

Relational Aggression toward Ex-Boy/Girlfriend: The Role of Narcissism and Quality of Previous Romantic Relationships among Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that narcissism and the quality of romantic relationships are found to play a major role in relational aggression. However, there was limited research on relational aggression in the context of terminated romantic relationships. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the role of narcissistic personality and the quality of previous romantic relationships on relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend. The participants consisted of 358 undergraduate students between the ages of 17-21 ($M = 19.56$, $SD = 1.27$). Narcissistic personality, quality of previous romantic relationships, and relational aggression were measured using questionnaires. The results showed that narcissistic personality and the quality of romantic relationships can explain the relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend. Implications of these results to behavioral science are discussed for further understanding the role of personal and contextual factors as predictors of romantic aggression on a terminated relationship.

Keywords: *Ex-Boy/Girlfriend, Narcissism, Relational Aggression, Romantic Relationship*

Relational aggression is a form of violence subtly and unconsciously carried out compared to physical and verbal aggression (Vitaro et al., 2006). People tend to participate in this activity in a bid to manipulate or damage a relationship (Yoon et al., 2004). Relational aggression is directly conducted through rejection and manipulation or indirectly by spreading rumours and slandering (Voulgariodou & Kokkinos, 2015). Although most often, people do not realize this type of aggression, it leads to serious negative consequences as victims experience difficulties adjusting their emotions (Ellis et al., 2009) and social (Gangel et al., 2017; Kushner et al., 2018), feel lonely (Soenens et al., 2008) and depression (Casper & Card, 2017; Kushner et al., 2018).

Over the past few years, behavioral studies have been conducted to understand the relational aggression in children (Baker et al., 2018; Jambon & Smetana, 2018), adolescents (Bell et

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al., 2018; Coyne et al., 2019), and adults (Clark, 2015; Sandberg et al., 2018). These analyses were carried out in various relational contexts, such as a sibling (Ostrov et al., 2006; Stauffacher & DeHart, 2006), friendship (Aizpitarte et al., 2019; Bass et al., 2018), romantic relationship (Oka et al., 2016; Woodin, et al., 2016), and marriage (Carroll et al., 2010).

Previous studies as stated above have shown that anyone can conduct relational aggression. However, there is a lack of research in the context of a terminated romantic relationship, naturally occurring in adolescent and young adults (Halpern-Meeekin et al., 2013; Rhoades et al., 2011). Although both parties have gone their separate ways, it does not rule out the possibilities that some hold on to their previous partner's feelings and tend to acquire information by stalking indirectly (Dreßing et al., 2014; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000). They sometimes spread rumours or false information on their previous partner. Therefore, those that terminate their romantic relationship carry out relational aggression in order to fight, anxiety, or frustration (Linder et al., 2002). This activity is inseparable from personal and contextual factors (Voulgariodou & Kokkinos, 2015).

According to several studies, personality needs to be considered to understand the relational aggression of an individual (Knight et al., 2018; Kokkinos et al., 2017). In addition, pathological personalities such as manipulative, narcissistic, and psychopathic lead to this activity (Ojanen et al., 2012; White et al., 2015). Although, recent studies have found that narcissistic personality has a high possibility to emerge into relational aggression compared to the manipulative and psychopathic (Bell et al., 2018; Knight et al., 2018).

The narcissistic personality is one of the personality types that boost one's desire to be worshipped by others and has little empathy (Raskin, & Terry, 1988). The narcissistic individual tends aggressively towards others to maintain their dominance or control over another person or group (Barry et al., 2007; Haseebunissa et al., 2018; Hawley et al., 2009; Mandrekar & Sarwate, 2021). In the context of a terminated romantic relationship, the individual carries out relational aggression on their previous partner or ex-boy/girlfriend to prove superior. This is because there is a possibility that the end of a romantic relationship becomes subject of discussion amongst their friends (de Zavala et al., 2009; Thomaes et al., 2008).

In addition, contextual factors such as the quality of the relationship contribute to the emergence of relational aggression. Previous research has found that individuals with poor friendship quality tend to commit relational aggression to their friends (Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018; Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). In the context of a romantic relationship, the partner's quality motivates the individual to commit relational aggression (Oka et al., 2016), especially with feelings of frustration and jealousy (Linder et al., 2002).

Despite the end of a romantic relationship, the individual with negative experiences tries to monitor the previous partner's behavior to delay the recovery rate (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Marshall, 2012). The existence of pain, such as frustration and jealousy, encourages them to commit relational aggression (Kraft & Mayeux, 2018; Ojanen et al., 2012). People tend to feel changes in positive and negative emotions after they end their romantic relationship (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Rhoades et al., 2011; Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

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Based on the above explanations, it can be concluded that personal factors such as narcissistic personality, and contexts such as the quality of previous romantic relationships, contribute to the relational aggression in individuals. Therefore, this research aimed to examine the role of narcissism and the quality of previous romantic relationships on relational aggression in such individuals. To achieve this research objective, three hypotheses were proposed: (1) the narcissistic personality plays a role in relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend, (2) the quality of previous romantic relationships plays a role in relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend, and (3) the narcissistic personality and the quality of previous romantic relationship plays a role in relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 358 participants were selected from a population of undergraduate students among 7 faculties at University of Surabaya, Indonesia. Participants were 17-21-year-old ($M = 19.56$, $SD = 1.27$) and consisted of 280 (78.21%) women and 78 (21.79%) men. Approximately 314 (87.71%) claimed to have 1-5 romantic relationships, and the remaining 44 (12.29%) had 6-10. In addition, 199 (55.59%) had romantic relationships with their last partner for less than 1 year, while 159 (44.41%) was for more than a year. Furthermore, 261 (72.91%) claimed that they ended their romantic relationship for less than 1 year, while 97 (21.09%) ended for more than a year. The age and sex characteristics of the participants were presented in Table 1.

Table 1; Demographic characteristics of the samples (age and sex)

Age (year)	Woman		Man		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
17	12	3.35	3	0.84	15	4.19
18	66	18.43	12	3.35	78	21.79
19	65	18.16	12	3.35	77	21.51
20	50	13.97	19	5.31	69	19.27
21	87	24.30	32	8.94	119	33.24
Total	280	78.21	78	21.79	358	100

Instruments

In this study, three self-reported questionnaires were administered to collect data. Data was collected using an online questionnaire through social networks and with voluntary participation. The questionnaires were originally in English and were translated to Indonesian to ensure understanding of the respondents.

- **Relational Aggression toward Ex-Boy/Girlfriend.** Relational Aggression Scale (RAS; (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2018), which consists of 30 items was used for measurement ($\alpha = 0.93$). RAS items were adjusted for the research objective by modifying the object of relational aggression as the previous partner or last ex-boy/girlfriend. RAS consists of four dimensions: direct and proactive relational aggression, which consists of 7 items, such as "I threatened to share my previous partner's private secret for my wishes to be obeyed" [$\alpha = 0.89$]. The direct and reactive relational aggression, which consists of 8 items, "I got a new partner to avenge my previous for making me angry" [$\alpha = 0.78$]. The indirect and proactive relational aggression consists of 8 items: "I blamed my previous partner behind their back" [$\alpha =$

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0.90]. The indirect and reactive relational aggression consists of 7 items: "When my previous partner hurt me, I secretly planned for revenge" [$\alpha = 0.74$]. RAS responses use five options from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

- ***Narcissistic Personality.*** This study used Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16; (Ames et al., 2006), which consists of 16 items to measure narcissistic personality ($\alpha = 0.69$). Each NPI-16 item consisted of two statements that describe (for example, "I knew that I'm a nice person because everyone said that to me") and not describe (for example, "When people compliment me, I often feel embarrassed") their personality. NPI-16 responses used dichotomous options by giving 1 point for a statement that describes the narcissistic personality and 0 points for the opposite.
- ***Quality of Previous Romantic Relationship.*** The measure of quality of previous romantic relationship was adapted from Adult Romantic Relationship Questionnaire (ARRQ; (Brennan & Shaver, 1995), which consists of 20 items. The measurement based on two subscales that were feeling frustration and jealousy. ARRQ items were adjusted with the objective of the research, which modified the previous partner with ex-boy/girlfriend. This research used the following dimension of frustration, such as 10 items: "My ex-boy/girlfriend often disappoints me" [$\alpha = 0.84$]. It was also associated with jealousy, which consisted of 10 items, for example, "When I couldn't see my ex-boy/girlfriend, I was worried" [$\alpha = 0.83$]). ARPQ response used five options from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data Analyses

Data analysis was performed by using the IBM SPSS Statistics 21. The research hypotheses tested using hierarchical linear regression analysis by involving three models, namely, (1) the narcissistic personality, (2) the quality of previous romantic relationship, and (3) the narcissistic personality and the quality of previous romantic relationship as a predictor variable. The goal was to test the role of each predictor variable separately and simultaneously.

RESULTS

The correlation result presented in Table 2 showed that the narcissistic personality has a significant positive correlation to the relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend ($r = 0.23, p < 0.001$). Moreover, the quality of previous relationship has a positive correlation to the relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend ($r = 0.38, p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, the narcissistic personality has no significant correlation to the quality of previous relationship ($r = -0.01, p > 0.05$).

Table 2; Zero-order Pearson's correlation between variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Narcissistic personality	0.28	0.18	—		
2. Quality of previous romantic relationships	2.92	0.65	-0.01	—	
3. Relational aggression	1.72	0.59	0.23***	0.38***	—

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The result of the regression analysis presented in Table 3 showed that the narcissistic personality and the quality of the romantic relationship can explain relational aggression toward ex-boy/girlfriend. In detail, narcissistic personality (model 1) with R^2 value of 0.05, as well as the quality of the romantic relationship (model 2) with R^2 of 0.11, separately can

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explain relational aggression. In model 3, the regression analysis result showed that narcissistic personality and the quality of the romantic relationship simultaneously can explain relational aggression ($R^2 = 0.17$).

Table 3; The regression analysis of the predictor variable on relational aggression

Predictor variable	Relational aggression		
	$\beta 1$	$\beta 2$	$\beta 3$
Narcissistic personality	0.23***		0.23***
Quality of previous romantic relationships		0.34***	0.34***
R^2	0.05	0.11	0.17

Note: β = standardized coefficients; R^2 = explained variance; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

DISCUSSION

The present study's objective was to examine the role of narcissistic personality and the quality of previous romantic relationships on relational aggression in individuals toward their ex-boy/girlfriend. The result found that the individual with narcissistic personalities and negative experiences during a romantic relationship that marked by frustration and jealousy, tend to do relational aggression toward their last ex-boy/girlfriend. This result is consistent with previous studies stating that the narcissistic personality is used to predict relational aggression in the context of friendship (Knight et al., 2018) and of romantic relationships (Linder et al., 2002). Contrary to the previous studies, our research was performed on individuals that ended their romantic relationships with previous partners.

The relational aggression is inseparable from personal factors such as narcissistic personality, which is used as predictor variable in this research. Previous studies have proven that narcissistic individual often has unsatisfying romantic relationships (Casale et al., 2020; Vrabel et al., 2019) due to low level of commitment (Foster et al., 2006; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2019). When establishing a romantic relationship, the narcissistic individual desires to dominate or control their partners (Tortoriello et al., 2017; Vrabel et al., 2020). It is not surprising when they have a conflict with their partners and try to justify themselves by humiliating others (Miller et al., 2007). Narcissistic individuals can perform psychological aggression on their partners to achieve their goals (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finzi-Dottan, 2018). Especially assuming others provoke the individuals with high narcissistic personality (Hart et al., 2019; Jones & Paulhus, 2010). Moreover, the end of a romantic relationship often becomes a subject of discussion among friends. Therefore, those with this type of personality tend to carry out relational aggression with their previous partner by presenting themselves as a nice (de Zavala et al., 2009; Thomaes et al., 2008).

Relational aggression is also predicted from the quality of the previous romantic relationship. This study proves that individuals that feel frustrated during a romantic relationship are more likely to commit relational aggression. The role of frustration indicates dissatisfaction and frequent conflicts (Vanhee et al., 2018). Psychologically, frustration triggers feelings of dissatisfaction, stress, or depression (Mahon et al., 2007; Nishimura & Suzuki, 2016). When the individual feels frustrated, they tend to actively and directly engage in behavior that aims to damage others' well-being (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). This is consistent with the theory of frustration-aggression, which stated that aggressive behavior often emerges when individuals feel frustrated because they met many obstacles to achieve their goals (Berkowitz, 1989).

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In the context of a romantic relationship, frustration can emerge when they have a low level of autonomy support provided by their partner (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). The frustration also emerges when the partner acts cold, rejects, and distance themselves (Guardia & Patrick, 2008). This occurs when the individual demands perfection from their partners, which possibly cannot be fulfilled (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that frustration is followed by maladaptive behaviors such as relational aggression (Prather et al., 2012; Tóth-Király et al., 2019).

Frustration and jealousy during a romantic relationship also increase relational aggression to the previous partner. The jealousy indicates the harm and conflict associated with being in an interpersonal relationship (Carson & Cupach, 2000; Dandurand & Lafontaine, 2014; Stewart et al., 2014). During a romantic relationship, jealousy often threatens the individual's self-esteem (Chin et al., 2017; Stieger et al., 2012), as they tend to engage in various aggressive behaviors to maintain self-esteem (Goldstein et al., 2008; Seiffge-Krenke & Burk, 2015). This is because those that feel threatened in an interpersonal relationship try to eliminate these consequences in various ways (Stockdale et al., 2015).

The jealousy associated with a romantic relationship emerges when the partner cheats on the individual (DeSteno et al., 2002; Guadagno & Sagarin, 2010). The jealousy also emerges when they feel anxious on their romantic relationship, experience uncertainty, and having low intimacy with their partner (Knobloch et al., 2001). This is often related to excessive monitoring behavior (Muise et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2014) with numerous questions and confrontations (Carson & Cupach, 2000). When this occurs continuously, the individual tends to engage in various relational aggression behaviors by continuously suspecting, humiliating, manipulating, and committing violence against their partners (Yoshimura, 2004).

In the context of a romantic relationship that has ended, frustration and jealousy are a source of individuals' pain towards their previous partner. This pain motivates them to search for information related to their past partner (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Marshall, 2012). The response can be in the form of relational aggression, which is considered as an effort to avenge their pain. This is consistent with the previous studies, which proved that the existence of pain, such as frustration and jealousy motivates the individual to perform relational aggression (Kraft & Mayeux, 2018; Ojanen et al., 2012).

In general, the result of this study has expanded knowledge of relational aggression in the context of a terminated romantic relationship toward ex-boy/girlfriend. This research proves that relational aggression occurs in relationships with siblings (Ostrov et al., 2006; Stauffacher & DeHart, 2006), friendship (Aizpitarte et al., 2019; Bass et al., 2018), romantic relationship (Oka et al., 2016; Woodin, et al., 2016), and marriage (Carroll et al., 2010). This indicates that the behavior that emerges when individuals ended a romantic relationship is not simply limited to searching the information that related to their previous partners (Dreßing et al., 2014; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000) but also relational aggression, such as spreading rumors or false information. It also confirms the empirical study regarding personal and contextual factors, which are predictors of relational aggression, as stated by Voulgaridou & Kokkinos (2018).

Although this study is useful to understand relational aggression in the context of terminated romantic relationships, it also has limitations. Firstly, it only examines relational aggression

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by involving antecedent variables without personal and contextual factors. For example, positive coping strategies used by individuals that undergo negative experiences during a romantic relationship prevent relational aggression. Contextually, it did not study the positive experiences that might be more dominant when an individual established a romantic relationship with a previous partner. Secondly, this study uses a self-reporting method to measure relational aggression, which is considered a measurement bias. Moreover, some individuals often provide positive responses to the item that has negative means. The reporting method from a friend is used for further research as a complement or alternative measure of relational aggression.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that narcissistic personality and quality of romantic as personal and contextual factors were found to play important roles in explaining the relational aggressions toward ex-boy/girl friends carried out by individuals that terminate a romantic relationship. The narcissistic individuals tend to justify themselves and humiliate their partner in various ways, such as by performing relational aggression to avenge their pain. Meanwhile, the quality of terminated romantic relationship that characterized by frustration and jealousy become the source of individual's pain towards their previous partners.

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