

The Broader Context of Relational Aggression in Adolescent Romantic Relationships: Predictions from Peer Pressure and Links to Psychosocial Functioning

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Abstract The broader context of relational aggression in adolescent romantic relationships was assessed by considering the ways such aggression emerged from prior experiences of peer pressure and was linked to concurrent difficulties in psychosocial functioning. Longitudinal, multi-reporter data were obtained from 97 adolescents and their best friends at age 15 and from adolescents and their romantic partners at age 18. Teens' relational aggression and romantic partners' victimization were predicted from levels of best friends' pressuring behaviors toward teens in an observed interaction as well as from best friends' ratings of how much pressure teens experienced from their peer group. Romantic partner relational aggression and teen victimization were predicted by pressure from teens' peer group only. Adolescents' romantic relational aggression and victimization were also associated with elevated levels of depressive symptoms and increased alcohol use. Results are discussed in terms of the connection of relational aggression in romantic relationships to the broader task of establishing autonomy with peers in psychosocial development.

Keywords Peer pressure · Autonomy · Romantic relationship · Relational aggression · Psychosocial functioning · Alcohol · Depression

Introduction

For much of the past decade, the study of relational aggression and victimization has primarily focused on examining its perpetration and consequences within the peer context (e.g., Crick and Grotpeter 1995, 1996; Prinstein et al. 2001; Sullivan et al. 2006; Werner and Crick 1999). Although this research has yielded critical information for understanding relational aggression and victimization, one central peer context has received little attention—the romantic relationship (Linder et al. 2002). Given the significance of peers in the emergence of romantic relationships during the later teenage years (Connolly et al. 2000), there are likely to be links between peer relations in early adolescence and future romantic relationships that may help explain why certain adolescent romantic relationships become characterized by relational aggression and victimization while others do not. This study aimed to examine one possible area of linkage, namely that the experience of peer pressure during early adolescence may increase the risk for later involvement in a relationally aggressive romantic relationship. Moreover, the present investigation also sought to explore associations between romantic relational aggression and victimization and internalizing and externalizing behaviors during late adolescence, thus extending our knowledge about links of relational aggression in romantic relationships to broader patterns of psychosocial functioning.

Relational Aggression in Peer Relationships

Relational aggression has been broadly defined as any attempt to harm another person by manipulating or damaging their social relationships (Crick and Grotpeter 1995).

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Unlike more overt forms of aggression, such as physical or verbal aggression, relational aggression aims to harm others by covert, indirect, and often circuitous means. At younger ages (pre-adolescence), these methods are often utilized within peer groups and incorporate strategies such as socially excluding others, spreading rumors, criticizing others behind their backs, or threatening to end relationships. Although these same forms often also appear in adolescence and adulthood, additional forms of relational aggression employed by teens and adults include dismissing others' opinions, making others feel guilty, withdrawing attention, or pretending to be hurt to make another person feel bad (see Archer and Coyne 2005, for a review). Previous research has also identified being the target of relational aggression, termed relational victimization, as a distinct construct, demonstrating that there are only modest correlations between being relationally aggressive and being a victim of relational aggression (Crick et al. 2001).

Early research examining gender differences in the perpetration of relational aggression found that at younger ages—during elementary and middle school years—girls tend to exhibit significantly more relational aggression than boys (Crick and Grotpeter 1995). Subsequent research regarding gender effects at these ages, however, has been mixed, with many studies finding no gender differences or finding a gender difference in the male direction (Archer and Coyne 2005). Moreover, studies examining relational aggression in adulthood have found little or no gender differences in the use of relational aggression, suggesting that if females do tend to use more relational aggression during childhood, the frequency with which males use relational aggression may increase with age (Archer and Coyne 2005; Björkqvist et al. 1992).

In terms of race/ethnicity, Prinstein et al. (2001) studied an ethnically diverse sample of 9th–12th graders and found that teens did not differ by ethnicity on measures of overt or relational aggression and victimization. Moreover, though previous research examining intimate partner violence has mostly demonstrated a higher rate of violence for black versus white couples (e.g., Caetano et al. 2000; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000), recent research has shown that these differences tend to disappear when data are disaggregated to account for individuals' household income and gender (Rennison and Planty 2003).

Relational Aggression in Romantic Relationships

Although a substantial literature has examined relational aggression within the peer context, little is known about how relational aggression operates within dyadic romantic relationships. Romantic relational aggression has been

conceptualized similarly to relational aggression in peer relationships and defined as any effort to use a romantic relationship as a means of manipulating or psychologically harming a romantic partner. Typical behaviors include threatening to break up with a romantic partner, making a partner jealous, or flirting with someone else in front of a partner (Morales and Crick unpublished measure). In the only published study of romantic relational aggression, Linder et al. (2002) found that college students who reported using relational aggression within their romantic relationships were less trusting of their current or most recent partner, and more frustrated, jealous, and clingy in their romantic relationships. Moreover, they found that men and women in their study reported using relational aggression at comparable levels, though men reported being victimized by relational aggression more often than women. These researchers also explored parental and peer predictors of romantic relational aggression and found that alienation from mothers and high levels of communication with fathers predicted higher levels of individuals' concurrent relational aggression. Similarly, alienation from peers predicted both more romantic relational aggression and victimization.

Linder et al. (2002) suggested that one possible explanation for these findings may be that due to parental and peer alienation, relationally-aggressive individuals may not have had a chance to learn appropriate skills for managing the give and take of intimate dyadic relationships. Furthermore, they surmised that high levels of communication with fathers might actually signal negative parent–child enmeshment, which may undermine the autonomy of the child and provide opportunities for these individuals to learn tactics of relational aggression within the relationship. Support for a combination of these ideas has also been offered by a number of studies indicating that autonomy undermining strategies by parents often involve socialization processes that discourage children from interacting with others (see Barber 1996, for a review), which may leave teens unable to assert their autonomy appropriately with peers (e.g., by resisting peer pressure) in future relationships (Allen 2004).

Developmental Significance of Autonomy in Adolescence

Establishing autonomy, both from parents during early adolescence and from peers in the later teenage years, has become recognized as a critical aspect of individuals' normative development during adolescence (Allen et al. 1994a; Grotevant and Cooper 1985; Hill and Holmbeck 1986). Previous research has documented a number of associations between adolescents' lack of autonomy from

parents and different problematic behaviors, including increases in depressive affect, drug use, and delinquency (Allen et al. 1994b; Casas et al. 2006). Moreover, research has consistently demonstrated associations between parental psychological control, which seeks to undermine children's autonomy, and children's aggressive behaviors within the peer context (Hart et al. 2003; Nelson and Crick 2002; Rogers et al. 2003). With regard to relational aggression specifically, parental enmeshment (in the form of excessive maternal coercion) has been found to be associated with greater perpetration of relational aggression in a sample of Russian nursery-school-age children (Hart et al. 1998), and parental psychological control has been significantly linked to increased relational aggression in pre-school age Chinese girls (Nelson et al. 2006). Such research, though limited to younger children and peer relationships, suggests that difficulties with autonomy and enmeshment in early adolescent peer relationships may also serve as precursors to the development of relational aggression in later romantic relationships. It may be, for example, that adolescents who frequently have their autonomy undermined by their best friends or larger peer social network experience and learn a degree of over-involvement within these relationships which is carried forth into their later romantic relationships in the form of relational aggression. Alternatively, these experiences may lead teens away from seeking other important interpersonal experiences during adolescence that lay the groundwork for healthy future romantic relationships.

Peer Relations as a Foundation for Romantic Relationships

Indeed, a growing literature has documented early adolescent peer relationships as particularly important for laying a foundation for future romantic relationships (Furman and Wehner 1994; Laursen and Williams 1997). In one of the earliest investigations of the role of peers in the development of adolescent romantic relationships, Dunphy (1963) observed that prior to the onset of romantic relationships peer groups tend to evolve from unisexual cliques of four to six close friends into larger mixed-sexed groups. Following the formation of these larger mixed groups, individuals within these networks begin to date one another and, as the groups themselves begin to disintegrate, couples emerge. These ideas are also consistent with more recent research linking romantic relationships to qualities of the larger peer group (Connolly et al. 2000; Connolly and Johnson 1996).

Research has also supported the idea that early relationship experiences, particularly those taking place within the peer context, may have a significant impact on the

quality of future romantic relationships (Furman 1999). Connolly and Johnson (1996), for example, found that adolescents' perceptions of support in their romantic relationships were correlated with perceptions of support from their best friends, suggesting that individuals may select romantic partners based on qualities they experience in their friendships. Longitudinal research has also shown that friendship quality has an effect, though it may be indirect, on the quality of teens' future romantic relationships (Connolly et al. 2000). This research has demonstrated that positive friendship qualities such as intimacy, nurturance, and affection are predictive of the same positive characteristics in individuals' concurrent romantic relationships. These positive concurrent relationship qualities then predict the same positive features in individuals' romantic relationships one year later. Similarly, negative aspects of friendships, including conflict and punishment, have been shown to predict negative qualities in concurrent and future romantic relationships (Connolly et al. 2000).

Peer Pressure as a Form of Autonomy Restriction

Peer pressure may be one important example of a negative friendship or peer experience in early adolescence that predicts unfavorable consequences for individuals' later romantic relationships. Peer pressure is broadly defined as any attempt by one or more peers to compel an individual to follow in the decisions or behaviors favored by the pressuring individual or group (Sim and Koh 2003). From the vantage point of adolescent autonomy development, peer pressure involves restricting individuals' capacity to make decisions and engage in behavior of their own volition by making them feel uncomfortable about asserting their own opinions. Such pressuring may be accomplished in many ways, including, but not limited to, forcefully stating one's own (favored) choice, ignoring the target's choice or reason for it, or using sarcasm to put down the target's position. Similarly, pressure might also be applied by using guilt induction or making exaggerated characterizations of the target's behavior (e.g., "You *always* say that."); Allen et al. 2001).

Prior work examining the sequelae of negative peer pressure has linked peer pressure to a host of undesirable outcomes for adolescents, including greater alcohol consumption, cigarette use, petty theft, drug use, delinquency, depressive symptoms and poorer grades in school (Allen et al. 2006; Santor et al. 2000; Sullivan 2006). In addition to these consequences, Crockett et al. (2006), using a longitudinal design to examine negative peer pressure at ages 12–13, found that pre-teens who experienced more negative peer pressure were also more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior at ages 16–17 as compared to teens

who did not experience negative peer pressure when they were younger. Little research, however, has explored associations between negative peer pressure and future interpersonal relationships. In one exception, Allen et al. 2006, found that negative peer influence predicted less stability in adolescents’ friendships over a one-year period, indicating that peer pressure may indeed impact future relationships in important ways. Despite these initial indications, however, research has yet to address the potential influence of such peer pressure on adolescents’ romantic relationships.

Relational Aggression and Links to Psychosocial Functioning

Though a burgeoning literature suggests that *peer* relational aggression and victimization are associated with negative consequences for psychological adjustment, there is a lack of research examining similar links between relational aggression in romantic relationships and adolescents’ psychosocial functioning. Studies in the peer context have revealed that both relationally aggressive children and youth who are victimized by relational aggression are more likely to be depressed, lonely, anxious, and socially isolated by their peers (Crick and Grotpeter 1995; Crick and Bigbee 1998; Prinstein et al. 2001). In a sample of college students, Werner and Crick (1999) found that young adults described as relationally aggressive by their peers displayed more antisocial and borderline personality features, including difficulties managing anger, tempestuous interpersonal relationships, and higher levels of impulsive and self-destructive behavior. Relational victimization has also been linked to externalizing problem behaviors. Sullivan et al. (2006) reported that relational victimization in a sample of eighth-grade boys and girls was associated with increased marijuana use for girls in the study and increased cigarette and alcohol for both boys and girls. These researchers also noted that relational victimization was positively associated with perpetration of relational and physical aggression, as well as delinquent behavior, after controlling for youths’ physical victimization.

Present Study and Hypotheses

The present study uses a multi-method, multi-informant longitudinal design to examine the overarching hypothesis that early experiences of negative peer pressure from teens’ best friends and larger peer social networks will predict the adoption of similar maladaptive relational strategies in their later romantic relationships, and further, to explore

links between romantic relational aggression and victimization and psychological maladjustment. First, it was predicted that adolescents who experience high levels of peer pressure from their best friends and larger peer groups would be more likely to self-report being relationally aggressive in their later romantic relationships and to have a romantic partner who reported being victimized by relational aggression. Second, because romantic partners are likely to be selected from teens’ larger social networks, it was predicted that peer pressure from teens’ larger social networks would predict higher levels of relational aggression from their romantic partners and elicit reports of relational victimization from teens. Third, extending previous research examining the negative correlates of relational aggression and victimization with respect to psychological adjustment, it was hypothesized that teens who perpetrated or were victims of romantic relational aggression would be more likely to report increased depressive symptoms and alcohol use. Adolescent gender and racial/ethnic status were also examined in all analyses, though no a priori hypotheses were presented with regard to adolescent demographic characteristics. Figure 1 presents a diagram of our hypotheses.

Method

Participants

This report is drawn from a larger longitudinal investigation of adolescent social development in familial and peer contexts. Participants included 97 teenagers along with their best friends and their romantic partners, assessed over a three-year period (adolescents were age 15.19 (*SD* = .79), 42% male, 58% female, at Time 1 and 18.30 (*SD* = 1.27) with the same gender breakdown at Time 2). The sample was socio-economically and racially diverse: 53% of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 33% as African American, and 14% as being from other or mixed ethnic groups. Adolescents’ parents reported an average

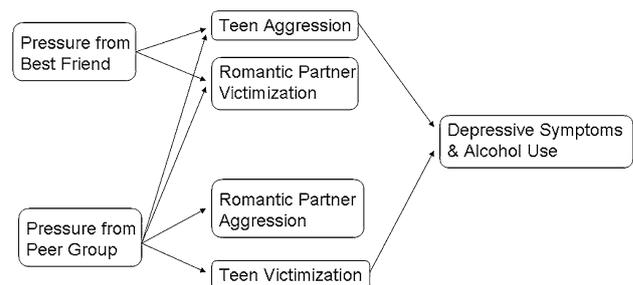


Fig. 1 Illustration of hypotheses

family income in the \$30,000 to \$39,999 range (20% of the sample reported annual family income less than \$20,000, and 37% reported annual family income greater than \$60,000). Income was assessed using a multiple choice question indicating ranges of incomes, which were then coded as a number, one through eight, with higher numbers indicating a higher income range (i.e., a score of one indicates an income range of \$0–\$4,999; and an eight indicates an income range of \$60,000 or more).

At Time 1, adolescents nominated their closest, same-gendered friend (age 15, $SD = 1.01$) to be included in the study. At Time 2, data were collected from target adolescents as well as their romantic partners. Romantic partners averaged 19.06 years of age ($SD = 3.10$), and their relationships with target adolescents averaged 14.40 months (range = 2.00–64.00, $SD = 13.31$). Although same-gender romantic relationships were not excluded, at the time of the study no participants reported being in such relationships; data detailing the ethnic/racial identities of romantic partners were unavailable. The 97 target adolescents in this study were a subset of the larger sample of 184 adolescents in the study, selected based on presence of a significant (i.e., 2-month or longer) romantic relationship by age 18. Analyses indicated that individuals who were in a romantic relationship at Time 2 were less likely to self-identify as racial/ethnic minorities than those who were not ($t = 2.88$, $p < .01$). There were no other significant differences on any other variables between adolescents who did versus did not have significant a romantic relationship at Time 2.

Adolescents were initially recruited to participate in a larger study from the seventh and eighth grades at a public middle school drawing from suburban and urban populations in the southeastern United States. Students were recruited via an initial mailing to all parents of students in the school along with follow-up contact efforts at school lunches. Interested families were subsequently contacted by phone. Of all students eligible for participation, 63% agreed to take part in the study. This sample appeared generally comparable to the overall population of the school in terms of racial/ethnic composition (37% non-White in sample vs. approximately 40% non-White in school) and socio-economic status (mean household income = \$44,900 in sample vs. \$48,000 for community at large). Adolescents provided informed assent, and their parents provided informed consent before each assessment. The same assent/consent procedures were also used for close friends and romantic partners. Interviews took place in private offices within a university academic building. Adolescents, peers, and romantic partners were all paid for their participation.

Measures

Romantic Relational Aggression and Victimization

Target adolescents and romantic partners each completed a 10-item measure about the levels of relational aggression and victimization in their relationship (Morales and Crick unpublished measure). The romantic relational aggression scale was comprised of five items and measured the reporter's aggression towards their romantic partner (e.g., "I have threatened to break up with my romantic partner in order to get him/her to do what I wanted") whereas the 5-item victimization scale measured relational victimization experienced by the reporter (e.g., "When my romantic partner wants something, s/he will ignore me until I give in"). Each item was rated on a 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = always) with higher scores indicating higher levels of relational aggression and victimization. Scale items are consistent with the types of peer nomination items used to assess relational aggression in childhood (e.g., "Tells friends they will stop liking them unless friends do what they say; When mad at a person, ignores them or stops talking to them"; Grotper and Crick 1996). Both relational aggression and victimization scales have shown relatively good internal consistency in previous studies ($\alpha = .73$, $\alpha = .72$; Linder et al. 2002) and in the current investigation ($\alpha = .76$, $\alpha = .84$, respectively for teens; $\alpha = .58$, $\alpha = .86$, respectively for romantic partners). Linder et al. (2002) reported that this measure was related in theoretically predicted ways to other measures of concurrent peer, parental, and romantic relationship quality. These included measures of peer alienation ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$), mother alienation ($\beta = .44$, $p < .05$), father communication ($\beta = .39$, $p < .05$), frustration ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$), jealousy ($\beta = .57$, $p < .001$), and trust ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .05$) in young adults' romantic relationships.

Observed Peer Pressure from Best Friend

Each adolescent-best friend dyad participated in an 8-min videotaped task in which they were presented with a hypothetical dilemma that involved deciding which four out of a possible 10 fictional individuals with specific characteristics and skills should be the first ones kicked off a deserted island as part of a "survivor" contest. During this task, teens and their best friends were also asked to decide which three out of a possible seven luxury items they would like to have on the island with them. After making their decisions separately, adolescents and their close friends were brought together and instructed to compare their answers (Strodtbeck 1951). They were then

asked to try to resolve any differences in their choices and to come up with a consensus list of four individuals to be kicked off the island and three items to keep on the island with them. The Autonomy-Relatedness Coding System for Peer Interactions was used to code these interactions (Allen et al. 2001). The coding system employed (J. P. Allen et al. 2000, unpublished manuscript, 1994a, b) yields ratings for the adolescent's overall behavior toward their best friend in the interaction, as well as for their best friend's overall behavior toward them. Ratings are molar in nature, yielding overall scores for adolescents' and best friends' behaviors across the entire the interaction; however, these molar scores are derived from an anchored coding system that considers both the frequency and intensity of each speech relevant to that behavior during the interaction in assigning the overall molar score. Specific interactive behaviors were coded, then summed together on a priori grounds. For this study, information from the *undermining autonomy scale* was used, which captures behaviors that make it more difficult for individuals to express autonomy in a discussion, such as by overpersonalizing a disagreement or pressuring another person to agree other than by making rational arguments. High scores on this scale indicate increased frequency and intensity of behaviors inhibiting autonomy, whereas low scores mean very few and low intensity behaviors inhibiting autonomy. It is important to note that low scores do not mean behaviors promoting autonomy, only less negative behaviors. Each interaction was coded as an average of the scores obtained by two trained raters blind to other data from the study (*intraclass* $r = .65$, considered in the 'good' range for this statistic according to Cicchetti and Sparrow 1981). Higher scores on this measure have also been associated with lower friendship quality ($r = -.21$, $p < .01$) and lower attachment security in the present sample ($r = -.17$, $p < .05$).

Pressure from Peer Group

Target adolescents' best friends completed a 30-item measure about the teens' experiences receiving and exerting peer pressure. This measure utilizes the item format originally developed for the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (S. Harter 1998, unpublished manuscript). The present study combined two scales from this measure which asks teens' best friends to assess the level of peer pressure the target adolescent regularly experiences from his or her larger peer group which were used together as one 16-item sum scale. Items are rated for how well the best friend thinks the item describes the teen (e.g., the item "Some teens are pressured by other kids" is answered as either "very much not like him/her," receiving a score of 1,

"somewhat not like him/her," "somewhat like him/her," or "very much like him/her," receiving a score of four), with higher scores indicating more pressure experienced by the teen. The combined scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .79$). Higher scores on this scale have also been linked with teens using fewer strategies reflecting autonomy in interactions with dad ($r = -.51$, $p < .05$), lower ratings of acceptance from mom ($r = -.15$, $p < .05$), and lower satisfaction in romantic relationships ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$) in the current sample.

Alcohol Use

Teens completed a 36-item measure about their alcohol use. This measure was adapted from the Alcohol and Drug Use Questionnaire used in the Monitoring the Future surveys (Johnston et al. 1987, 2006). Alcohol use was assessed by asking teens to report about the average number of alcoholic drinks they typically consume per week.

Depressive Symptoms

Target adolescents completed the Beck Depression Inventory, a 21-item measure indicating their current level of depressive symptoms (Beck et al. 1979; Beck and Steer 1987). Each item is rated on a four-point scale (0–3), with higher scores indicating greater severity of symptoms. A total summed score of 10–18 is considered mild to moderate depressive symptoms, and 19–29 is considered moderate to severe depressive symptoms. This measure demonstrated high internal consistency in the present study ($\alpha = .83$).

Procedure

Participants' data were protected by a Confidentiality Certificate issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which further protects information from subpoena by federal, state, and local courts. If necessary, transportation and child care were provided to participants. At Time 1, teens answered questionnaires about themselves and their best friends filled out questionnaires about themselves and the teen. Teen-best friend interactional/observational data were also obtained at this time. Questionnaires given to both teens and their best friends were administered in separate rooms. At the end of this visit, participants were asked if they could be called in three years to arrange for a follow-up assessment.

Teens were called 3 years later at Time 2 to invite them to return to the study. At this time teens were asked if they were currently in a romantic relationship. Teens who reported being involved in a romantic relationship of at least 2 months were invited to participate in a session with their romantic partner. At Time 2, participants and their romantic partners filled out questionnaires about themselves, each other, and their relationship.

To best address any potential biases due to attrition in analyses of our sample subset, full information maximum likelihood (FIML) methods were used to handle any missing data (i.e., where data were not missing completely at random) among the 97 teens and romantic partners in the study (there was 87% data coverage on average for measures used in the study). Because these procedures have been found to yield the least biased estimates when all available data are used for longitudinal analyses (versus listwise deletion of missing data), the entire original sample of 97 adolescents study was utilized for these analyses (Enders 2001). This larger sample thus provides the best possible estimates of teens' and their partners' levels of relational aggression and victimization and was least likely to be biased by missing data. Alternative longitudinal analyses using just those adolescents without missing data (i.e., listwise deletion) yielded results that were substantially identical to those reported below. In sum, analyses suggest that attrition was modest overall and not likely to have distorted any of the findings reported.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and ranges for all variables are presented in Table 1. Initial analyses explored the role of gender (coded 1 for male, 2 for female), income, and participant racial/ethnic minority group membership (coded 1 for non-minority, 2 for minority) on the primary measures of the study. Given that the vast majority of our non-white participants (i.e., 72%) were African-American, power did not allow separate analyses by subgroups for non-white participants. Because experience of minority status in society was considered one of the most salient features of racial/ethnic status for these adolescents, the decision was made to code these teens in terms of minority versus majority status for analyses. Analyses which included versus excluded minority students who were not African-American did not yield appreciably different results.

For the purposes of the correlation table, neither gender nor minority status were entered as covariates in analyses. However, because adolescent-peer groupings were

automatically segregated by gender, gender was routinely entered as a covariate in all additional analyses. Similarly, given the ethnic heterogeneity of our sample, minority status was also entered as a covariate in all analyses for the purpose of running post-hoc analyses with minority status as a moderating variable. We also examined possible moderating effects of gender on each of the relationships described in the primary analyses below. Although analyses revealed that participants did not differ on any measures due to gender, moderating effects were found for minority status, which are discussed in greater detail below.

Correlational Analyses

Table 1 also represents simple correlations among each of the study's variables. As illustrated in the table, there were a number of correlations between variables of predictive interest and our outcome variables, relational aggression and victimization, which are explored further below. These analyses also indicate that the indices of peer pressure being considered are for the most part relatively independent of one another, and thus provide largely distinctive tests of the utility of the peer pressure measures in predicting important aspects of romantic relationship functioning.

Primary Analyses

Teen Romantic Relational Aggression and Partner Victimization:

Hypothesis 1: Adolescents who experience high levels of peer pressure from their best friends and larger peer groups will be more likely to self-report being relationally aggressive in their later romantic relationships and to have a romantic partner who reports being victimized by relational aggression.

Our first aim was to examine the association between teens' experiences of peer pressure during early adolescence and their own use of relational aggression in a romantic relationship during the later teenage years. In order to examine this and all other longitudinal hypotheses, a hierarchical linear regression model was used, which accounted first for gender, then minority status, and finally the predictor of interest. Results of this hierarchical linear regression equation suggest that teens with a best friend who exhibited higher levels of pressuring behaviors towards the teen at age 15 during an interaction task reported greater perpetration of relational aggression in

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among demographic, predictor, and outcome variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Household income ^a	30–39	20	0	60+	–	.11	.01	–.04	–.24*	.10	–.26*	.01	.02
2. Pressure from best friend	42.78	6.92	21.00	58.00	–		.16	.26*	.20	.19	.24*	.17	–.21
3. Pressure from peer group	1.12	0.41	0.17	2.17		–		.13	.18	.17	.06	–.21	.07
4. Teen relational aggression	7.82	3.71	5.00	22.00			–		.05	.60***	.09	.10	.25*
5. Partner relational aggression	7.41	2.85	5.00	17.00				–		.20	.62***	–.02	–.16
6. Teen relational victimization	8.32	5.03	5.00	25.00						–	–.03	.37**	.18
7. Partner relational victimization	7.59	4.38	5.00	35.00							–	–.19	–.11
8. Alcohol use	2.42	1.40	1.00	5.00								–	.03
9. Depressive symptoms	5.02	4.85	0.00	17.00									–

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. $N = 97$

^a *M*, *SD*, Min, Max refer to Thousands of Dollars

their future romantic relationships after accounting for teens’ gender and racial/ethnic minority status (see Table 2). A post-hoc moderator analysis revealed an interaction between minority status and best friends’ pressuring behaviors toward teens. This analysis revealed that teens who reported themselves as members of a racial/ethnic minority group were more likely to report relationally aggressing toward their romantic partners ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$). In addition, we investigated the role of peer pressure from teens’ larger peer group, and found that teens’ relational aggression was also significantly predicted by pressure from their peer group, as illustrated in Table 3.

We also examined the relationship between teens’ experiences with peer pressure and their romantic partners’ report of experiencing relational victimization within the romantic relationship. Teens with a best friend who exhibited pressuring behaviors toward the teen during early adolescence were more likely to be in a relationship with a partner who reported feeling victimized by relational aggression (see Table 4). Pressure from teens’ larger peer group did not have a significant effect on romantic partners’ reports of relational victimization.

Table 2 Regression analysis predicting teen report of relational aggression towards romantic partner in late adolescence

	β entry	β final	ΔR^2	Total R^2
<i>Step I</i>				
Gender	.05	.06		
Minority status	.31**	.30	.10**	.10**
<i>Step II</i>				
Pressure from best friend	.30**	.30**	.09**	.19***

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. $N = 97$. Gender coded: male = 1, female = 2; Minority status coded: non-minority = 0, minority = 1

Partner Romantic Relational Aggression and Teen Victimization

Hypothesis 2: Peer pressure from teens’ larger social networks will predict higher levels of relational aggression from their romantic partners and elicit reports of relational victimization from teens.

The next set of analyses aimed to examine the likelihood that teens who feel pressured by their peers become involved in a romantic relationship in which their partner

Table 3 Regression analysis predicting teen report of relational aggression towards romantic partner in late adolescence

	β entry	β final	ΔR^2	Total R^2
<i>Step I</i>				
Gender	.05	.03		
Minority status	.31**	.37***	.10**	.10**
<i>Step II</i>				
Pressure from peer group	.25*	.25*	.06*	.16**

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. $N = 97$. Gender coded: male = 1, female = 2; Minority status coded: non-minority = 0, minority = 1

Table 4 Regression analysis predicting romantic partner report of victimization from teen in late adolescence

	β entry	β final	ΔR^2	Total R^2
<i>Step I</i>				
Gender	.08	.07		
Minority status	.25*	.25*	.07*	.07*
<i>Step II</i>				
Pressure from best friend	.25*	.25*	.06*	.13**

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. $N = 97$. Gender coded: male = 1, female = 2; Minority status coded: non-minority = 0, minority = 1

Table 5 Regression analyses predicting romantic partner report of relational aggression and teen report of relational victimization in late adolescence

	Partner relational aggression		Teen relational victimization	
	β entry	β final	β entry	β final
<i>Step I</i>				
Gender	-.13	-.15	-.17	-.19
Minority status	.19	.25*	.16	.23
<i>Step II</i>				
Pressure from peer group	.26*	.26*	.26*	.26*
R^2 from Step I	.05		.06	
ΔR^2			.06*	
Final R^2			.12**	

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. $N = 97$. Gender coded: male = 1, female = 2; Minority status coded: non-minority = 0, minority = 1

uses relational aggression. Table 5 shows the result of a hierarchical linear regression indicating that teens who experienced more peer pressure during early adolescence from their larger peer network were more likely to have a romantic partner who reported being relationally aggressive toward the teen.

After controlling for gender and minority status, results also showed that adolescents who were reported to feel more peer pressure from their larger social network at age 15 were more likely to feel victimized in their romantic relationship 3 years later, as shown in Table 5.

Concurrent Psychological Adjustment

Hypothesis 3: Both romantic relational aggression and victimization will be linked to higher concurrent levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

To assess this hypothesis, a similar hierarchical linear regression model was utilized, however, in this model additional variables were controlled for before examining the relationships between relational aggression and victimization and psychosocial functioning. Specifically, gender and minority status were accounted for first, followed by pressuring behaviors from best friends and pressure experienced from teens’ larger peer groups. As predicted, after controlling for these variables, teens’ levels of relational aggression towards their partners were associated with teens’ internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Specifically, teens’ increased levels of relational aggression predicted a higher number of alcoholic drinks consumed by the teen per week (see Table 6). Table 6 also shows that adolescents with higher scores on the measure of relational aggression tended to score higher on the Beck

Table 6 Regression analyses predicting concurrent internalizing & externalizing behaviors from teen report of relational aggression

	Alcohol use		Depressive symptoms	
	β entry	β final	β entry	β final
<i>Step I</i>				
Gender	-.39***	-.39***	.06	.04
Minority status	-.39***	-.47***	-.02	-.18
<i>Step II</i>				
Pressure from the peer group	-.06	.02	.04	.13
Pressure from best friend	.12	.07	-.21	-.25*
<i>Step III</i>				
Teen relational aggression	.22*	.22*	.37**	.37**
R^2 from Step I	.31***		.00	
ΔR^2	.01		.05	
R^2 from Step II	.32		.05	
ΔR^2			.10**	
Final R^2			.15*	

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. $N = 97$. Gender coded: male = 1, female = 2; Minority status coded: non-minority = 0, minority = 1

Depression Inventory, indicating greater levels of depressive symptoms. Similar findings emerged for teens who felt victimized by relational aggression in their romantic relationships. Victimized teens were found to have higher levels of concurrent alcohol consumption and depressive symptoms (see Table 7).

Table 7 Regression analyses predicting concurrent internalizing & externalizing behaviors from teen report of relational victimization

	Alcohol use		Depressive symptoms	
	β entry	β final	β entry	β final
<i>Step I</i>				
Gender	-.39***	-.30**	.06	.12
Minority status	-.39***	-.43***	-.03	-.10
<i>Step II</i>				
Pressure from peer group	-.06	.02	.04	.11
Pressure from best friend	.12	.08	-.21	-.25*
<i>Step III</i>				
Teen relational victimization	.33**	.33**	.28*	.28*
R^2 from Step I	.31***		.00	
ΔR^2	.01		.05	
R^2 from Step II	.32		.05	
ΔR^2			.07**	
Final R^2			.12*	

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. $N = 97$. Gender coded: male = 1, female = 2; Minority status coded: non-minority = 0, minority = 1

Discussion

This study found that experiencing peer pressure from both teens' best friends and their larger peer groups during early adolescence predicted teens' later involvement in romantic relationships characterized by relational aggression and victimization. Analyses revealed that adolescents observed to have a best friend who uses pressuring strategies intended to undermine their autonomy are more likely to perpetrate relational aggression in their own romantic relationships and to have a romantic partner who reports feeling victimized by relational aggression 3 years later. Moreover, peer pressure from teens' larger peer group also predicted increases in levels of adolescents' relational aggression. Difficulties establishing autonomy in early adolescence within the family context have previously been linked to numerous deleterious developmental outcomes, including increased levels of peer-rated hostility in young adulthood (Allen et al. 2002). Therefore, it may be that teens who experience consistent attempts by their friends (whether close or more distant) to undermine their autonomy may become increasingly frustrated by this behavior over time and eventually act on their frustrations in different contexts and in different forms, such as by being relationally aggressive toward their romantic partners. Behaviors which undermine autonomy are also similar enough to those characterizing relational aggression that it is likely that teens, unwittingly or not, may learn the advantages of the behaviors employed by their autonomy-undermining, pressuring friends to produce a desired outcome and come to use them in their own relationships.

Although our analyses revealed that pressure from both teens' best friends and their larger peer groups predicted teens' increased levels of romantic relational aggression three years later, the finding was somewhat stronger using best friends' pressuring behaviors toward teens as a predictor. Although this distinction was modest, it may highlight the increased salience of close friendships during early adolescence, suggesting that certain characteristics of an individual's best friendship may carry slightly greater weight than qualities of the general milieu of peers in the teen's larger social network. Previous research suggests, however, that good friendship quality may not be an essential feature for peers to influence one another in deviant behavior, finding that adolescents reporting poor friendship quality with a peer who engages in deviant behavior are more likely to escalate their own levels of delinquency (Poulin et al. 1999). Indeed, literature examining relational aggression in the peer context indicates that friendships of relationally aggressive children are characterized by poorer quality (Grottpeter and Crick 1996), leaving open the possibility that teens' best friendships with those who undermine their autonomy are not

necessarily particularly intimate. Instead, the present effect may be a function of more time spent with the best friend in contrast to less time spent interacting with other adolescents in the teen's larger peer group who also nevertheless exert an influence on the teen. Future research would thus benefit from examining other characteristics of teens' friendships, including the role of relational aggression in these relationships, as predictors of relational aggression in their later romantic relationships.

It was also found that increased pressure from teens' larger peer group predicted higher levels of romantic partners' relational aggression and predicted teens' reports of feeling victimized by relational aggression. Longstanding research has documented the development of adolescent romantic couple relationships as forming within larger mixed-sex social networks, suggesting that teens and their romantic partners may be particularly likely to select one another from the same peer group (Dunphy 1963). Thus, it may be that romantic partners are subjected to similar levels of peer pressure from the same social network as the target adolescents in our sample, and that this pressure also leads romantic partners to relationally aggress through the mechanisms discussed above. Alternatively, it is possible that teens who experience peer pressure during early adolescence become comfortable in pressuring-type relationships and seek them out as characteristics of their later romantic relationships either due to their familiarity or to feelings that they do not deserve better treatment (Andrews and Brewin 1990; Walker 1979).

Based on our results examining predictors of teens' own use of relational aggression, we might expect stronger predictions about romantic partners' behavior from the romantic partner's own close friends, although these data were not available in the current study.

In addition to exploring the antecedents of romantic relational aggression and victimization, we further investigated their links to the concurrent psychological adjustment of the teens in our sample. In these analyses we found that both teens' higher levels of perpetration of relational aggression and their experiences of relational victimization were associated with greater alcohol use and increased depressive symptoms. It may be that depressed individuals use relational aggression as an unsatisfying attempt to maintain closeness with their romantic partners because they lack the appropriate social skills and positive affect to maintain the relationship. Alternatively, it is possible that the use of maladaptive relational strategies such as relational aggression may lead to mutual strain between romantic partners, which could in turn cause individuals to develop symptoms of depression. Or, given that these data are cross sectional, it may be that a third factor, such as poor impulse control or low self-esteem, leads to both relational aggression and poor psychosocial functioning.

In terms of externalizing behavior, we found that teens who used more relational aggression in their romantic relationships, as well as those who felt victimized by relational aggression, showed elevated alcohol use. This is consistent with findings in the same-gender peer context in which relational aggression has been shown to predict alcohol problems (Storch et al. 2004). Similar to the explanation for depressive mood, increased alcohol use may simply be a by-product of an unsatisfactory relationship in which relational aggression and victimization co-occur—alcohol use may essentially represent a coping mechanism for a poor or stressful relationship. On the other hand, alcohol use might be a contributing factor to teens' use of relational aggression. Prior studies have shown, for example, that romantic relationships characterized by excess alcohol use are much more likely to lead to physical abuse than those without excess use and that, moreover, relational aggression and victimization have a tendency to progress into physical aggression (Conner and Ackerley 1994; Sullivan et al. 2006). Thus, the importance of considering relational aggression in romantic relationships is especially clear when considering the potential for such behavior to escalate into physically harmful actions, particularly when exacerbated by excessive alcohol use. Adolescence may also be a critical time for identifying and ameliorating these behaviors, as the teenage years have been shown to mark the beginning of cycles of learned helplessness within aggressive or abusive relationships which, once developed, become incredibly hard to break (Craven 2003; Walker 1979). Still, a third possibility for consideration is that some underlying factor, such as impulse control difficulties might account for both relational aggression and alcohol use. Longitudinal research will be needed to begin to tease apart these potential explanations.

Although this study cannot demonstrate definitive causal relationships between peer pressure, romantic relational aggression and victimization, and psychological adjustment, the effects observed are at least consistent with the hypothesis that peer pressure and romantic relational aggression and victimization have multiple and potentially severe negative consequences. However, our findings clearly suggest the need for further research exploring these and other possible explanations for these striking associations. It is, however, important to also note a few additional limitations in the current study. First, the sample is relatively small and excluded adolescents who were only in very brief relationships; furthermore, although not excluded, no same-sex relationships were available for inclusion. Although our sample allowed for an in-depth exploration of predictors of and possible consequences of peer pressure and relational aggression and victimization, replication of these findings using a broader and more

diverse sample is warranted. Second, the alpha for the romantic partner relational aggression was low, and improved reliability on that scale should be established prior to future analyses. Third, it would have been useful to have best friend data from the romantic partner of the target teen, which would have permitted us to compare the influence of best friends for both the target adolescent and the romantic partner for predicting relational aggression and victimization. Fourth, these data yielded evidence of concurrent associations between romantic relational aggression and victimization and alcohol use and depressive symptoms, but they are unable to allow us to infer which, if either, preceded the other. Additional longitudinal research is needed to disentangle these relationships in order to help better determine their developmental progression.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study have several practical and clinical implications. Considered within the framework of the development of autonomy from peers as a normative, yet critical, task of adolescence, parents, schools, and therapists all have the potential to create opportunities for individuals during childhood and early adolescence to help equip teens with the tools necessary to assert themselves in potentially difficult situations with peers. Parents, for example, have opportunities to help their children learn to recognize peer pressure as well as to emphasize the value they place on rising above peers' negative influence when it occurs. They also have the abilities to both model appropriate forms of communication for their children as well as to engage their children in dialogue that permits both parent and child to comfortably express their own ideas and viewpoints, helping to develop a skill set for communication in future interactions. Similarly, schools can aim to incorporate activities into their classes that encourage independent thinking, voicing personal opinions about particular issues, and actual practice implementing these skills in formats such as debate. Finally, this research suggests that when opportunities to develop these competencies in these other venues may be lacking, therapists should consider training in these areas as a focus of treatment.

In addition to these implications, the documented associations between teens as both perpetrators and victims of relational aggression and increased levels of alcohol use and depressive symptoms further suggest the importance of adolescent romantic relationships for teens' psychosocial functioning. These results provide additional evidence for the increasingly accepted notion that adolescent romantic relationships deserve to be taken seriously by both the larger research community and by health-care professionals. Though causation cannot be inferred from the present findings, the data suggest associations that merit future consideration of and attention to adolescent romantic

relationships in the treatment of teens' alcohol abuse and depressive symptoms, and vice-versa.

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