

The Association between Attachment and Physiological Responses to Relational Aggression during Emerging Adulthood

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Introduction

Relational aggression is a form of aggression in which the aggressor carries out purposeful behaviors designed to hurt others by taking advantage of relationships, social status, and feelings of connectedness (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). This form of aggression is more common in girls than boys and becomes noticeable in early adolescence (Crick, 1996; Murray-Close et al., 2014; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Many studies have found that relational aggression can lead to future social and emotional maladjustment, which can be detrimental to relationships.

One important avenue of research is to try to understand the factors that might predict why some individuals engage in relational aggression. One study found that those who engage in relational aggression tend to have more muted physiological responses when exposed to examples of relational aggression (Wagner & Abaied, 2016). Additionally, studies have found that other variables such as attachment, parenting style, psychological control, and self-esteem may have an influence on relational aggression.

Attachment refers to the bond that humans create with a primary caregiver in infancy that is essential to healthy development and sets a working model for future relationships (Bowlby, 1969). Securely attached adults have friendships that are characterized by closeness, intimacy, and conflict resolution. Parental psychological control is defined as covert ways of psychologically controlling a child in such a way that the child would be unable to become an individual. Because adolescence is a pivotal time for identity formation, parental psychological control could have an impact on relational aggression in adulthood (Clark et al., 2015). Furthermore, those with high and unstable self-esteem are found to gravitate towards aggressive behaviors (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989).

Previous research on relational aggression has focused on adolescents and has assumed that associations found in younger populations would be consistent into adulthood. Thus, the current study asks if attachment representations, parenting styles, and self-esteem impact female engagement in, and physiological responses to, relational aggression.

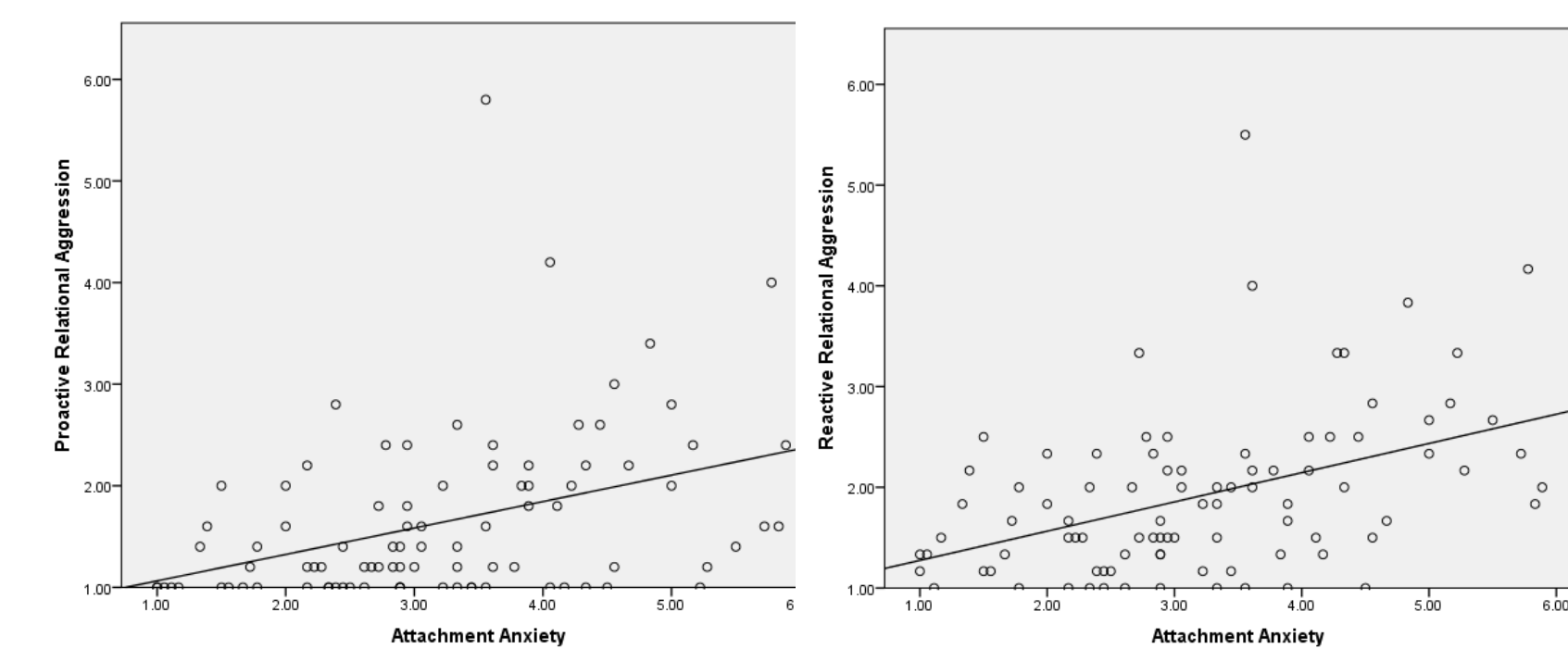
Method

Participants included college female students ($n = 90$) between the ages of 17-23 years and were recruited through the Department of Psychology's online research participation website. The mean age of the group was 19.74 years ($SD = 1.3$). Participants in this study had completed at least some college courses, and majority of participants reported growing up in a household with an income greater than \$60,000.

Participants answered a series of surveys online. Attachment was measured using the ECR (Brennan et al, 1998), and parental control was measured using the CRPBI (Margolies & Weintraub, 1977). Self-esteem was measured using the RSES (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants then participated in an in-laboratory session where they were connected to galvanic skin sensors and exposed to 4 different videos illustrating aggression and participated in an 8-12 minute interview about a recent stressful situation with a peer. MindWare ambulatory monitors using Biolab 3.1. were used to collect electrodermal activity.

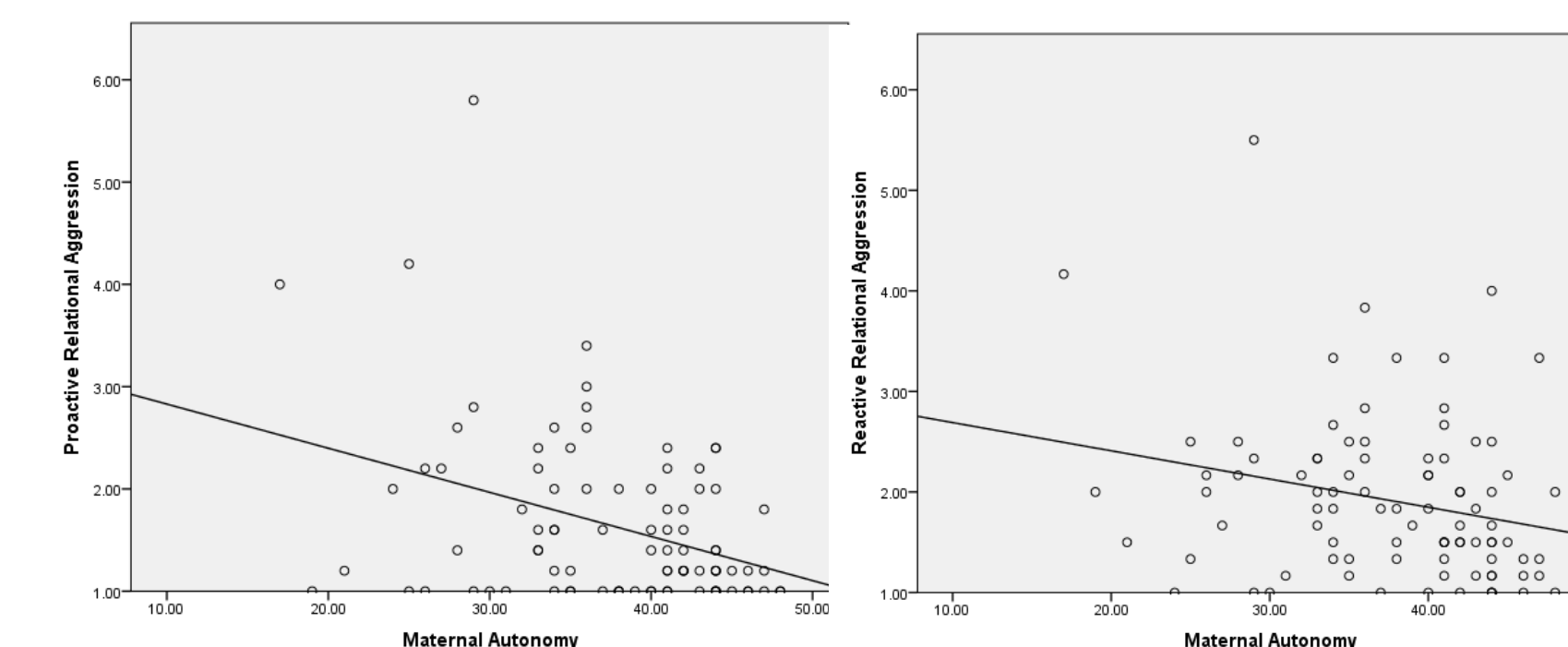
Results

Attachment Anxiety



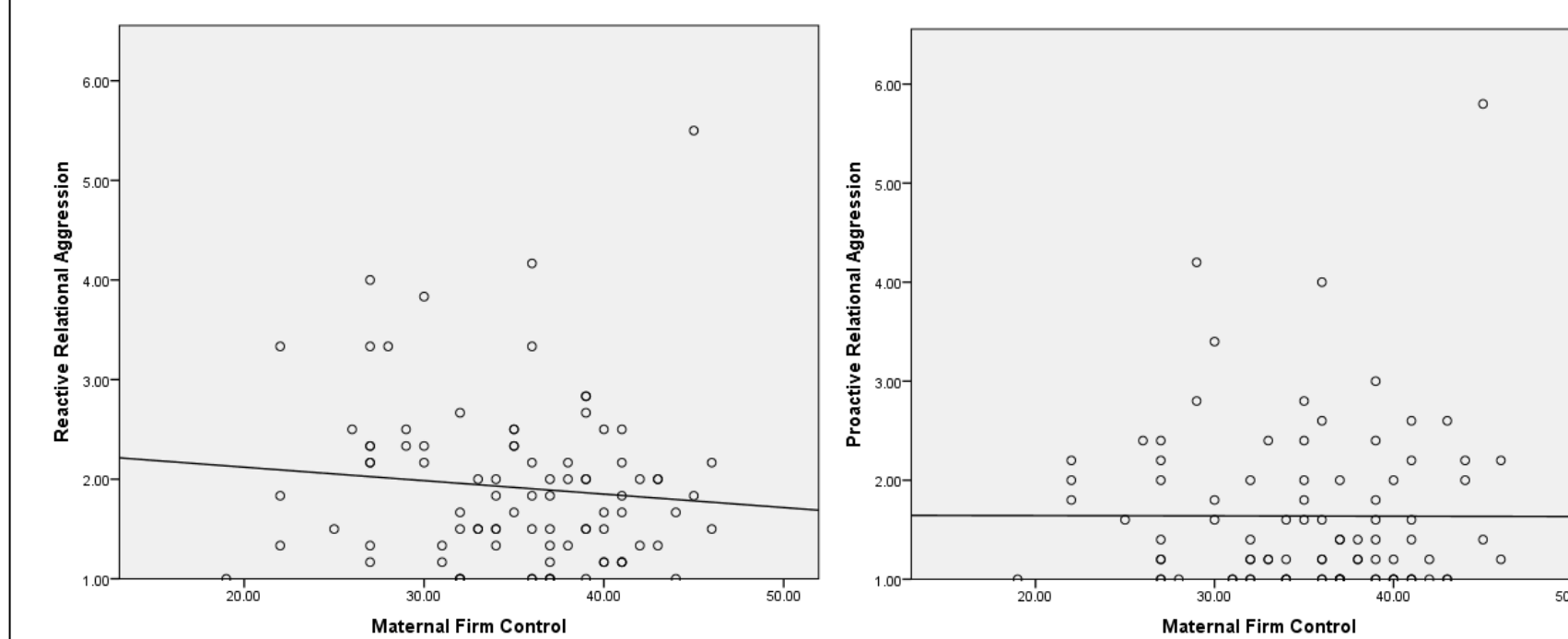
The results revealed a significant influence of attachment anxiety, $b = .180$ ($SE = .075$), $p = .018$, on proactive relational aggression where heightened anxiety was related to more engagement in proactive relational aggression. Attachment anxiety also had a significant effect on reactive relational aggression, $b = .223$ ($SE = .068$), $p = .002$, where greater anxiety indicated more engagement.

Maternal Autonomy



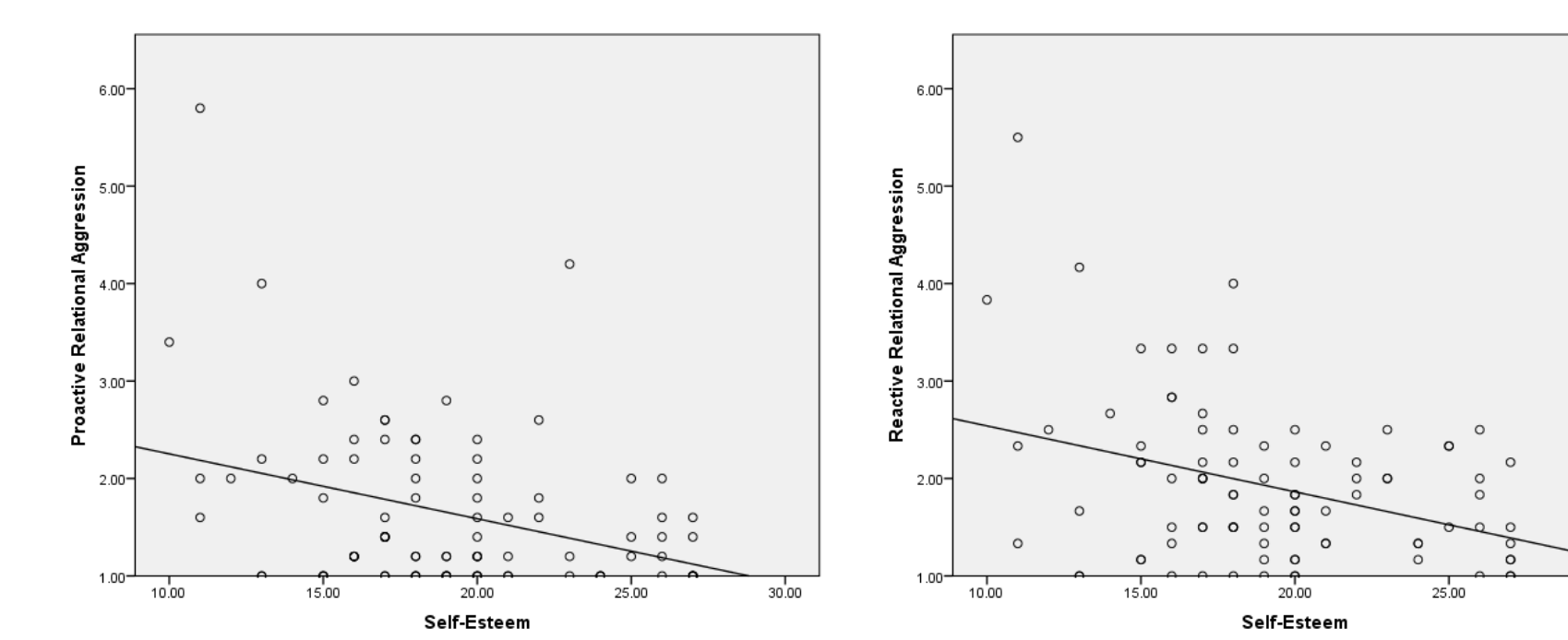
Maternal autonomy had a significant influence on proactive relational aggression, $b = -.036$ ($SE = .011$), $p = .002$, where more autonomy from the mother indicated less engagement in this form of relational aggression. There was a marginally significant influence of maternal autonomy, $b = -.020$ ($SE = .011$), $p = .075$, on reactive relational aggression, where greater maternal autonomy was associated with less engagement in reactive relational aggression.

Maternal Firm Control



Maternal firm control, $b = -.111$ ($SE = .058$), $p = .058$, had a marginally significant effect on relational aggression where greater maternal firm control was related to less reactivity when talking about social stressors.

Self-Esteem



There was a marginally significant influence of self-esteem on proactive relational aggression, $b = -.035$ ($SE = .020$), $p = .078$, as well as on reactive relational aggression, $b = -.035$ ($SE = .020$), $p = .076$, where higher self-esteem was related to less engagement in both types of relational aggression.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to assess how adult attachment anxiety, parenting style, psychological control, and self-esteem predicted relational aggression in emerging adulthood as well as physiological responses to relational aggression.

Heightened attachment anxiety had significant influences on both proactive and reactive relational aggression. Those with greater attachment anxiety may be more likely to engage in proactive relational aggression and less likely to react when exposed to relational aggression. On the other hand, participants who also had high attachment anxiety may be less likely to engage in reactive relational aggression, oriented around self defense. It may be that college females with anxious attachment representations may not feel the need to protect themselves by engaging in relational aggression but rather strive to keep themselves on top in terms of popularity; they may also be more numb to exposure due to engagement in relational aggression.

Consistent with prior research (Clark et al., 2015), participants who experienced greater autonomy, associated with authoritative parenting styles, tended to engage less in both proactive and reactive relational aggression. Additionally, these participants had greater reactivity in response to relational aggression. Autonomy involves the concept of freedom—freedom to be an individual and make decisions. Thus, it may be that emerging adults who have experienced authoritative parenting styles are less likely to be passive when trouble arises. Additionally, high self-esteem had a negative relationship with proactive and reactive engagement, suggesting that those with high self-esteem are more confident in themselves and do not feel the need to put others down through relational aggression.

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