to develop prosocial behaviours if they are taught these skills directly, as compared to using prosocial modelling.

Teacher-student relationships	Positive teacher-student relationships result in an increased likelihood that students will talk to teachers about RA that occurs in the classroom. Publically offer your availability and support at the beginning of each year.
Understanding the function of the behaviour	Many girls hold the view that RA, while hurtful, is acceptable and even normal. Girls need to be challenged on this commonly-held belief and directly taught that RA is not ok. Girls may also engage in RA for other reasons, such as boredom or for attention. Teaching of prosocial behaviours can be beneficial in these instances, as well.
Target group for teaching prosocial behaviours	As girls move through adolescence, they tend to develop more prosocial behaviours and incidences of RA begin to subside. Therefore, teaching prosocial behaviours should be early on rather than in later years.
Involving students	Be aware that victims of RA have expressed the desire to be included in the decision-making process about what will occur to ameliorate the RA.

In analysing the data, it became apparent that both girls and teachers were consistent in their perceptions of girls who use RA. From this, three types of female adolescent aggressors were identified: popular girls, regular girls, and tough girls. Further investigation using supplementary coding and a reanalysis of the interview transcripts led to a proposed model that identifies these types using descriptions of girls' traits and behaviours (see Figure 1).

Popular girls were described as well accepted by both other girls and teachers; they were feminine, and flirted with boys or were viewed to be sexually promiscuous. They sought to control the group, and were more covert than overt in their relationally aggressive behaviours. Popular girls were thought to be physically and fashionably more attractive and from wealthy backgrounds. Popular girls were considered to "get their own way." Five girls and five teachers referred to popular girls during the interviews. The popular girls described themselves as, "We're pretty popular, yeah." (n = 2) or were described by other girls (n = 3) and teachers (n = 5) as being "definitely cool." The girls stated that girls tried to be like the popular girls, and they perceived teachers as liking the popular girls. The teachers noted that popular girls were likely to be found in the academic top streams and they behaved differently to other groups of girls. One described, "But I truly think that it's those top - those higher band girls. It's definitely more covert; it's definitely more that indirect, aggressive type of bullying and I have to really observe them."

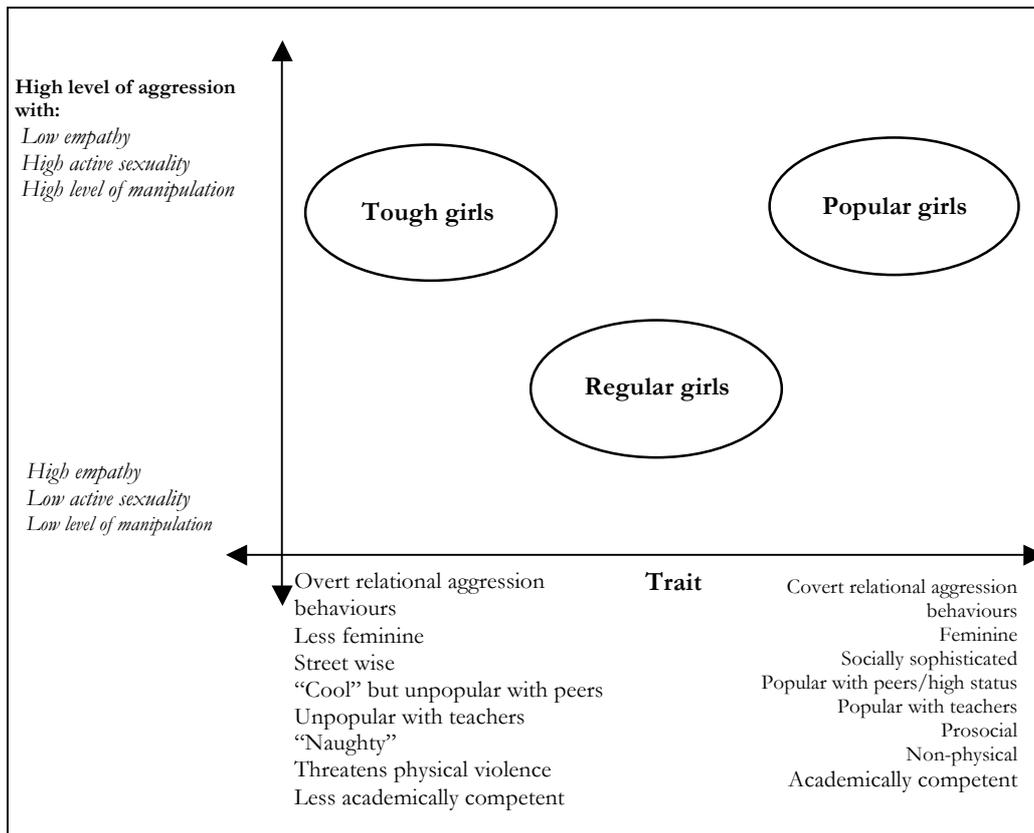


Figure 1: Representation of the types of girls who use relational aggression

Regular girls were perceived ($n = 6$ girls and $n = 8$ teachers) as being outside of the popular and tough groups. Both the girls and the teachers identified regular girls using words such as normal, regular, and average. The girls considered regular girls to be average in popularity; they did not regularly organise weekend parties with alcohol, and they were less sexualised in appearance and behaviour as compared to their popular peers. In addition, regular girls did not identify themselves as being associated with a particular location in the school grounds; this was associated with popular girls. The majority of the girls interviewed regarded themselves as regular girls. They perceived RA to be a part of normal adolescent development. One girl stated, “All girls do it. It splits us up and then we get back together again. It’s not that serious. Everyone does it and some people just follow.” Another girl reported, “We just call each other a couple of names, but then the next day she’ll say sorry and then I’ll say sorry and yeah...” One teacher explained this behaviour in the following way, “Girls lack social skills so they get into fights with each other.”

Tough girls were considered “cool” but not popular, and more overtly relationally aggressive. They flirted with boys or were sexually promiscuous, were less feminine and

dressed to cover themselves, were likely to threaten physical violence, came from lower ability and socio-economic groups, and sought to control the group. They projected an image of being anti-social rule breakers. Tough girls were described by seven girls and six teachers, but never by the girls about themselves. One teacher stated, "They were street wise, and quite cool in a way, but the interesting thing was they were deeply unpopular, not just amongst their own age group, but among all year groups." Likewise, three girls reported that tough girls' behaviours tended to make them unpopular in that, "The way she acts...everybody like doesn't like her cause she acts too tough." A characteristic of the tough girls was overt aggression that often contained threats of physical violence, described by four of the girls and one of the teachers. One girl reported, "She threatens to smash you all the time and stuff." Tough girls also were described as identifiable because of the different clothing that they wore. One teacher noted, "They generally seem to have less skin. They wear pants and maybe jerseys. I dunno if they want to look big and tough or if it's because of where they came from and what they wear there."

Of note, eight teachers suggested that teacher strategies may need to be different according to the aggressor typology of the girl, in addition to the type of RA.

Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to identify the types of RA that occur among girls in Year 9 and Year 10 schools and in classrooms in one area of New Zealand and to understand the differences and similarities of the perceptions of teachers and girls with regard to RA in the classroom. Additionally, the study worked to identify strategies for teachers and girls to effectively collaborate to prevent and/or manage incidences of RA in the classroom.

The results indicated that the girls in this sample used a wide range of relationally aggressive behaviours. Although the girls rated RA as more acceptable than physical aggression, and viewed RA as normal, the interview data indicated that they would prefer RA not to occur. Direct verbal aggression was the most prevalent relationally aggressive behaviour reported by both teachers and girls. Beyond that, RA tended to be more indirect and covert than direct and overt. These results partially support findings from the literature, in particular Coyne, Archer, and Eslea's (2006) conclusion that indirect aggression is found more frequently than more direct forms of aggression at school. Text bullying was expected to play a significant role in relational aggressive behaviour in school, because it meets classroom expectations of appearing to be quietly on-task, and not likely to attract the attention of the teacher. However, text bullying did not play a major role, perhaps due to school policies that were in place. The girls in this study reported that when they use cell phones covertly in class, it is more to chat with friends than to aggress.

The study also indicated that girls are more likely to place the blame for RA on others, rather than on themselves. Simmons (2002) and Xie et al. (2002) similarly reported that perpetrators do not attribute blame to themselves but rather ascribe it to others. The lack of responsibility that girls in this age group take for their actions has an implication for any intervention that may be put into place to address RA, in that the girls may be

resistant to behaviour change because they do not perceive themselves as aggressors. The girls' perceptions of RA, as measured by the scenarios, indicated that RA was more acceptable, but more distressing, than physical aggression. Correlations from the PEQ Self and Others suggested, however, that the more girls considered RA to be acceptable, the more likely they were to consider physical aggression as acceptable. This supports findings reported by Goldstein and Tisak (2010).

Both teachers and girls wanted to decrease the level of RA that occurred in classrooms. The girls in this study reported that it is not helpful when teachers are unaware of or minimise RA, or suggest that the girls just leave the situation. In the latter case, the girls stated that they would be unlikely to report RA. Overall, as with Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier's (2008) findings, both the girls and teachers stated that talking to an adult or a friend is an effective strategy in addressing RA in the classroom. It must be acknowledged, however, that adult intervention may inadvertently make the situation worse. Mechanisms must be put in place to deal with potential consequences, such as monitoring the outcomes for both the victim and perpetrator.

Positive student-teacher relationships, therefore, are subject to teachers being seen to observe and respond appropriately to incidences of RA. Although the teachers' strategies were driven by girls' feelings and sensitivity around RA, they were aware that not addressing RA in its early stage or not having very clear organisational structures might lead to escalation of the aggression. Luckner and Pianta (2011) also found that teachers with clear classroom organisation interactions had an impact on reducing RA with middle school students.

There was considerable overlap in the girls' and teachers' perceptions of RA and as part of normal development. The danger in considering RA as normal is that teachers could develop passive or indifferent attitudes toward it (see Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Radcliff & Joseph, 2011; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). It is interesting to note that the teachers did not seem to hear the somewhat paradoxical nature of their viewpoints that girls should not tolerate RA, and yet they consider RA to be normal.

A significant contribution to the literature from this research is the proposed model that identified distinct groups of aggressors: popular, regular, and tough girls. The literature identifies these types, but not in a cohesive model. Adler and Adler (1995) and Simmons (2002) postulated that popular girls' behaviours are the result of the dominant patriarchal culture having taught girls to mask overt aggression in favour of more covert actions. From this perspective, popularity can also be viewed as a social currency (McBride, 2011). Further, Wiseman (2002) and Currie et al. (2007) stated that popular girls' relationships with others and need for control is centred on girls' relationships (real or perceived) with boys. For regular girls, James et al. (2010) stated that the average girl may aggress as a function of friendship conflict and a mistaken view that such behaviour is normal. A new wave of research (Batchelor, 2010; Burman & Batchelor, 2009; James et al., 2010) has focused on "girl gangsters" (Batchelor, 2010, p. 407) that brings together the wealth of knowledge about girls in gangs and binds it with an understanding about the ways girls are relationally aggressive. Tough girls (see Figure 1) are unpopular with both other girls and

teachers, and considered by teachers to be less academically competent. Smith, Rose, and Schwartz-Mette (2010) also found that tough characteristics (measured by overt aggression such as calling out mean names) are not highly regarded by other girls. Gorman, Schwartz, Nakamoto, and Mayeux (2011) linked being disliked with overt aggression and low academic performance.

The proposed model would benefit from further examination to establish its reliability, validity, and usefulness. Teachers would then be able to use this model to first identify the characteristics of the aggressor and then adjust their interventions accordingly.

Several limitations in the study are noted. First, results may not generalise to other countries or even other regions of New Zealand. It is noted that reactions to actual aggressive acts may be different from reactions to written descriptions of such acts in scenarios and questionnaires. Also, as with any self-report measure, social desirability in the responses may have been a factor. In terms of the PEQ, one item might have been ambiguous. It asked how often has another girl started a fight with you/how often have you started a fight with another girl. It was not clear whether the fighting was physical; as such, this item did not yield reliable responses. A further limitation of the PEQ was that although the respondents were asked how many times a physical, relational, or prosocial behaviour occurred, it did not establish how many people were involved per incident. There may also have been a bias created in the responses of the girls who were interviewed because of the selection process. The girls were randomly selected from the overall pool of participants, rather than selecting students who were more representative of victims and perpetrators. Additionally, future research should include a scenario on cyber-bullying.

Overall, this study provides perspectives from a sample of adolescent girls and teachers in terms of what is considered RA, why girls engage in RA, and what strategies may be most effective for teachers to use when they encounter incidences of RA in the classroom. It proposes a model that may help teachers identify girls who are engaged in RA behaviours by their characteristics, which in turn may suggest the most effective ways to work with any particular girl to develop better ways of interacting with her peers.

Endnote

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Appendix: Interview questions

Introductory paragraph (read to all participants)

Relational aggression is behaviours that are intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion. Some of these behaviours, for example, include things like not letting some girls join into the group, negative facial expressions such as rolling of the eyes gossip, telling lies, spreading rumours or ignoring a girl on purpose. These behaviours are meant to make a girl feel bad and left out of the group.

1. Can you describe the last time you saw a girl acting in a relationally aggressive way in class?
2. What is the best thing for girls to do in class to address relational aggression? What do you think doesn't work?
3. What is the best thing the teacher does in class to address relational aggression? What do you think doesn't work?
4. Tell me what you think about the way girls use relational aggression. Why do you think girls behave in these ways?
5. Do you think that girls and teachers should use the same strategies to deal with relational aggression in class and out of class? Or do you think different situations require different strategies?
6. Is there anything else you think could be put into place to lower the levels of relational aggression happening in classrooms?