

Effect of Social Support on the Relationship between Relational Aggression and Family-Maladjustment: Adolescents' Perspective

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The study was aimed to investigate the moderating role of social support on the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment among adolescents. Data was collected on Diverse Adolescents Relational Aggression Scale (Horton, 2010) to assess relational aggression, Perceived Social Support Scale (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991) to assess social support, and Index of Family Relations-IFR (Hudson, 1997) to measure degree of family maladjustment. Participants were approached at different schools and colleges of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Sample ($N = 300$) comprised of equal number of girls and boys with age range 14-18 years. Psychometric properties of scales indicted moderate to good reliability for the study sample. Analysis on demographics indicated that study variables varied nonsignificantly. Results showed that family maladjustment was significantly positively related with relational aggression; whereas, significantly negatively related with social support. Regression analysis further revealed that social support and particularly family support moderates the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment. This significant interaction suggested that although there was positive relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment; provision of social support, in general, and family support, in particular, may nullify the effect of relational aggression and improve adjustment in adolescents even with aggressive tendencies.

Keywords. Family maladjustment, moderators, relational aggression, social support

Empirical literature consistently reported that relational aggression and family adjustment are negatively correlated (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001), while social

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support and family adjustment are positively related (Touliatos, Perlmutter, & Straus, 1990). According to Dellasega and Nixon (2003), family adjustment is not a simple phenomenon, rather it is a complex interplay between multiple factors including demographics (i.e., socioeconomic status, health, gender, education, family system, and ethnic background); psychosocial (i.e., personality traits); and socio-environmental (i.e., social and tangible support). Given such a complex interplay, it is imperative to explore factors affecting family adjustment from various domains of individual's life. Present study is aimed to explore the buffering role of social support on the effect of relational aggression on family maladjustment among adolescents.

Earlier literature though addressed the role of aggression generally, yet the literature is scarce specifically exploring the effect of relational aggression on family maladjustment (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997). Studies (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999) have indicated negative association between relational aggression and social support as well positive association between relational aggression and psychological maladjustment during major developmental stages including, that is, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. The present study is designed to elucidate the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment in adolescents. The core objective is to develop an understating of the role of social support for the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment.

Adolescence is the stage of storms and stress evoking several of adjustment issues with family, friends, and social setups. During late adolescence, the adolescents strive and struggle for autonomy resulting in adjustment issues between adolescents and their families (Werner & Crick, 1999). Given the critical nature of late adolescence in reference to family adjustment, the present study focused adolescent sample assumed to be vulnerable for psychological, social and familial adjustment problems. Though variances due to demographic characteristics were not the main objective of the study, yet as the literature indicates inconsistent findings with relational aggression, some of them suggesting high relational aggression among girls (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), while others suggesting no differences across gender (Prinstein et al., 2001), we assumed that an investigation for gender differences on study variables may help in resolving contradiction presented in literature particularly addressing relational aggression (Burton et al., 2007; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Prinstein et al., 2001).

Though a direct relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment as indicated by earlier researches (Dellasega &

Nixon, 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999) is logical, but the underlying mechanism is not that simple. Another predictor of adjustment is social support from the family, peers, and feelings of commitment to a social group increase the overall adjustment of an individual (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008). Empirical evidences suggest that social support is positively related to psychological, social, and occupational development of an individual (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). Empirical literature indicates a positive role of social support for a variety of otherwise disadvantaged populations. It appears to have a positive contribution in psychological adjustment of cancer patients (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996), as well as family adjustment of disabled and physically ill individuals (Wilson, Washington, Engel, Ciol, & Jensen, 2006). In line with earlier literature, we assumed that social support is negatively related with both relational aggression and family adjustment among adolescents.

Both relational aggression and social support are empirically related to maladjustment, empirical literature is lacking on the interactive effect of relational aggression and social support on family maladjustment (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Rubinlicht, 2011). A little is devoted in the existing literature for investigating triad of the relationship. Ladd and Burgess (2001) suggested that social support moderates the association between aggression and adjustment as it compensates the dysfunctions created by aggression. Rubinlicht (2011) also explored the moderating role of family and peer support on relational aggression and academic adjustment among youth. Results indicated that youth having supportive friends and family have less impact of relational aggression on the academic adjustment. Family and peer support may act as a buffer in minimizing negative impact of being a victim of relational aggression. Adolescents high on these forms of social supports performed better in their academic chores as compared to individuals who lacks family and peers support. In line with these researches, we also assumed that social support, in general, and family support, in particular, may act as moderating factors for the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment.

The present study is aimed to address three major objectives. Firstly, we aim to find out the relationship between relational aggression, social support and family maladjustment among adolescents. Secondly, we aim to investigate any potential gender differences on relational aggression, social support, and family maladjustment. Finally, our third objective is to investigate the moderating effect of social support for the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment among adolescents.

Method

Sample

In the present study, purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data from adolescents. The sample of the study consisted of adolescents ($N = 300$), having equal number of boys ($n = 150$) and girls ($n = 150$). Sample was collected from schools and colleges of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Age of the sample ranged from 14 to 18 years ($M = 16.49$, $SD = 1.49$). In the present study, $n = 110$ belongs to nuclear family system in which adolescents' lives with their parents only, whereas $n = 190$ participants belongs from joint family system in which adolescents' lives with their parents, grandparents, and other relatives. In present study, early adolescents whose age range varies between 14-16 years were $n = 130$ and late adolescents whose age range lies between 17-19 years were $n = 170$.

Instruments

The Diverse Adolescent Relational Aggression Scale. It was developed by Horton (2010) for adolescents of age 14-19 years. It consisted of 28 items that were used to assess relational aggression among closely associated relationships, that is, family and friends. All items were positively worded to describe relationally aggressive behaviors and influences (i.e., It is okay to talk about someone behind their back). Items were scored on a 4-point Likert scale (1) = *strongly disagree* to (4) = *strongly agree*. A composite score was computed by summing responses on all the items. Higher scores on the computed variables indicated higher levels of relational aggression. The Diverse Adolescent Relational Aggression Scale (Horton, 2010) had high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .78 (Horton, 2010) and in the sample of the present study Cronbach's alpha reliability of this measure was found to be .72.

Perceived Social Support Scale. Perceived Social Support Scale was developed by Pierce et al. (1991) and translated by Rafai (as cited in Awan, 2007). In the present study translated version of Perceived Social Support was used. This scale consisted of 26 items including four subscales; Family Support (8 items), Peers Support (5 items), Close-Ones Support (3 items), and Colleagues' Support (10 items). Items were rated on a 5-point likert scale having five response categories ranging from 1= *Never* to 5 = *Always*. Given the age range of the study sample that is 14-18 years, ten items measuring perceived

social support provided by the colleagues were not used in the present study. Perceived Social Support Scale had good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .81 (Awan, 2007) and in the sample of present study Cronbach's also was .75 which suggested that the instrument was reliable.

Index of Family Relations. Index of Family Relations (IFR) was developed by Hudson (1997). The IFR consisted of 25 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *none of the time* to (7) *all of the time*. This scale was used to assess the degree of impairment in family relations. The IFR included 12 reverse score items (i.e., I think my family is terrific). High score on computed variable indicates more family problems for the respondent. Index of Family Relation was appeared to have high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha coefficient =.90 (Hudson, 1997), while for the present sample reliability of IFR was found to be .90.

Procedure

Sample was approached individually at schools and colleges. Informed consent was taken from the participants by giving them a complete orientation of study objectives. Participants were assured about the confidentiality of data. Instructions were given to the participants for filling the questionnaires and scales were administered on them. Participants were properly guided for their queries regarding the understanding of items. They were thanked for their participation and cooperation in study after completion of scales.

Results

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. In which bivariate correlation was used to investigate relationship between study variables. Independent sample *t*-test was applied to test differences in study variables across gender. Further, multiple linear regression analysis was used to test moderating role of social support on the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment.

First objective of present study was to investigate relationship between relational aggression, family maladjustment, and social support. Results presented in Table 1 showed that relational aggression is significantly positively associated with family maladjustment, while social support is negatively associated with family maladjustment. Additionally, family support is negatively

associated with relational aggression and family maladjustment. Finally, peers support, and close relationships support are also negatively related with family maladjustment (Table 1).

Table 1

Pearson Correlation between Relational Aggression, Family Maladjustment, Social Support and Its Subscales (N=300)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Relational Aggression	-					
2. Family Maladjustment	.16**	-				
3. Social Support	-.02	-.42**	-			
4. Family Support	-.10	-.49**	.81**	-		
5. Peers Support	.04	-.21**	.78**	.42**	-	
6. Close relationships Support	.04	-.22**	.63**	.30**	.27**	-

** $p \leq .01$.

Second objective of present study is to explore gender differences in relational aggression, social support, and family maladjustment. Findings of *t*-test showed nonsignificant mean differences across gender ($p > .05$) on all three study variables that is, relational aggression, family maladjustment, social support as well as on subscales.

Moderating Role of Social Support on the Relationship between Relational Aggression and Family Maladjustment

The main objective of our study is to investigate the moderating role of social support and its domains on relational aggression and family maladjustment. Our results showed that social support act as a moderator in the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment. As presented in Table 2, social support (β Interaction = -.11, $p < .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$) appeared to moderate the effect of relational aggression on family maladjustment and added 1% additional variance in the model. This moderating effect of social support is further elaborated through modgraph. As presented in Figure 1, modgraph showed that when social support is low, there is a positive relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment, whereas higher levels of social support are associated with a decline of the effect of relational aggression on familial maladjustment.

Table 2
Moderation of Social Support on the Relationship between Relational Aggression and Family Maladjustment (N=300)

Predictors	Family Maladjustment				
	Model 1B	Model 2B	B	Model 3	
				LL	UL
Constant	81.14**	97.12**	99.82**	73.45	126.19
Age (in years)	-3.47**	-3.16**	-3.29**	-4.70	-1.88
Education (in years)	.29	.49	.48	-0.69	1.65
RA		.29**	.28**	0.07	0.48
SS		-.71**	-.71**	-0.88	-0.54
RA X SS			-.02**	-0.03	-0.004
R ²	.07	.26		.27	
ΔR ²		.19		.01	
F	12.21**	26.28**		22.50**	
ΔF		37.36		5.71	

Note. RA= Relational Aggression, SS= Social Support

** $p \leq .01$

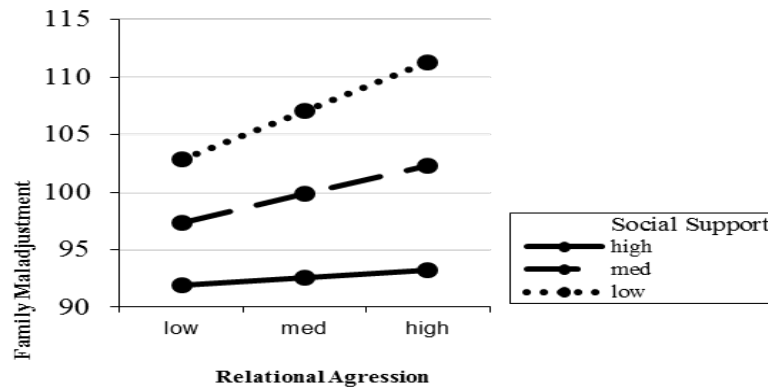


Figure 1. Moderating effect of social support on relational aggression and family maladjustment.

Our findings also indicated that among sources of social support, family support is the most critical variable affecting the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment. As presented in Table 3, family support moderated ($\beta = -.09, p < .05, \Delta R^2 = .009$) the effect of relational aggression on family maladjustment and explained 0.9% additional variance in the model. The moderation is further elaborated through modgraph. As with overall social support, a

similar pattern of relationship is observed for moderation by familial support. As presented in Figure 2, modgraph showed that increase in family support reduced the impact of relational aggression on family maladjustment, whereas low levels of family support are associated with increase in the impact of relational aggression on family maladjustment.

Table 3
Moderation of Family Support on Relationship between Relational Aggression and Family Maladjustment (N=300)

Predictors	Family Maladjustment				
	Model 1B	Model 2B	B	Model 3	
				LL	UL
Constant	81.14**	112.57**	112.63**	86.45	138.82
Age (years)	-3.47**	-3.23**	-3.29**	-4.64	-1.92
Education (years)	.29	.51	.52	-0.61	1.66
RA		.19*	.19*	-0.05	0.38
FS		-1.63**	-1.59**	-1.92	-1.26
RA X FS			-.04*	-0.07	-0.0001
R ²	.07	.31		.32	
ΔR^2		.23		.009	
F	12.21**	33.81**		28.09**	
ΔF		51.28		3.89	

Note. RA= Relational Aggression, FS= Family Support.
* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

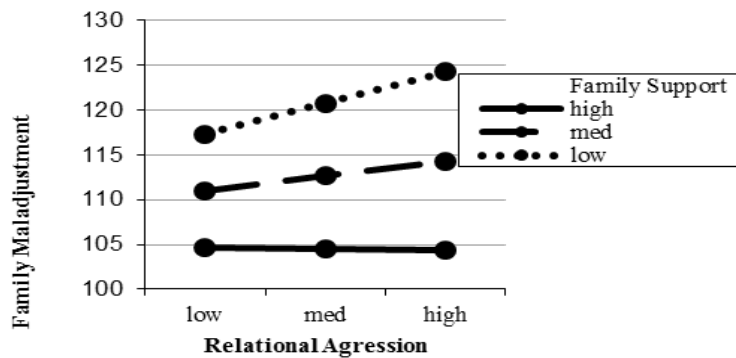


Figure 2. Moderating effect of Family support on Relational aggression and Family maladjustment.

Findings of present study indicates nonsignificant mean differences across gender on relational aggression ($t = .91$, $df = 298$,

$p = .36$), family maladjustment ($t = 1.08$, $df = 298$, $p = .28$) and perceived social support ($t = .63$, $df = 298$, $p = .52$) among adolescents.

Discussion

The study was aimed to explore the moderating role of social support on the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment. Earlier literature suggests that social support act as a moderator and buffers the impact of relational aggression on family maladjustment (Ladd & Burgess, 2001). Social support may minimize or balance the impact of relational aggression on family maladjustment as social support is positively related with family adjustment of a person (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Elhawi & Itzhaky, 2005; Touliatos et al., 1990).

The first objective of present study was to find relationship between relational aggression, social support, and family maladjustment. Results of present study showed that relational aggression has significant positive association with family maladjustment and it is negatively associated with social support. Previous literature also gives consistent findings that these constructs are related with each other. For instance, study conducted by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) indicated that relational aggression is associated with social-psychological adjustment among sixth graders. The researchers indicated that relational aggression had negative impact on the family life of a person and it is mostly associated with family problems. A study conducted by Crick (1996) stated that relational aggression is a strong precursor of future social maladjustment and children who exhibit relationally aggressive behavior have higher chances to develop psychological problems in later life including internalizing and externalizing problems.

Another study conducted by Prinstein et al. (2001) also presented similar findings and showed evidence suggesting that aggressors and victims of relational aggression both experience social and psychological maladjustment. Perpetrators of relational aggression experience loneliness and social disapproval while victims of relational aggression experience social avoidance, social apprehension, and social isolation. Findings of present study align with above cited literature. Our results also showed negative relationship between social support and family maladjustment among adolescents. Literature showed that social support and family adjustment are strongly associated with each other and that lack of social support leads towards social, psychological, and academic

problems among people of all ages. Izzo, Weiss, Shanahan, and Rodriguez-Brown (2008) conducted a research to investigate the role of social support on adjustment and their research findings showed that social support has been a strong predictor of socio-emotional adjustment. Social support has affirmative influence on psychological, social, and occupational development of an individual. People with strong and effective social relationships usually have well established personalities. Later literature evidenced that social capital has a positive impact on personal and family well-being (Kim et al., 2008). Literature has also presented evidences suggesting that social support plays an important role in the life of physically disabled people. Additionally, social support provided by family is significantly positively related with psychological and functional adjustment (Wilson et al., 2006).

Elmaci (2006) concluded that with increase in social support, the social and psychological adjustment level also increases, whereas depression level decreases among students of broken families. In other words, adjustment is positively related with social support and it is inversely related with depression. For adolescents, family adjustment is directly related with social support. Lack of social support, especially, parent support may lead toward internalizing as well externalizing problems including depression, anxiety, overt, and covert aggression, delinquent behaviors, and substance abuse (Touliatos et al., 1990). Findings of our study showed that social support is significantly negatively related with family maladjustment. Family support, peers support, and close relationships support is also significantly negatively related with family maladjustment.

Second objective of this study was to explore mean differences across gender. Our results showed nonsignificant gender differences in relational aggression among adolescents. Previous literature indicated that significant gender differences appeared on relational aggression only in children, but not in adolescents. For instance, Prinstein et al. (2001) investigated relationship between relational aggression and psychosocial problems among aggressors and victims; thereby concluded nonsignificant gender differences in relational aggression among aggressors and victims. According to their findings, male and female level of showing relational aggression is same in adolescence and adulthood, while significantly different across gender in childhood. Finally, moderating role of social support including family support, on the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment was determined by using multiple regression analysis. It was hypothesized that social support, and family support, moderates the relationship between relational aggression and family

maladjustment. Findings of present research supported hypothesis and suggested that social support particularly family support moderates the effect of relational aggression on family maladjustment. A research conducted by Ladd and Burgess (2001) also showed that social support act as a moderator in minimizing the impact of relational aggression on family maladjustment. Social support decreases the dysfunctions created by relational aggression and enhances family adjustment. Another research conducted by Rubinlicht (2011) concluded that youth who have supportive friends and family are least affected by relational aggression, particularly, in reference to their academic adjustment. These findings indicated that social support minimizes the negative impact of being victim of relational aggression.

As the findings of present study highlights that relational aggression and family maladjustment are very influential factors which affects family life of adolescents and furthermore, both girls and boys gets equally victimized. According to indigenous study (Khan, Quadri, & Aziz, 2014), aggressive behavior is directly related to family structure and family environment. Aggressive child behaviors (both direct and indirect) are the inclination to behave in an unfriendly fashion in a society with family members, parents, peers, teachers, and relatives (Khan et al., 2014).

Limitations and Suggestions

The present study has although elucidated critical role of social support for the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment, it certainly has some limitations. First of all, relational aggression, family maladjustment, and social support were assessed by using self-reported measures; hence posing a threat of common variance method. Future studies shall also include parents, peers, or teacher rating instruments to avoid this limitation. Secondly, the cross sectional design of the present research limits on determination of causation. It is recommended to replicate the study using a longitudinal design. Additionally, given the complexity of family adjustment phenomenon, it is subject to be influence of multiple factors. It is recommended that confounding and correlates shall be controlled in future studies. Finally, sample of the study poses a limitation on generalization as data was collected from schools and colleges of Rawalpindi and Islamabad only. It is recommended that future studies shall incorporate more diverse sample.

Implications

Social support plays an essential role in the healthy life of an individual. By providing social support to relationally aggressive adolescents, the impact of relational aggression can be reduced on the family adjustment. Family adjustment and social support are positively related with each other and leads towards healthy life. Social support decreases family dysfunctions and problems, whereas enhances family adjustment. Findings of the present study provides a baseline that may help in developing social support based interventions to decrease adverse impact of relational aggression on family life of adolescents. Furthermore, it is concluded that provision of social support is helpful in family adjustment of adolescents.

Conclusion

Present study explored the moderating role of social support in the relationship between relational aggression and family maladjustment. Findings showed that relational aggression is positively related with family maladjustment and it is negatively related with social support. Family maladjustment has significant negative association with social support, peers support, family support, and close relationships support. Moderation analysis revealed that social support particularly family support act as a moderator and buffers the effect of relational aggression on family maladjustment.

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