



Student Engagement: The Impact of Relational Aggression in High School

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Abstract

Student cognitive engagement can positively influence a student's academic performance in school and result in increased graduation rates. This study examines how relational aggression can impact cognitive engagement and how this impact differs between male and female students. Practitioners will create a deeper understanding of relational aggression and engagement resulting in allowing school psychologists to assist students by identifying and implementing effective interventions.

Literature Review

- Approximately 7,000 students drop out of school each year, and only 70% of entering freshman graduate (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009 & Wang & Peck, 2012).
- Cognitive engagement increases development of effective and efficient self-regulated strategies, therefore, allowing students to better understand complex ideas and evaluate potential benefits or downfalls of strategies (Miller & Byrnes, 2001; Wang & Peck, 2012).
- Relational aggression is bullying that focuses on negatively affecting peers by harming their social relationships (Crapanzano et al., 2010).
- Half of youth in sixth through tenth grade are verbally or relationally bullied (Johnson et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2009).
- Both males and females reported using avoidance and rumination to cope with relational aggression (Young & Dietrich, 2015).
- Avoidance coping has been linked to more health problems, increased risky behaviors, higher levels of stress, and lower self-esteem (Steiner et al., 2002 & Hunter et al., 2004).
- The use of rumination and high levels of stress is related to high levels of anxiety, which can decrease student success (Young & Dietrich, 2015).

- The purpose of this study was to determine how participants differ in cognitive engagement as a function of self-reported relational aggression (high/low) or gender (male/female).

Methods

Participants

- Participants in this study included 83 high school students from Midwestern rural schools.
- Although this survey was distributed and completed by 295 students, due to incomplete surveys, 40 males and 43 females were ultimately included in the analyses.

Procedure

- Participants completed adapted versions of the Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument to measure level of relational aggression (Parada, 2000) and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire to measure level of cognitive engagement (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990).
- Participants also answered qualitative questions regarding relational aggression and cognitive engagement.

Results

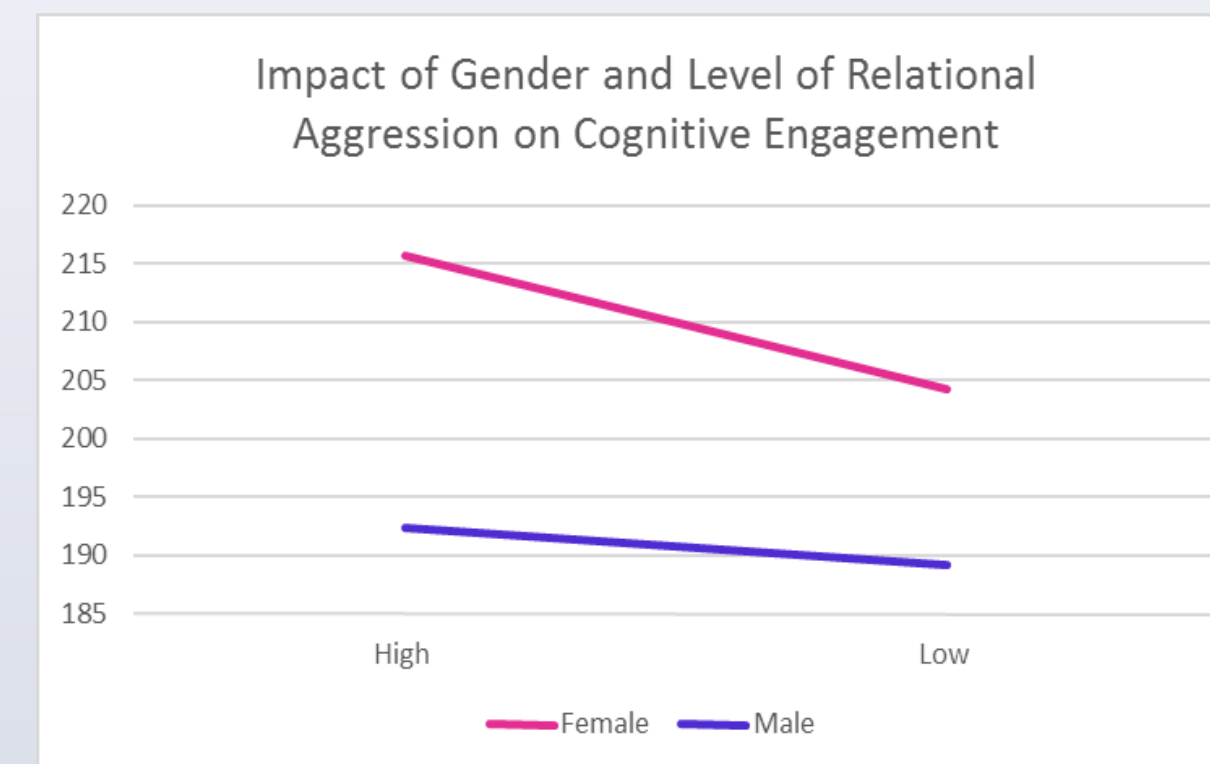
Reliability Analyses

- Before completing the main analyses for this study, reliability analyses were conducted on the surveys completed. Chronbach's alpha values for the two adapted scales were acceptable (Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument $\alpha=.946$; Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire $\alpha=.926$).

Main Analyses

- A median split was performed to create two groups: a high relational aggression group, and a low relational aggression group.
- A 2 x 2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine differences between males/females and low/high relational aggression on the dependent variable of cognitive engagement.

- The interaction between the independent variables (gender and level of relational aggression) was not significant $F(1, 79) = .204, p = .652, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$.
- The main effect for level of relational aggression was not significant, $F(1, 79) = .668, p = .416, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .008$.
- However, the main effect for gender was significant, $F(1, 79) = 4.543, p = .036, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .054$. Specifically, females reported significantly higher cognitive engagement than males.



Qualitative Data (top answers)

Student participants within this sample responded to four qualitative questions. Theme analysis of this data revealed the following:

- Students experience relational aggression most often at school or on social media.
- Student complete acts of relational aggression most often through others or via technology.
- When experiencing relational aggression students reported experiencing a decrease in self-esteem and lack of focus.
- Students reported school professionals could help decrease experiences of relational aggression by acknowledging the acts and talking to involved parties.

Discussion

- The results of this study indicated no significant differences in cognitive engagement, based on level of relational aggression.
- However, there was a significant effect for gender, as females reported significantly higher levels of cognitive engagement in the classroom.
- Prior research completed by Wang and Peck (2012), found no significant difference between male and female reports of cognitive engagement in the classroom.

Implications and Future Direction

- Using the results of this study, high school professionals should attempt to increase the cognitive engagement of male students.
- This is important because cognitive engagement results in academic success. Additionally, prior research found that over time a male student's cognitive engagement decreases.
- School professionals can increase cognitive engagement by having high expectations for students, challenging students cognitively, and providing responsive feedback.
- In relation to the qualitative data, school professionals should ensure students know acts of relational aggression will be addressed, but they could be unaware of the repercussions others face.
- The implementation of PBIS could help reduce acts of relational aggression.
- In the future, the completion of all items on the survey should be stressed to students.

Selected References

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