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### Coping with relational aggression: a qualitative study

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Coping with Relational Aggression: A Qualitative Study

Graduate Thesis/Project

Submitted to the Faculty

Of the School Psychology Program

College of Liberal Arts  
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

By

Rebecca M. Haderer

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Science and  
Advanced Graduate Certificate

Rochester, New York

(4/6/09)

Approved: Scott Merydith  
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### Abstract

This study explored effective techniques girls use in coping with relational aggression victimization. A qualitative approach was used to capture the experience and problem solving process in arriving at solutions. Participants included 7 female students age 12 to 14 who attended a western New York junior high school. A semi-structured interview format was employed. Results indicated that victims of relational aggression were targets of rumors that frequently involved a theme of denigration. Initial reactions to the victimization always included a negative emotional response followed by a behavioral response. Victims engaged in a step-by-step problem solving process to arrive at a solution. In most cases, the problem was solved when an adult such as a school counselor or school social worker intervened. These results suggest that the actions of school personnel are integral in helping girls effectively cope with relational aggression.

## Introduction

### *Overview of the Study*

Bullying among adolescents appears to be inevitable in the school setting. Although much research has focused on the physical aspect of bullying, recent attention has been drawn to more subtle and less physical forms of bullying. Relational aggression is a type of nonphysical bullying that involves a student or group of students who attempt to harm others by attacking and damaging their relationships with others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Acts of relational aggression may include intentional ignoring, excluding, spreading rumors or threatening to end a friendship.

As research accumulates and emerges in the field of relational aggression, light is shed upon the rationale behind relational aggression, how it is carried out, gender differences, intervention methods and assessment techniques. However, little is known about the actual experience of relational aggression. Researchers typically employ quantitative methods such as surveys and rating scales to define the phenomenon. These methods are useful in providing an overview of the experience but lack a certain depth and quality. The aim of the current study is to go beyond mere descriptions and numerical conclusions in order to obtain a greater understanding of the experience of relational aggression. A more qualitative approach would provide insight into how one actually experiences relational aggression and how one is able to cope and manage the associated stress. Although research has focused on negative consequences victims of relational aggression may experience, few studies have examined effective coping techniques. By examining the experience of relational aggression and the way girls effectively manage the stress associated with victimization, we may begin to development interventions that may be useful in implementing in the schools.

### *Definition of Terms*

Throughout this study relational aggression will be defined as any behavior that is intended to harm someone by damaging or manipulating relationships with others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). It should be emphasized that unlike other types of bullying, relational aggression is not as overt, or noticeable.

This study will also examine effective coping styles. Coping will be defined as strategies or specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986). Coping research indicates that two types of general coping styles exist. Problem-solving strategies are active efforts to alleviate stressful circumstances. Emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986).

### *Delimitations*

This study will explore the experience of relational aggression among adolescent females and the effective coping strategies they employed to resolve their conflicts. It should be noted that the sample of students in this study was a sample of convenience. All participants were Caucasian females from a rural western New York junior high school who volunteered to participate in the study and were willing to discuss their experience with relational aggression. This study will not examine the experience of relational aggression among males, other age groups, geographic regions, or races. In addition, participants were referred to the researcher based on their success in coping with relational aggression. Ineffective coping methods and consequences will not be examined in this study. Lastly, this study exclusively focuses on relational aggression victimization. Other forms of aggression such as physical bullying and

cyberbullying are beyond the scope of this study. Participants were identified as victims. Perpetrators of relational aggression were not included in this study.

## Literature Review

### *An Overview of Bullying*

Moderate aggression exhibited during childhood is often viewed as a behavior part of normal development. It is when this aggressive behavior is taken to extreme limits that one must be cognizant of the potential harm both the victim and the aggressor are experiencing. Although bullying among school children is an old and well-known phenomenon, systematic research on bullying did not begin until the 1970s (Olweus, 1978). This research focused primarily on bullying in Scandinavian schools and did not attract attention in the United States until the 1980s and early 1990s. Olweus (1993), the leading researcher in the field of bullying, defined bullying as when a student is exposed repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. A person who engages in negative actions intentionally inflicts or attempts to inflict injury or discomfort on someone else through physical contact, with words or in more indirect ways, such as making mean faces or gestures, spreading rumors or intentionally excluding someone from a group. In addition, an imbalance of power exists in which a more powerful person or group attacks a less powerful person or group (Olweus, 2003).

Most research in bullying has been conducted in countries such as Europe and Australia. These studies have reported varying prevalence rates from 15 to 70 percent in different countries (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Bauman, 1999). However, the problem of bullying is just as severe and intricate in the United States as it is overseas. Nasel et al. (2001) surveyed 15,686 students across the United States in grades 6 through 10 enrolled in both private and public schools. Results of this study revealed that 30% of children surveyed reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying including being the

bullying, being bullied or both. It is likely that this is an underestimate as students are reluctant to admit their involvement in bullying.

Determining what acts constitute bullying may seem straightforward; however, differentiating between an aggressive act and a non-aggressive act is not as simple as it appears. It seems obvious that a physical display of aggression such as a push or shove would be viewed as a blatant act of aggression. However, less obvious forms of aggression or bullying exist that likely cause just as much pain as physical aggression.

### *Defining Relational Aggression*

Within the past decade, relational aggression has become the center of much research and debate. Although this form of aggression has most likely always existed, due to its secretive nature it is difficult to detect. Adults brush such malicious behaviors off and reason that this is just the way kids are or that this is just a stage they will eventually outgrow (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). These assumptions are fortunately becoming less prevalent as adults as well as children are beginning to understand that covert forms of aggression are just as damaging as direct physical forms.

Different terms have been used to label subtle forms of aggression such as social aggression, indirect aggression and relational aggression. These terms seem to overlap with one another and there is currently a debate in the field regarding which term is most appropriate when discussing these behaviors. Social aggression is mainly directed toward damaging another person's self-esteem and/or social status using overtly aggressive behaviors and concealed methods that employ the social community (Cairns et al., 1989). Using social relationships as a means of attack, social aggression may include gossiping, social exclusion, social isolation, social alienation, writing notes about someone, talking about someone behind his or her back,



stealing friends or romantic partners, triangulation of friendship or romantic relationships and telling secrets (Xie, Cairns & Cairns, 2005). Galen and Underwood (1997) added to this definition to include more direct actions such as negative facial expressions and body gestures. Like social aggression, indirect aggression as defined by Lagerspetz et al. (1988) is often secretive in nature but does not require the perpetrator to engage the participation of the social community.

Relational aggression has emerged from much of the research in the domains of social and indirect aggression. The term relational aggression was first defined in a study by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) as attempts to harm others that focus on relational issues and include behaviors that are intended to significantly damage another child's friendships or feelings of inclusion by the peer group. This may involve actions such as intentional ignoring, excluding, spreading rumors and threatening to end a friendship. Unlike social aggression and indirect aggression, relational aggression is always geared towards harming relationships and may or may not involve the participation of the social community. This was the first study to provide evidence for the validity of a relational form of aggression and was the first piece of research that showed that relational aggression appears to be relatively distinct from overt aggression. This research also concluded that relational aggression is significantly related to gender and to social-psychological adjustment in children.

Gilligan (2003) proposed that females' morality and sense of self are based on connectedness and interdependence with others and that affiliation and acceptance by other girls often become essential elements of identity. Moreover, as girls reach adolescence, relationships with others become increasingly important, potentially assisting with psychosocial adjustment and a sense of well-being (Pipher, 2002). Although this emotional intimacy in friendships and

strong desire for connectedness can be used to promote positive relationships, it can also be used as leverage or as a sort of weapon in friendship. This paradox of friendship being used as a weapon can be carried out through relational aggression. Relational aggression may be used as a means to achieve a certain status within a social hierarchy. By manipulating relationships, children can ensure that they will maintain their high status within their immediate social system. Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) investigated this conflict and found that the desire to establish and maintain a positive self-concept was significantly correlated with the use of relational aggression. Relational aggression was found to be a common aspect of female friendships and was used to assert power and resolve conflicts.

Although much of the research pertaining to relational aggression focuses on adolescents, relational aggression can occur at any age. Learning to manipulate friendships, likely occurs when children are first introduced to social interactions. For instance, making a statement such as, “I won’t be your friend anymore, if you don’t do what I say” is a rather simple manipulation that can be used to assert dominance in a relationship. More sophisticated methods might involve spreading rumors about another person to lower that person’s status and elevate the status of the perpetrator. Due to the wide array of techniques that can be employed to manipulate relationships, researchers have proposed two different methods of executing relational aggression (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). The first is reactive and is frequently used in response to a threat or after the child has been angered. This may involve a child gossiping about another child if she feels that she has been betrayed. The second is instrumental in nature and involves a child manipulating a relationship to get what he or she wants. A relationally aggressive act that is instrumental in nature may involve a child humiliating another to raise his or her own social status.

*Aggression and Gender*

Typically, it is thought that boys are more likely to display physical forms of aggression more frequently than girls. This may include punching, kicking and throwing to express their anger. When girls are angry, they are more likely to use indirect and relational forms of aggression, such as verbal insults, gossiping, tattling, ostracism, threatening friendships or third-party retaliation (Mash & Wolfe, 2006). Cairns and Cairns (1984) found that boys and girls reported to be equally involved in conflicts. However, physical aggression was reported more frequently in boys' conflicts with other boys and girls tended to ignore their opponent in a confrontation. More recent research is unveiling the fact that physical acts of aggression are becoming more common among females than they used to be. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2006) the rate of adolescent girls' arrest for delinquent crimes increased by 83% between the years of 1988 and 1997, whereas the boys' arrest rates increased by only 39% and of these crimes there has been a 155% increase in the number of person-directed crimes committed by girls. This may be attributed to changing gender norms. In the past, girls were taught to be submissive and resistant. Now it is becoming more acceptable for girls to display overt emotions in the form of physical aggression.

Relational aggression differs from physical aggression in that it is extremely secretive. Although acts of physical aggression are easily recognizable, it is far more difficult to recognize a relationally aggressive act and often times its source. The research concerning relational aggression in gender is somewhat conflicting. Although much of the popular literature depicts relational aggression as a phenomenon distinct to teenage females, this conclusion is inconsistent with the findings of empirical studies. Some research has identified boys as being more relationally aggressive than girls. Tomada and Schneider (1997) found that boys in Italy were

more likely to engage in relational aggression than girls. Henington et al. (1998) found second and third grade boys to be rated by their teachers as more relationally and physically aggressive than girls. Similarly, Goldstein, Tisak and Boxer (2002) found that preschool boys are more likely to be relationally aggressive than preschool girls.

Although the research is mixed, a majority of studies have focused on females and thus more is known about relational aggression in females than in males. Many researchers have found that girls engage in relational aggression more frequently than boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Archer, 2004; Burton, Hafetz & Henninger, 2007). Galen and Underwood (1997) propose that girls may view relational and physical aggression as equally hurtful whereas boys may view physical aggression as more hurtful. Rose, Swenson and Waller (2004) suggest that this may be due to the desire to elevate one's social status. Girls tend to use relationally aggression behaviors in order to be perceived as popular, high-status individuals. If relationally aggressive acts are viewed as atypical for boys, participating in this form of aggression would not elevate their status. In fact it may result in the contrary as this behavior is the exact opposite of how society expects boys to act.

Development and maturation may be other determinants of relational aggression. Henington et al. (1998) purport that relational aggression is more often seen in females because this form of bullying requires verbal skills. Girls' language skills tend to develop before boys, whereas boys tend to develop muscle before girls. Subsequently, boys are likely to use physicality as opposed to language to bully their peers.

#### *Relational Aggression and Age*

Relational aggression is not necessarily distinct to a certain age group. Although it may appear to be more common among middle school to high school aged children, preschool aged

children know how to manipulate friendships to achieve what they desire. Much of the victimization research has focused on adolescents as the main group participating in peer-maltreatment. Therefore, the occurrence of relational aggression among younger age groups has been vastly under-researched. Crick, Casas and Hyon-Chin (1999) provided the first evidence of the importance of both physical and relational victimization in young children. Specifically, they looked at 129 children aged 3 to 5-years and 6-months. Teachers were asked as a group to complete rating forms pertaining to peer victimization and children were asked to complete an age-appropriate peer-nomination task. Specifically, they would state whether or not they liked to play with a certain child and whether or not they liked the child. Overall, results indicated that relationally victimized children were less accepted by peers than were other children and that girls were more likely to be victims of relational aggression and boys were more likely to be victims of physical aggression. This study is the first to sample such a young age group. Understanding the development of relationally aggressive behaviors as they begin in preschool may be important understanding the phenomenon's origins.

Relational aggression seems to be predominant among adolescents. Galen and Underwood (1997) in an analysis of relational aggression among fourth, seventh and tenth graders discovered that rates of indirect forms of aggression were highest among middle school aged children. Significantly noted is the importance of the school setting as a venue for both experiencing and exhibiting relational aggression. It is in this social situation where children are first introduced to intense peer interactions. They are forced to find their place in this new world and may resort to manipulation techniques to achieve high status and popularity. This is particularly prevalent among middle school aged children as they encounter new people with varying interests coming from different elementary schools.

*Perpetrators of Aggression*

Perpetrators of relational aggression generally use manipulation and exclusion techniques to not only manage their anger but to get what they want and to achieve high social status. Conway (2005) suggests that some girls engage in relationally aggressive behaviors in emotionally arousing situations so that they may regulate the anger and distress that they are experiencing. Relational aggression may serve as an outlet for girls to manage their intense emotions when they are confronted with a stressful or confusing situation. It is likely that they feel that as though they are not doing any real damage, as no one is typically physically injured. Relational aggression is therefore a means to attack an opponent silently and in an undetectable manner. Relational aggression may also be utilized to manage social power (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004). By manipulating relationships, children can ensure their place at the top of the social hierarchy. Threatening friendships is one way that perpetrators may guarantee a faithful following of peers. Perpetrators then justify such malevolent actions by reasoning that they were in a highly competitive and frustrating situation and the outcome is to their advantage. The guilt is brushed off by the immediate reward of enhancing their social status

Simmons (2002) interviewed a group of 28 girls and found that they are caught in a paradoxical trap in which they are expected to be passive and powerful at the same time. Perpetrators of relational aggression are typically perceived to be popular individuals. Simmons asked this group of girls to name some adjectives describing the ideal or perfect girl. What she found was that the portrait of the perfect girl was not entirely positive. Although the girls mentioned some positive adjectives, such as pretty, popular, smiling, happy and smart, they also mentioned an equal amount of negative characteristics such as fake, stupid, helpless, superficial, dependent and manipulative. It appears that the perfect girl is also caught in a trap. She is

perceived as stupid and smart at the same time. Struggling to uphold a certain reputation may cause substantial stress and the means to achieve popularity may not always be viewed by others as commendable. It should be pointed out that these interviews Simmons conducted were informal and did not follow a systematic protocol. Despite the lack of technical adequacy, this is one of the only attempts in the literature that examines relational aggression from a qualitative approach. Rather than having participants fill out surveys and rating scales, Simmons examined their actual experience with relational aggression from a more personal and first-hand view.

Similar to what Simmons found, a study conducted by LaFontana and Cillessen (2002), seeking perceptions of popular and unpopular peers, revealed that children have mixed emotions about popular peers. Although prosocial behaviors were associated with being popular, so were antisocial behaviors. In fact, antisocial behaviors were more strongly correlated with being popular than being unpopular. Popular peers were seen primarily as physically and relationally aggressive and popularity was viewed more as a function of quantity rather than quality of friendships. Regardless of how many close friends popular peers had, they were determined to be popular if they were involved in a large social network rather than a small, close-knit social circle. Equally important to note is that girls associated more negative behaviors with being popular than boys did. Girls tended to view popularity as a function of dominance rather than a function of likeability. In this Machiavellian system of popularity, it is necessary to assert dominance over one's peers if one wishes to maintain his or her status at the top of the social hierarchy.

The aforementioned research demonstrates that popular but controversial children, who are judged with mixed emotions by their peers tend to be the ones who are most relationally aggressive. For instance, a popular cheerleader, may be renowned within her high school for her

immaculate appearance and large group of friends, but may be equally well-known for her pompousness and ability to manipulate others.

The effects of being a provocateur of relational aggression are not yet well-known. Rose Swenson and Waller (2004) propose that youths that are perceived to be popular are in a unique situation in that they are able to act aggressively without social censure. Due to their high social status, popular relational aggressors are able to act without interference as others are hesitant to restrict their behavior. They also suggest that such behavior can lead to increased aggression over time; thereby further increasing the aggressor's perceived popularity. If there are no immediate consequences for these perpetrators, they will continue to engage in these relationally aggressive behaviors to obtain whatever they want.

A potential consequence of being a perpetrator of relational aggression is that although socially prominent children and adolescents have no problem achieving personal goals in their social relationships, they may do so at the expense of those relationships (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). For instance, if two popular female friends are competing for the attention of a male, one may be inclined to spread rumors about the other in order to lower her opponent's status of popularity and to elevate her own. Although this may seem absurd that two allegedly close friends would do such malicious things to one another, it is all in an effort to use relational aggression to one's own advantage and achieve a desired end.

### *Victims of Relational Aggression*

Although no individual anticipates being the victim of relational aggression, perpetrators almost always select a vulnerable target to release their aggression upon. Generally, those children who have isolated themselves or are considered to be social outcasts can become frequent targets of relational aggression. La Fontana and Cillessen (2002) found that children



viewed those individuals who were considered to be social isolates as unpopular. They viewed unpopular children as “misfits” who do not understand the proper way to behave in social situations involving interactions with peers. Consistent with prior studies (e.g. Lagerspetz, Bjorkvist & Peltonen, 1988; Foster, DeLawyer & Guevremont, 1986), they also found that girls were able to make this identification much earlier than boys. Other targets of relational aggression may include those who are new to a school and have not yet established a social unit of friends (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006). Horn (2003) examined children’s reasoning behind exclusion from social groups and found that children were inclined to use conventional reasoning such as stereotypes when attempting to explain social exclusion. It appears that children find it somewhat acceptable to exclude other children from their social groups. However, the children who are left behind are experiencing the consequences of this behavior.

Victims of relational aggression experience negative consequences. Victims are often submissive and may be hesitant to assert themselves in social situations. They may draw negative conclusions about themselves on the basis of negative peer interactions (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). This may lead to feelings of helplessness and depression or other risky behaviors damaging to one’s health. Results from a 6-year longitudinal study conducted by Prinstein and La Greca (2004) indicated that girls who are rejected by their peers later experienced increased risk for substance use, in particular heavy episodic drinking and marijuana use, sexual risk behavior and profiles of elevated problem behaviors across domains. This study also demonstrated that victims of relational aggression as opposed to non-victims report experiencing more internalizing symptoms, more feelings of loneliness and lower self-esteem. In addition, becoming a victim of relational aggression combined with internalizing symptoms may put many girls at risk for depression in early adolescence (Conway, 2005). As previously mentioned, this

victimization can occur at any age. The preschool students in the study conducted by Crick, Casas and Hyon-Chin (1999), were perceived as being different and vulnerable by their peers, thereby making them susceptible to perpetrators of relational aggression. Another study conducted by Werner and Crick (1999), demonstrated the consequences of relational aggression on adults. Women who were victims of relational aggression were likely to have some form of maladjustment, mainly borderline personality features and bulimia. Based on this research, experiencing relational aggression as a child may have long-term consequences that carry over into adulthood.

Children who have been excluded from social situations or perhaps have been gossiped about may feel as though they are constantly on the outside looking in. While the large group is having fun, often at the victim's expense, the targeted child is left with mixed emotions. In the provincial world of middle and high school, it is rather difficult to figure out where one fits in and how one is expected to act. Anyone who deviates from the specific guidelines of what is considered to be appropriate and acceptable behavior may likely become the target of relational aggression.

Relational aggression research has mainly focused on the negative consequences associated with victimization. To date, few studies have focused on effective coping styles. In one of the few studies to examine coping strategies, Remillard and Lamb (2005) found that most girls engaged in problem solving techniques to resolve conflict. This study also indicated that seeking social support is the most effective coping strategy in resolving conflict among friends in a way that restores the friendship. Although this research identifies effective ways to cope with relational aggression, due to the quantitative nature of the study specific problems solving techniques and steps are not identified. In addition, the researchers do not specify whether social

support from a friend, parent, teacher, or acquaintance is most effective in resolving conflict. Despite identifying effective coping techniques, this study leaves many questions unanswered, suggesting the need for a more qualitative examination of effective coping strategies.

### *Intervention Techniques*

Although more today is known about relational aggression than in the past, empirically validated intervention techniques are needed in this area. One option is utilizing physical aggression literature and applying the techniques used in these studies to relational aggression (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). In order for such techniques to be successful, they must not only focus on aggressive individuals but on the victims of relational aggression as well. An effective intervention is conscious of peer-group dynamics as well as individual behaviors and will seek to change behaviors that are rewarded with high social status (Rose, Swenson & Waller, 2004).

Another approach could use Functional Behavior Assessment to determine what children find rewarding about engaging in relationally aggressive acts and then teach and reinforce positive replacement behaviors (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). Due to the covert nature of relational aggression, it would be necessary to conduct interviews with parents, teachers and students alike to obtain insight as to how relational aggression functions and flourishes within the group dynamic and how it effects various individuals.

Until there is a certain protocol to follow in addressing relational aggression, schools should make their best attempt to take the matter into their own hands by intervening when this problem is prevalent. For instance, schools should encourage social support and promote inclusion rather than exclusion, tolerance and respect rather than discrimination and disregard for others and open-communication rather than feelings of silence and contention. To achieve this,

educators should make their best efforts to make the school environment as comfortable and as open as possible. It is evident that children are likely to act out when they are put in threatening situations. Therefore, schools should teach children how to respond appropriately and demonstrate the advantages of engaging in prosocial behavior. Prinstein and La Greca (2004), found that those children who had at least one close friend were able to react better and cope more effectively when they were the targets of aggression. Schools should emphasize the importance of friendships, since being in communal relationships with peers may reduce the stress experienced when one is victimized. Such positive relationships may develop through social skills training programs that address the qualities of a good friend and emphasize the importance of including other children in group activities and working together cooperatively (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006).

One research-based intervention that has been shown to be effective in its implementation is tootling (Skinner, Cashwell & Skinner, 2000) Tootling focuses on teaching prosocial behavior and reinforcing those skills rather than focusing on the inappropriate behaviors of children. Tootling involves children recognizing the positive and helpful behaviors of other children. The overall goal of this method is to increase the likelihood of children praising and recognizing the positive behaviors of other children rather than the negative behaviors.

An intervention that showed promise among younger aged children was advocated by Harris and Bradley (2003) in their research implementing the rule, “You can’t say you can’t play.” Teachers in kindergarten classrooms read fairy tales to the children that included elements of inclusion and exclusion. Children then role-played and held discussions as part of this intervention. At the end of the study, those students who had experienced this intervention stated that they enjoyed playing with other children more than the control group. In this

particular situation, the children did not have control in regard to with whom they could play with. Therefore, introducing children to those whom they may not normally associate with has a positive impact on their social interactions.

Although empirical evidence for successful programmatic interventions is limited, two programs show promise in addressing the issues surrounding relational aggression; the Empower Program and the Ophelia Project (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). The goal of the Empower Program is to end violence among youths, by getting children to engage in leadership related activities. This program is based on the Owning Up curriculum which surrounds the belief that violence occurs when members of society act on gender-specific stereotypes. In addition, this intervention focuses on reducing the bystander effect and getting children to stand up for others rather than ignore aggressive situations. The Ophelia Project works towards creating a healthier environment for girls by focusing on creating a positive school climate. This initiative works by involving parents and educating them about relational aggression. Parents then should discourage their children from relationally aggressive behavior and encourage prosocial behavior.

### *Identifying Victims and Perpetrators*

Assessing relational aggression can be somewhat challenging due to its secretive nature. Perpetrators of relational aggression are experts at staying out of the range of adult detection. They use sophisticated methods to maintain anonymity from both adults and their targets. In addition, children may easily justify in their own minds utilizing relational aggression by reasoning that no one is physically hurt and it is not a crime to talk about someone. Finding an effective method to assess relational aggression can be a very difficult task for researchers and clinicians alike.

One of the predominant methods of assessment is a sociometric strategy known as the Children's Social Behavior Scale Peer Form which was developed by Crick (1995) and her colleagues. This technique relies upon peer reports for assessing relational aggression. Sociometric assessment methods involve techniques such as peer nomination, peer rating and peer ranking. This method can be adapted to any age group. In the study in which Crick, Casas and Hyon-Chin (1999) examined relational aggression among preschoolers, they used pictures of classmates rather than names to accommodate for the fact that preschoolers are unable to read. Although this method has been found to be highly effective in assessing aggression, there are a few disadvantages and limitations to using sociometric assessment measures. To begin with, it is important that the researcher adhere to strict ethical guidelines when using these methods. Due to the sensitive nature of peer evaluations, it is crucial that risk to student participants is minimized. For instance, after completing such measures it is likely that students will discuss what they reported. Researchers should enforce the idea that these measures are intended to be kept confidential so that no one is hurt. Obtaining informed consent and participation of an entire group to ensure full validity is therefore a challenge when utilizing sociometric measures. In addition, teachers and parents may be hesitant to endorse sociometric methods if they believe negative behaviors such as aggression may be increased or that the self-esteem of certain students may be harmed (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). With this in mind, it can be rather difficult to obtain administrative consent within the school system.

Another form of assessment utilizes teacher ratings. Teachers work with students directly and are with them for a good portion of their week, making their insights and observations useful in assessing relational aggression. Teacher ratings are not only economical but efficient and practical as well. Teachers can rate how frequently children are perceived to be

engaging in aggressive behavior using the Children's Social Behavior Scale-Teacher form, which was also developed by Crick (1995). Using this particular rating form accompanied with the peer form can provide sufficient validity as the same measures are being assessed, just from the teacher's point of view rather than the students' perspective. There are disadvantages to this method, including teacher biases. Teachers tend to maintain early impression which may have been created earlier in the year, thereby causing inaccurate perceptions of behavior (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). In addition, teachers are not always in tune with what is occurring among children. Their assessments may not be entirely accurate as they may be unaware of peer-group dynamics (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006). Being an outsider, looking into the social circles of children, may make it difficult for teachers to accurately assess various situations. It also can be challenging for those who teach younger age groups, such as preschool to determine who are frequent targets of relational aggression, as children tend to be particularly active at this age (Crick, Casas & Hyon-Chin, 1999). Teachers at this level seem to focus more on preventing physical acts of aggression that would put a child in immediate danger rather than acts of relational aggression.

Self-report measures can be useful in evaluating relational aggression. Such measures probe the child to rate how true a particular statement is of themselves. Results can then indicate if a child is relationally aggressive or if he or she is experiencing negative consequences as a result of being a victim. An effective self-report measure used in this manner is the Social Experience Questionnaire which was also developed by Crick (1998) and examines a child's experience with prosocial, overt and relationally aggressive behaviors from peers. This allows the researcher to examine the child's coping skills and perceptions of social experiences. An additional benefit of utilizing this method is that it may provide initial evaluations of mental

health. As with any self-report measure, this technique is subject to response bias. Often times, the child will respond with the answer he or she feels is what they should say, even if it does not accurately describe her or she may be trying to please the evaluator. Another drawback of this method is that social skills cannot accurately be assessed. Although it can be determined how well a student is able to cope with relational aggression, it cannot measure how she would respond to such victimization (Merrel, Buchanan & Tran, 2006).

Naturalistic observations may also be helpful in the assessment process. Researchers tend to be more objective than students and teachers and are trained to recognize certain behaviors. They are less biased in that they do not know the reputation of the children being observed and therefore, serve as a neutral party. Although direct observation is one of the best empirically validated methods, there are many challenges to this process. To begin with, such observations can be time-consuming and often require the permission of school administration to occur. In addition, children are likely to behave differently if they know they are being observed and behaviors may be limited during the specific time of observation. Due to the highly secretive nature of relational aggression, it may be very difficult if not almost impossible for the researcher to observe this behavior if only allotted a limited time for observation.

Interviews can also be conducted with students to determine their exposure to relational aggression. Interviews are helpful in that they are not necessarily as limited as a questionnaire. If a child responds and the researcher is interested in learning more about a particular situation, he or she may prompt the child for more information. There is certain protocol that an interview session may follow. This may in turn help to determine if a child is at risk and what intervention techniques would be most helpful in reducing the effects of relational aggression. Interviews tend to have the same disadvantages as self-report measures. It is possible that the child being



interviewed will be hesitant to report any feelings of victimization and may show a response bias. To date, few studies exist that employ this technique. In depth interviews with those who have experienced relational aggression would provide valuable insight regarding how one may effectively cope with victimization.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in this study included 7 Caucasian female students, ages 12 to 14 years old (mean age 13.28) who attended a rural junior-senior high school in western New York. Purposive sampling was used to select participants because research demonstrates that the phenomenon of relational aggression is predominant among adolescent females. Students were identified by the school psychologist as having experienced relational aggression and as having successfully resolved their conflicts. The school psychologist provided the participants with information regarding this study and then referred students to this researcher. Parental consent and student assent were granted prior to the researcher meeting with each student.

### *Materials and Procedures*

To elicit the personal story of each participant's experience with relational aggression, a semi-structured interview was developed (see Appendix A). Questions aimed at capturing the respondent's individual situation and her reactions to victimization. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions but encouraged a degree of flexibility according to the different stories presented. Permission was sought to record the interviews. All tapes were coded with a number and no personal details were recorded. Each interview focused on a specific situation in which the participant experienced relational aggression and explored her initial reaction to the experience. The second part of the interview encouraged the participant to elaborate on methods she found to be most effective in coping with the situation.

### *Data Analysis*

Phenomenological analysis was utilized to explore the "lived experience" as taped during the interviews (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). Phenomenological studies aim to examine the

underlying structure and core meaning of shared experiences. Based on the guidelines outlined by Smith et. al. (1999) a thematic analysis was undertaken by listening to audiotapes repeatedly, reading individual transcripts, noting the significant issues communicated and identifying similarities and differences among participants' responses. Each taped transcript was typed verbatim and a participant number was assigned to each interviewee (see Appendix B for transcription). Tapes were destroyed upon completion of the transcription process. After careful and repeated review of the interviews, key points and themes were noted in the margins of the transcription. A flow chart was then developed outlining themes that emerged from the interviews as well as steps each participant took to arrive at a resolution.

## Results

Figures 1 through 7 illustrate the themes that emerged from the interviews as well as the problem solving process the participants undertook. Each participant experienced a distinct form of relational aggression that took on a specific theme. In each case, the victim was friends with the perpetrator. In addition, participants reacted in a similar manner before engaging in the problem solving process.

### *Depiction of Relational Aggression*

In every case, the participant identified rumor spreading as the main form of relational aggression she experienced. One participant experienced physical aggression in addition to rumors and three participants experienced triangulation coupled with rumor spreading.

The participant had a close relationship with the perpetrator in every instance. Participant #1 said, “We had actually been friends before in the beginning of the year up until the middle of the year. Then she turned it around and said, ‘hey I don’t like you anymore.’” Participant #3 said, “We were friends from like second grade...” and Participant #4 said,

Well, my friend T and me, we used to be friends. Then we weren’t friends anymore. We would get in fights all the time and stuff. He would sometimes say mean things about me. He would talk to his friends about me.

Prior to the relationally aggressive act, each victim had identified the perpetrator as a friend. They viewed this individual as someone whom they could trust.

Another theme that emerged was the nature of the rumors. In every case, the rumors took on a tone of denigration. For instance, participant #1 stated

Something went around that I was Satan's Child... the whole grade kept saying I was a demon from Hell. They said that my parents divorced because I tried to kill my dad.

They said that I was satanic.... I was a demon for a month.

In addition, in nearly every case the rumor referenced the students' sexual behavior. Participant #1 further identified rumors that had been spread about her; "There were a couple little stupid ones that had to do with me being pregnant and being a whore." Other participants indicated that their friends also sought to damage their reputations and questioned their sexual lifestyles. Participant #2 stated, "There was this one time when my friend, said something to my other friend that was bad about me. She told everyone I was pregnant." Participant #5 fell victim to a reputation damaging rumor her friend spread as well, "She was really mean though. She told everyone that I was a slut and said that I slept with everyone I saw. Only in the instance of Participant #6, did the nature of the rumor have to do with criticizing a skill deficit. In all other cases, attacks aimed at denigrating the victim's character and harming her reputation.

### *Initial Reactions*

Initial reactions to the relationally aggressive acts followed a distinct pattern. The participants always exhibited an initial negative emotional reaction followed by some sort of behavioral response. Emotional reactions varied from feeling angry, upset, scared, hurt and betrayed. These negative responses indicated that the victim was feeling distressed which often resulted in a behavioral response. Behavioral responses also varied across participants. Many of the participants indicated that they cried. Participant #1 expressed her emotional and behavioral response, "At first, I would just go home to my mom and just cry. It came to a point where it's not teasing anymore. It's just mean aggression trying to ruin your life." She also initially responded by avoiding school, "Before, I would wake up and I would just tell my mom I am not

coming to school.” Other participants also initially avoided or ignored the perpetrator(s). For instance, Participant #5 stated, “Before I couldn’t go to the garbage can without them screaming at me. So I decided not to go near them and I told the teachers I wanted to sit at a different table.” One participant indicated that she responded with a verbal outburst, “I started swearing down the hallway and made sure everyone could hear me.” Although their reactions took on different forms, participants reliably displayed a negative emotional reaction followed by a behavioral response, in every instance.

### *Problem Solving Process*

All participants engaged in a problem solving process which is described in terms of specific action steps taken to arrive at a solution. Ongoing actions the participants engaged in throughout the problem solving process are identified as “Actions Continuous” and helped to alleviate stress while trying to arrive at a solution. The problem solving process is illustrated in Figures 1 through 7.

Although participants followed a varied sequence of steps in the problem solving process, a theme of direct confrontation emerged in the first step of the problem solving process. Four of the seven participants directly confronted the perpetrator before taking other actions. In every instance that direct confrontation was used, it was not effective. Other participants employed methods of ignoring or sought social support from an adult as their first step. In each case, these techniques were not effective in resolving the conflict. Regardless of the first method employed, the participants' choice of action was ineffective in solving the problem.

Another theme that emerged in the problem solving process was seeking support from adults. However, seeking adult guidance was not always effective in resolving the conflict. For instance, Participant #1 spoke with both her mother and teachers and reported that these

techniques were not effective. She stated, "I went to the teachers to try and get my seats moved and they didn't do that." Only when the adult gave advice or took some sort of action was seeking adult support an effective means to solve the problem. Three of the participants found talking to a school counselor who then served as a mediator between the conflicting parties was the most effective coping strategy. Participant #2 stated, "Well the way it really got resolved was when Mrs. V called us down to her office and all three of us started talking about it and I was like ok I understood why she did it." Participant #3 also found adult mediation to be effective,

I would talk to Mrs. A a lot and she would tell me the best thing to do is just to talk to her but I didn't want to because it made me mad just looking at her and talking about it. So Mrs. A said we could come to her office and talk about it with the three of us and that's why I finally realized that I shouldn't get revenge on someone that did something bad to me.

One participant found that the ultimate answer to her problem was getting the school safety officer to intervene. One interviewee found it helpful to ask her teachers to move her to a new lunch table while two other girls followed the advice of their mothers and ignored the perpetrators. In every case, the ultimate resolution was having an adult intervene or give advice.

Participants reported actions they engaged in throughout the problem solving process (actions continuous) that did not completely resolve the conflict but helped to assuage their feelings of distress. Five of the interviewees indicated that although talking to their friends did not solve the problem, it helped them cope with the associated stress of falling victim to relational aggression. Five of the participants also reported that writing about the incident either in a journal or through an online blog was helpful in managing their emotions.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to capture the experience of those who fall victim to relational aggression and examine effective coping strategies victims employed. Previous research has focused on the negative consequences victims experience as well as ineffective coping strategies that often result in maladjustment. Research has indicated that girls who experience relational aggression are at higher risk for drug and alcohol abuse and are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors (Prinstein & La Greca, 2004). The present study examined the negative emotions associated with victimization. Victims were likely to feel upset, angry and betrayed. These highly arousing emotional responses to relational aggression make children more vulnerable and may result in them resorting to more harmful means of coping such as drugs and alcohol.

The behavioral response the girls exhibited following their initial emotional response appears to be the natural reaction they experienced as a result of becoming a target. Although these responses did nothing to resolve the situation, it is important to understand what these girls were experiencing. Through qualitative evaluation, one is able to understand the reasons behind these behavioral responses. Initial behavioral responses were extremely reactive, lacked thought and in some cases may have done more harm than good. These responses tend to be uncontrollable but provide the victim with a means to express her emotions. If the victimization persists and is left unresolved it becomes apparent why girls are likely to engage in ineffective means to resolve their conflicts which in turn, increases their likelihood of becoming susceptible to depression and feelings of helplessness that can be damaging to their health (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).



Results of the present study are consistent with previous research by Remillard and Lamb (2005) who through quantitative analysis found that most girls engage in problem solving techniques and seek social support to resolve conflicts in situations that involve relational aggression. However, this study did not address the degree of distress nor the specific problem solving steps girls engaged in to arrive at solutions. Without qualitative analysis, the emotional toll as well as the steps girls needed to take to solve their problems would not be evident.

In addition to capturing the experience of relational aggression, this study sought to examine effective coping strategies so that school personnel can take appropriate intervention steps. In nearly every instance, it was the conscientious act of an adult that ultimately resolved the conflict. If adults do not take an active role in trying to resolve relational aggression, the conflict will likely persist resulting in further damage to the victim. Students who sought adult support and were ignored continued to experience relational aggression. If adults do nothing to help resolve the situation, it is likely that students will try to find other ways to cope which could include engaging in harmful behaviors. However, if adults such as parents, teachers, school counselors, school social workers and other school personnel take an active role in mediating between the conflicting parties, the victimization can stop. This study further demonstrated that children will try to solve these conflicts on their own. Often, these techniques may alleviate stress associated with victimization but are not successful in resolving the conflict. Seeking active adult support appears to be an effective coping strategy. It is important that schools recognize this and implement effective mediation interventions when relational aggression occurs.

*Limitations and Future Implications*

Despite the positive findings, there were several limitations to this study. To begin with, a qualitative study with a relatively small sample size limits the ability to make conclusions or generalizations to a larger population of adolescent girls. This study examined the experience of relational aggression among females aged 12 to 14 years old. Although this is an important group in which to study relational aggression, the generalization of the results to males and other age groups is unclear. In addition to being adolescent females, all participants were Caucasian and from a rural lower to middle class region of western New York. It is uncertain as to whether these results would be applicable to other populations.

Another potential limitation to this study pertains to the methodology. Although qualitative research is lacking in this area, participants may have been reluctant to disclose information in a one on one interview setting. This format tends to be less anonymous than a paper survey. Moreover, it is possible that participants may have answered questions in a socially desirable fashion. Another limitation in the methodology is that these participants were only interviewed once. Additional interviews may have brought about more in depth information regarding the experience of relational aggression and effective coping strategies.

Due to the complex nature of this phenomenon, additional qualitative studies that capture the victims' experience with relational aggression may shed light upon their experiences. Further research in this area is needed to help develop effective interventions for children. Due to the high prevalence of relational aggression among adolescent females, future studies should examine ways children may effectively manage the associated stress. Future studies should also examine this experience among different populations. Clearly, more research is needed in this area. Although this study has identified some important themes as well as effective means to

cope with relational aggression, further in depth analysis of this phenomenon is necessary to help school personnel determine effective ways to address this issue.

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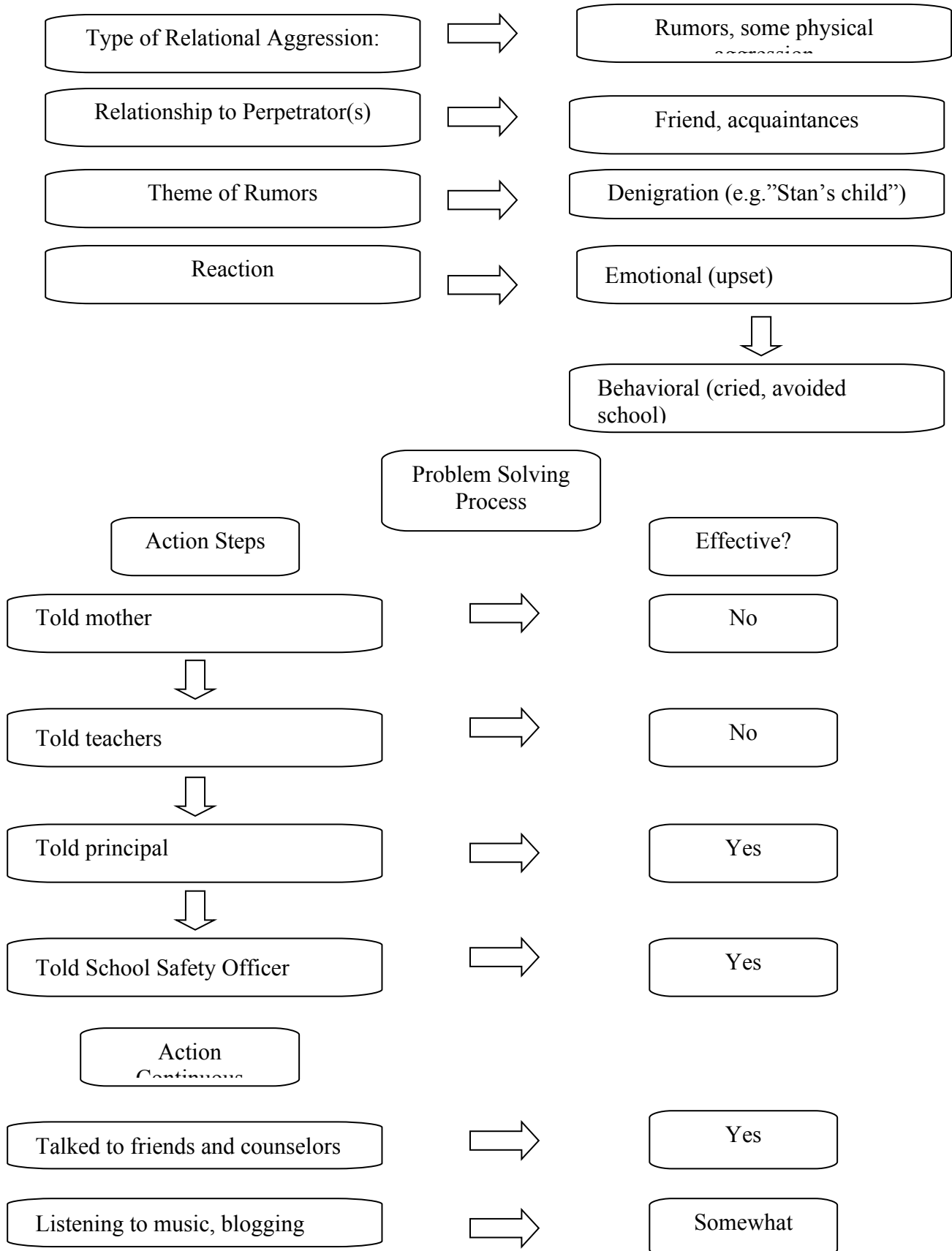


Figure 1.

Participant #2 (age 14)

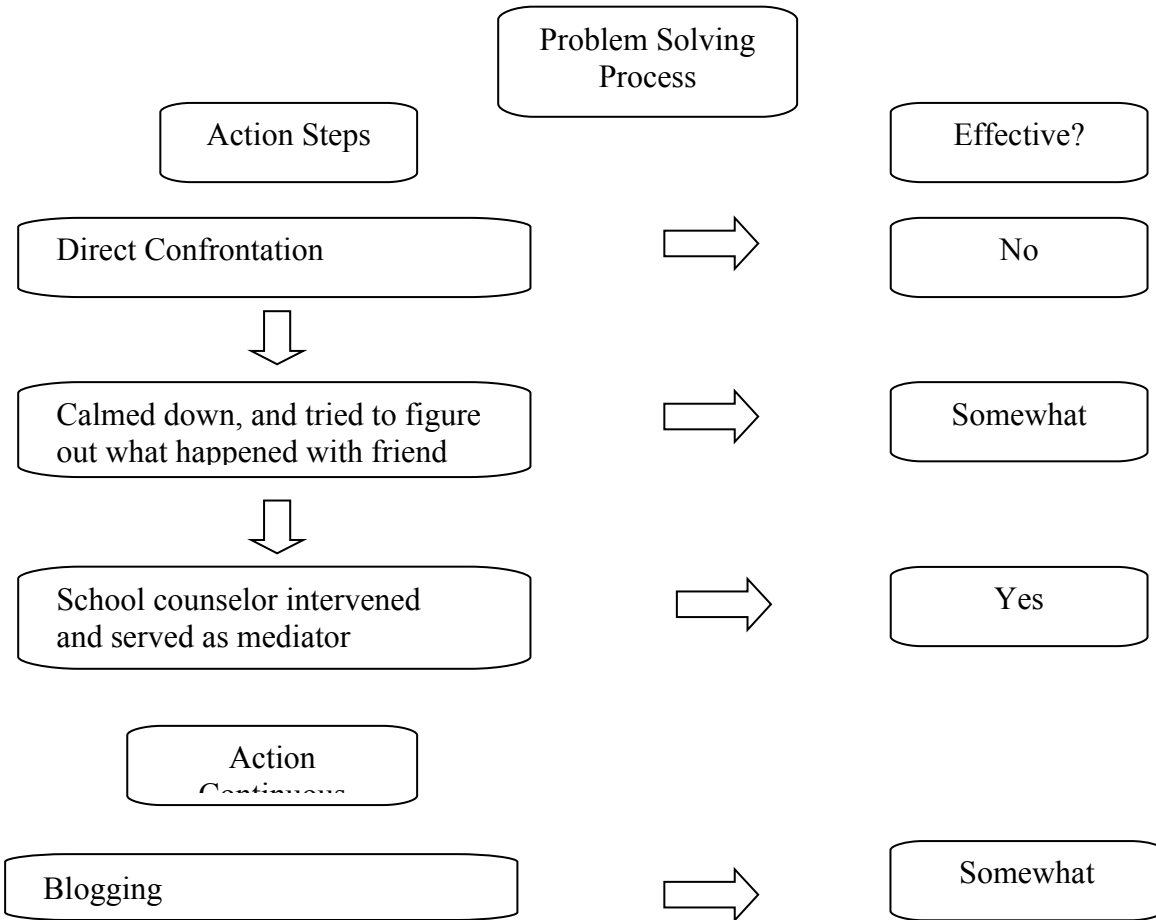
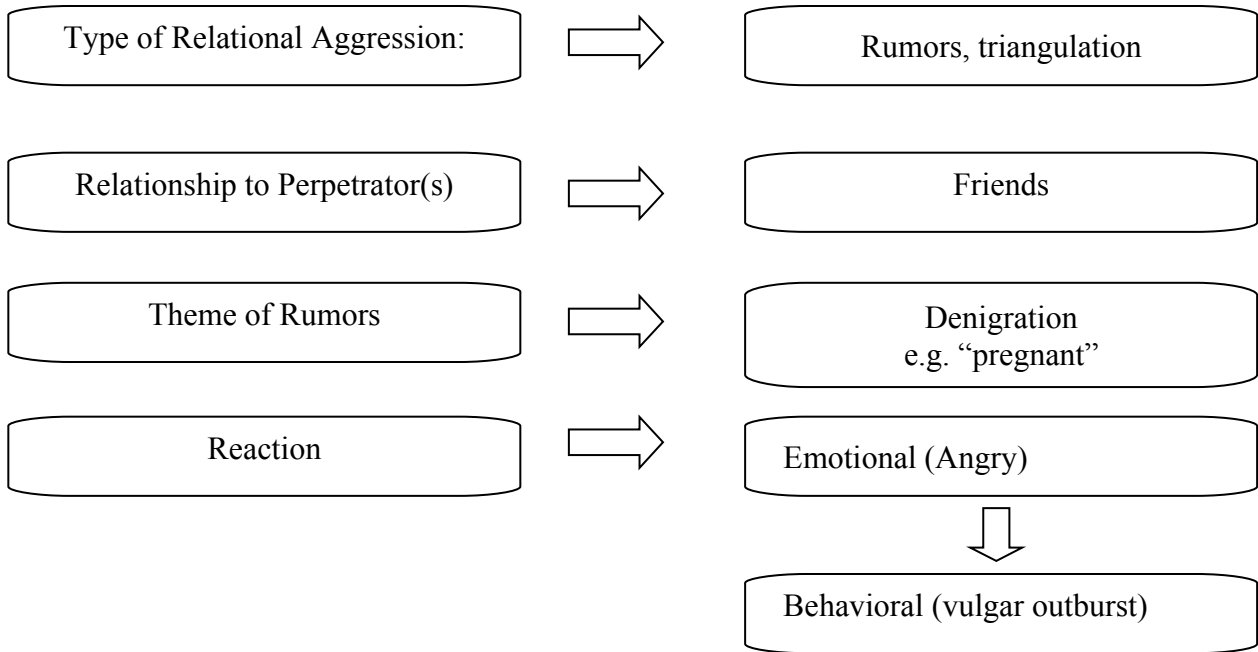


Figure 2.

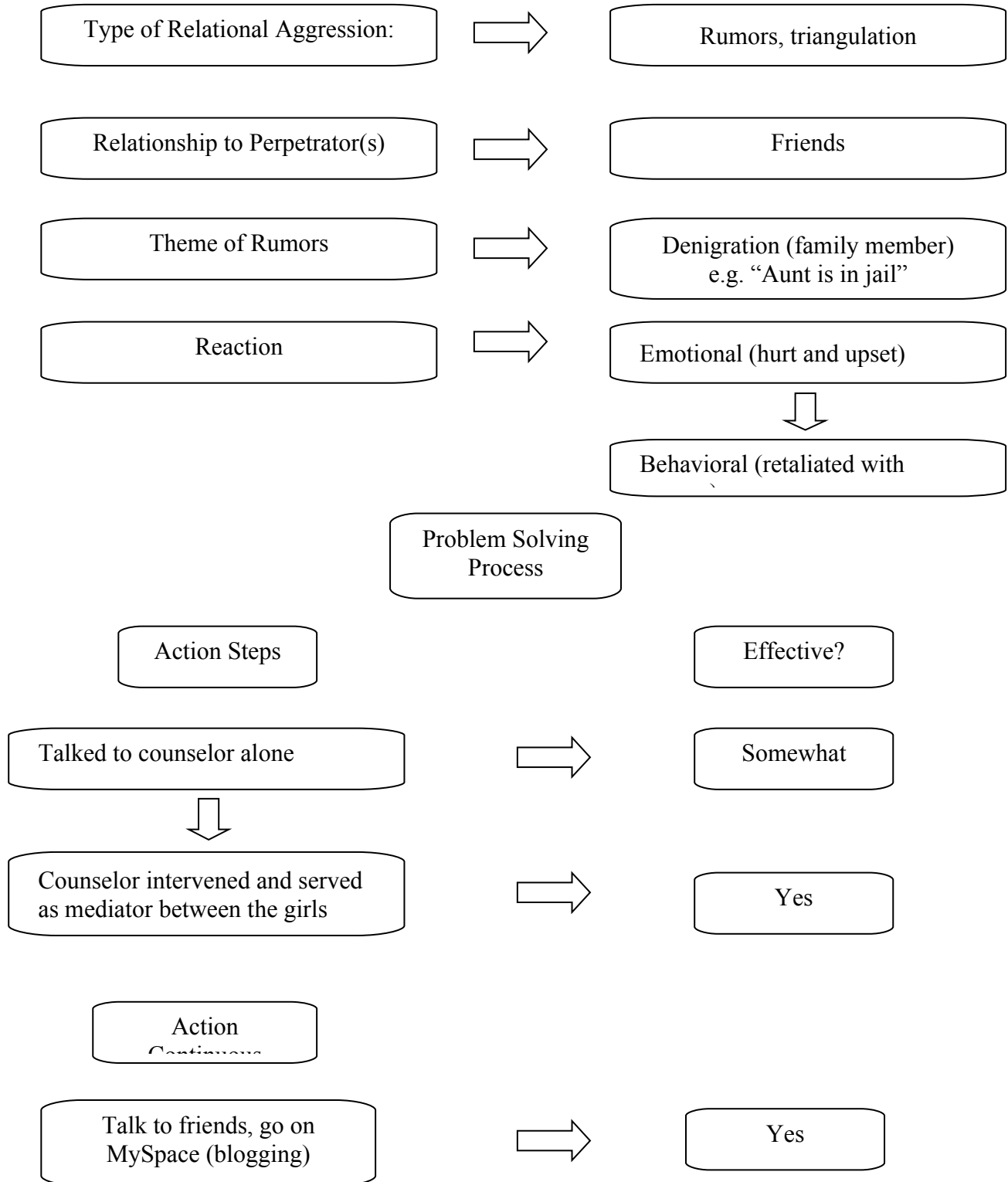


Figure 3.

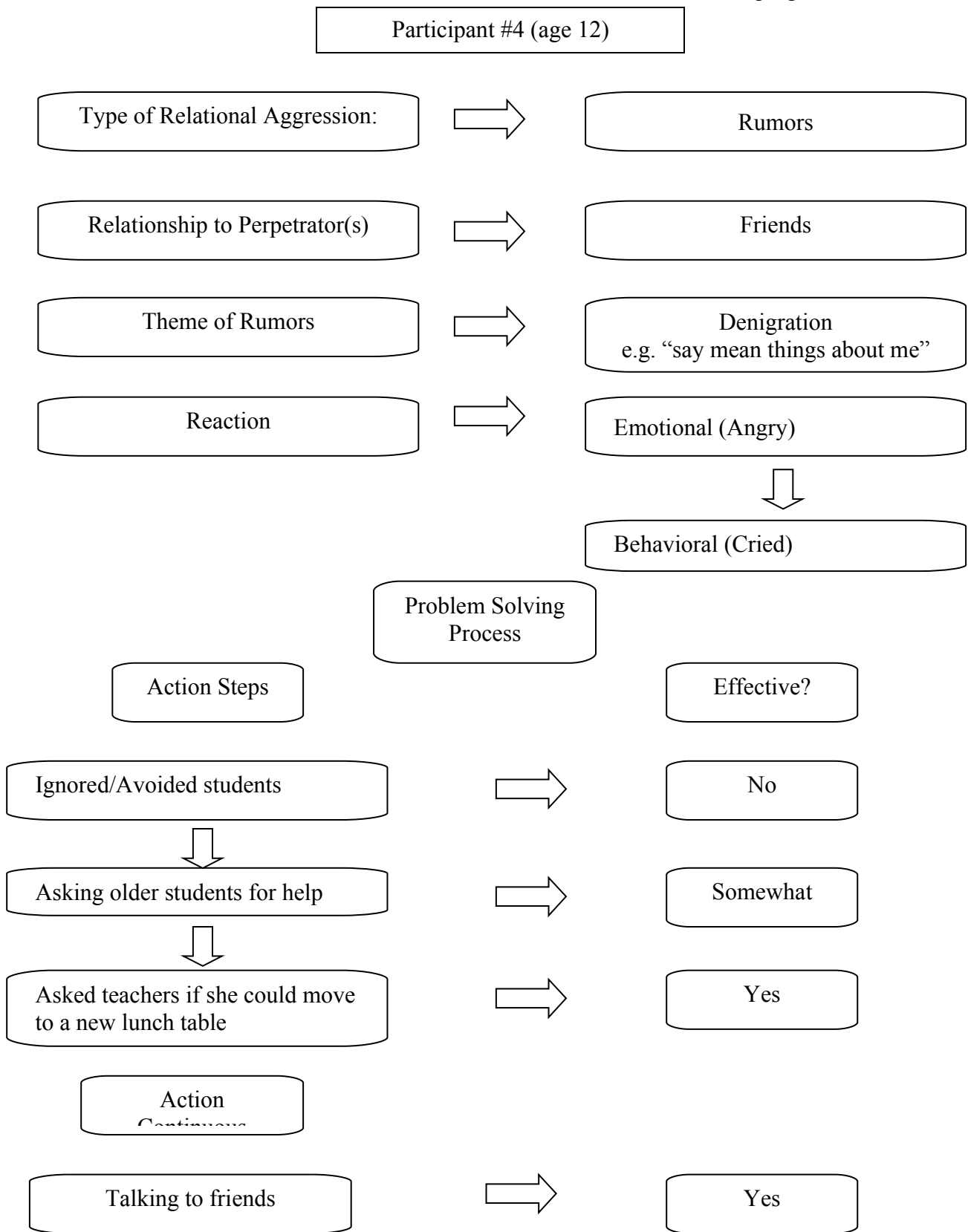


Figure 4.

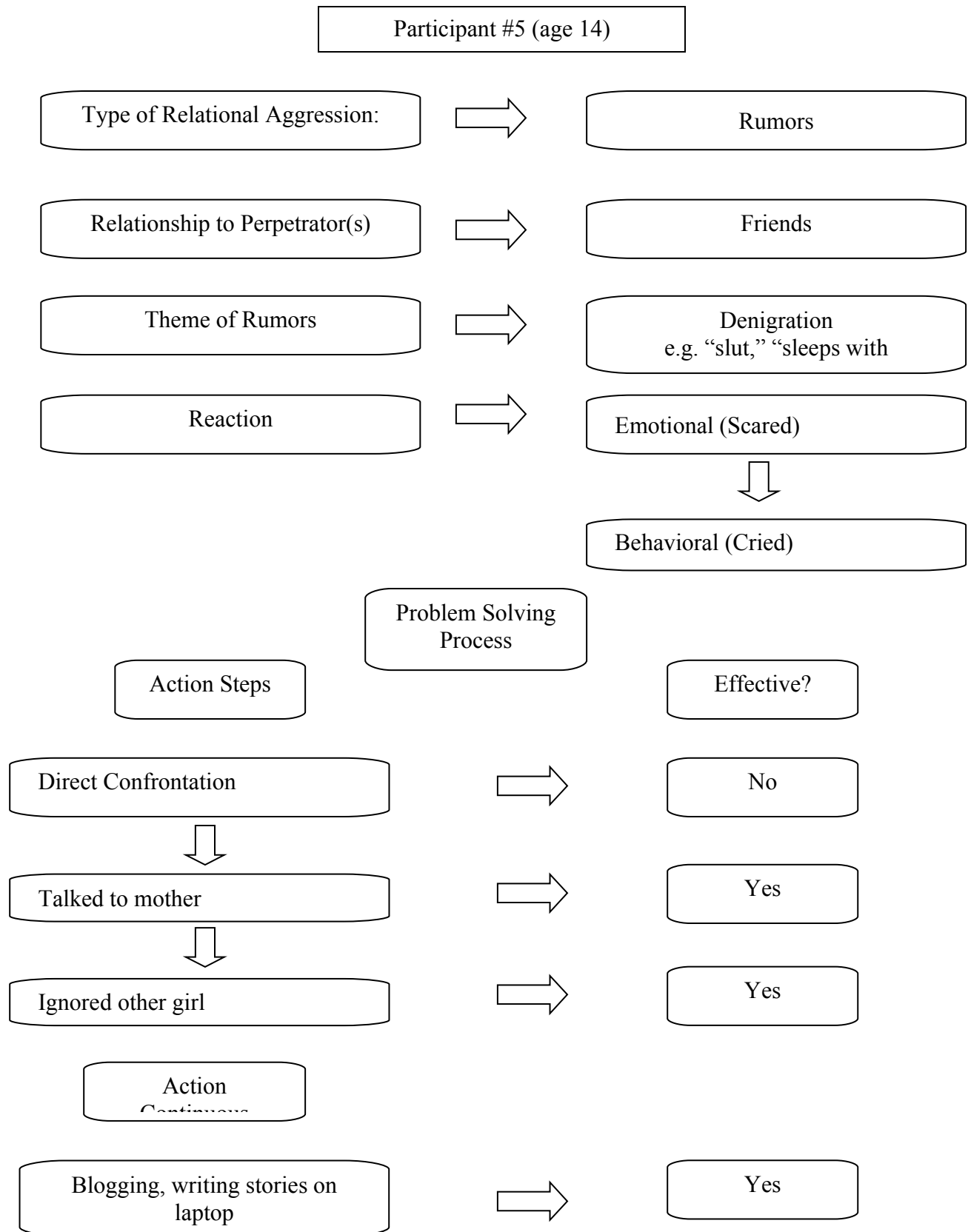


Figure 5.

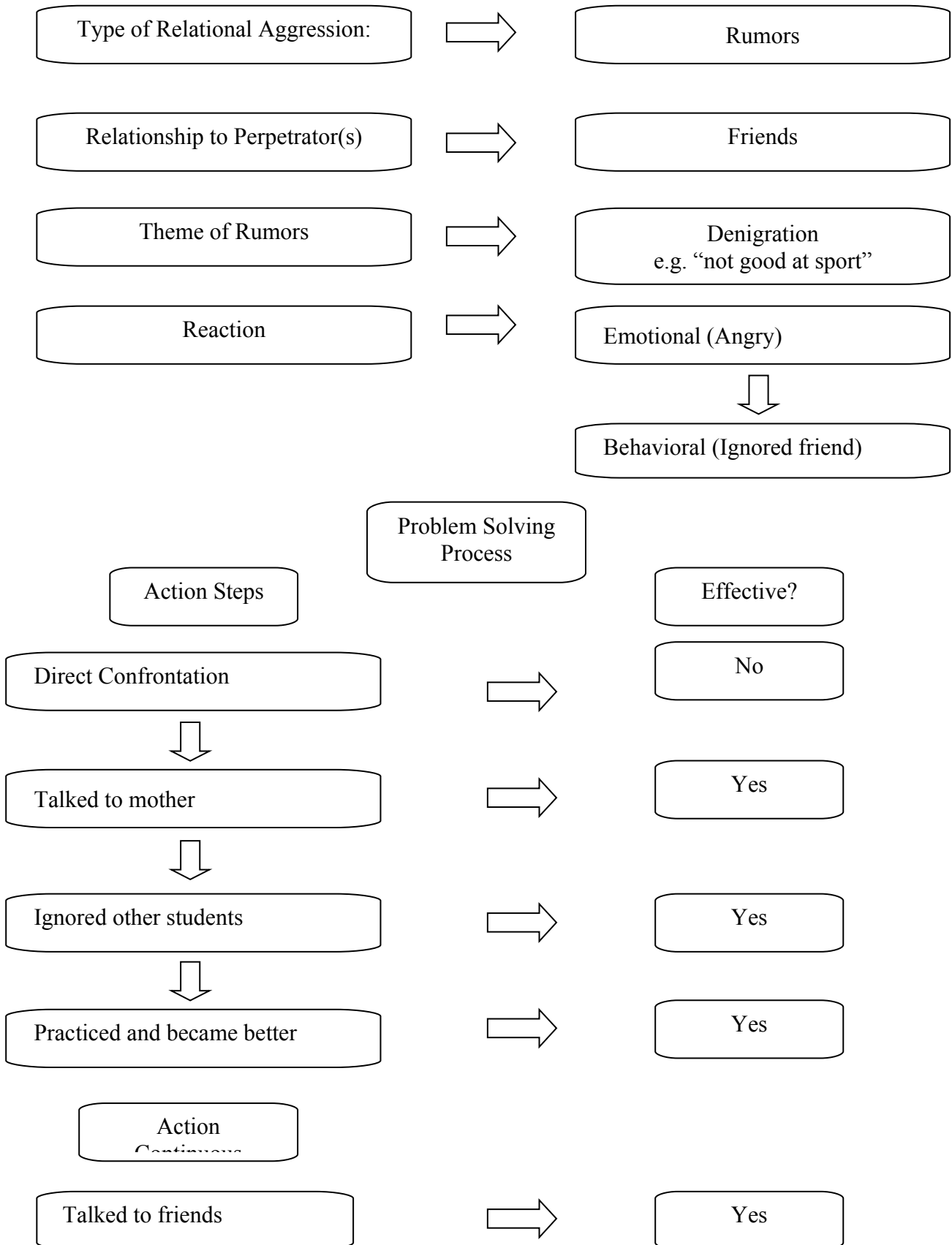


Figure 6.

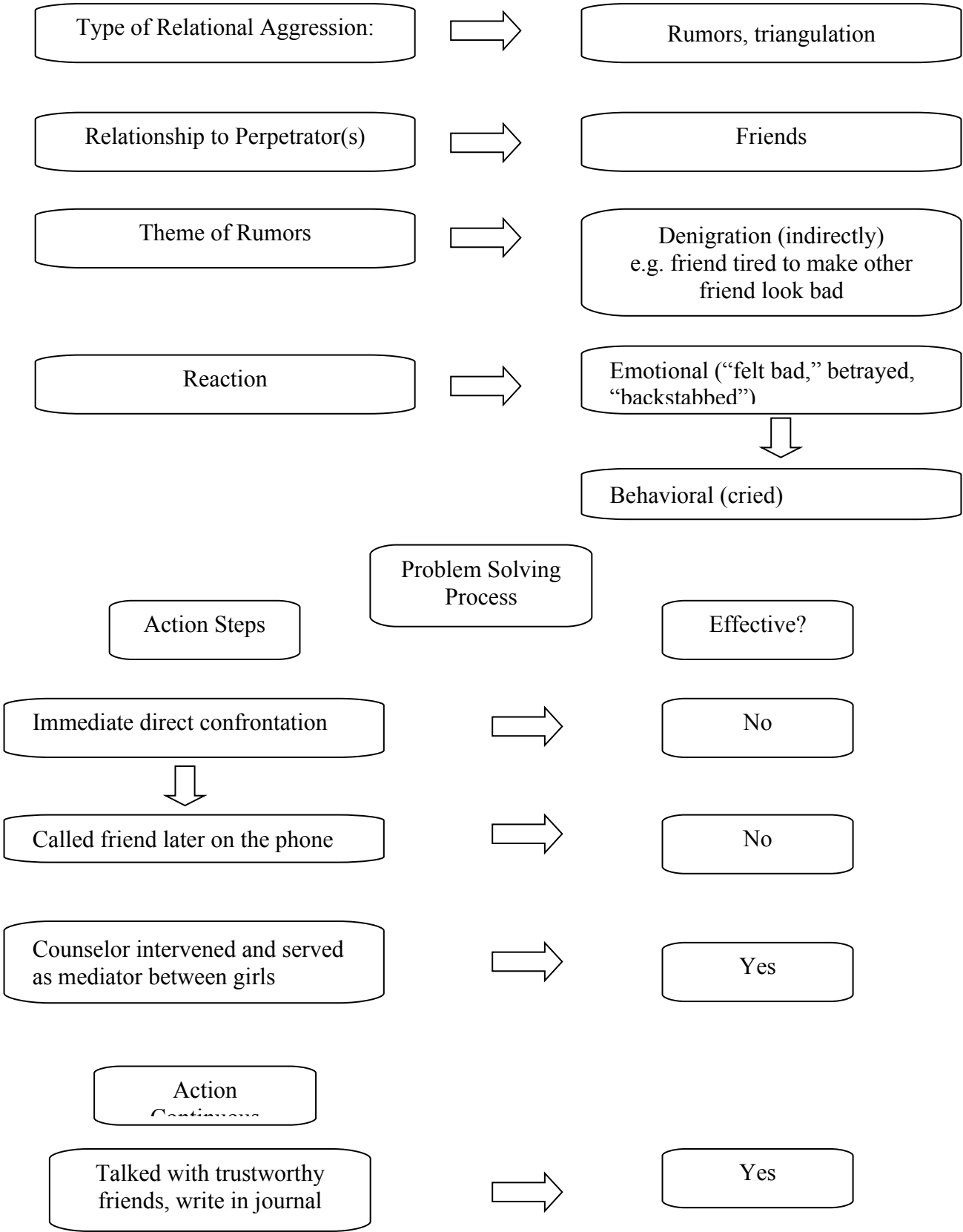


Figure 7.



## Appendix A

Relational Aggression  
Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire

1. I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?
  - a. Yes. That's exactly what relation aggression isOR
  - b. Relational aggression is commonly experienced among girls your age. It sometimes involves talking about someone behind her back, spreading rumors or trying to come between friends.
2. Briefly tell me what happened
3. I'm talking to you today because although we do not want anyone to experience relational aggression, we know it happens quite often. When this happens, we want to find the best ways to cope with this. I want to know what you did to handle this situation. That is how you cope. After this happened how did you feel?
4. How did you first react?
5. What did you do first?
6. What happened because of that?
7. What else did you do to try and make things better?
8. Were you satisfied with the way things went?
9. Did you feel better about yourself?
10. Did you feel better about \_\_\_\_\_ (situation, friends, other child, etc.)
11. When this happens, some girls find it helpful to talk to their parents, write in a diary, listen to music (etc.) Was there anything else you did?
12. What do you think is most helpful to you?

## Appendix B

**Participant #1**

Age: 14

**I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?**

Um kind of

**What do you think it means?**

Um Bullying among friends or peers

**Yes that's right. It's more of a verbal bullying. It's not really physical fighting but it's kind of the things girls do with each other. Like spreading rumors gossiping and it's more common among girls. So you kind of have experienced something like that with your friends?**

Yes

**Ok. Why don't you tell me one situation where this happened.**

Something went around that I was Satan's Child. I don't know how believable that is but I wear different clothes than the rest of the girls here and I use different vocabulary. I don't use "like" or "oh my god." I use intelligent things I guess. Actually it wasn't just the girls but it was basically the whole grade kept saying I was a demon from Hell. They said that my parents divorced because I tried to kill my dad. They said that I was satanic and I'm not. I don't have a religion. I don't know. I don't believe in God but I don't believe in Satan either. They just kept saying I was satanic. I was a demon for a month.

**And is that the only incident you can recall?**

That was basically the big one. There were a couple little stupid ones that had to do with me being pregnant and being a whore. You know. So that kind of stuff is spread about a lot people. I'm pretty sure there is a pregnant rumor every week. I was just the girl of the week

**So it sounds like you know what relational aggression is. There's a lot of spreading rumors, talking about people behind their back. And it does happen and sometimes there are boys involved but it does happen mostly among girls. I'm talking to you today because although we do not want anyone to experience relational aggression, we know it happens. It definitely happens in high school. Among people your age it is very common. So what I want to find out is how people cope with this. So I want to know how you handled this situation and what you did about it.**

At first, I would just go home to my mom and just cry. It came to a point where it's not teasing anymore it's just mean aggression trying to ruin your life. Then I went to the teachers to try and get my seats moved and they didn't do that. One time I sat behind this girl who in earth science, we would pass rocks back to look at the samples in the rock to see things like the crystals in the rock. But the girl, every time she would pass it back she would slam it down on my hand. It got my hand a couple of times. So my hand would be bleeding and the teacher would say, how do I know you didn't do that to yourself? So especially when the teachers are against you, what do you do? So after I went to the teachers, I went to the principal and the principal did a lot more than the teachers did but it still continued so I went to the cop that's here, Officer S and then it stopped. So I had to go to the extreme of getting the cop

**So while all this was happening how did you feel about it?**

I don't know kind of like they were all against me. Because no one seemed to really care. It didn't matter who I went to. I would go to some of the counselors and I thought they were the only ones that were actually trying. But there is only so much you can do. I mean you can't physically go to each kid and say hey cut it out.

**So the first thing you did was try to talk to the teacher?**

The first thing I did was talk to my mom who is the CSE director. I don't know what she did but nothing happened. Then I went to the teachers who were in charge of that class, then I went to the principal and then the cop.

**So nothing really happened until you went to the cop it sounds like?**

More happened with the principal but yeah it never officially stopped until I went to the cop.

**So it sounds like some of those methods worked. Did you try anything else other than talking to adults?**

I talked to them. The girl who was slamming my hand and I talked to my friends and my boyfriend. But I actually had a conversation with the girl and said, "I don't get why you don't like me." Because we had actually been friends before in the beginning of the year up until the middle of the year. Then she turned it around and said, "hey I don't like you anymore." So, she said that she has new friends and that she didn't need me anymore. And I said well fine but don't try and hurt me. She told me to shut up so I don't know I didn't see the point in all that. I talked to my friends.

**So it sounds like you weren't too satisfied talking to the teachers. Talking to you friends didn't really work so well...**

Because there is nothing they can do. The only thing they could do is say, "oh I'm going to beat her up."

**Did any of this make you feel better about yourself or did you feel like it didn't really work?**

No. I'm not the type of person who will go and if someone is mean to me spread rumors about them or go and get a gang and beat them up. Because to me, that's really immature and I don't see why anyone would want to do that. Because really, if someone is spreading a rumor about me, spreading a rumor about them doesn't make a difference. It doesn't counterattack it. It's just starting new crap.

**Well that's the way some girls do cope. They will retaliate and do more negative things but it seems like you handled this really well. So do you feel better about this situation now or is it still going on?**

Yeah. It's definitely better than it was in the beginning of the year and 6<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Um it hasn't completely come to a halt but I can definitely come to school now. Before I would wake up and I would just tell my mom I am not coming to school. It was awful because the only people I have, I only have a couple of friends. There are not a lot of people at school like me because I am so different. So all of my friends are different too we were basically the outcasts and we had a lunch table and kids would always come and leave signs on our table that would say praise Jesus and physically bow down on the ground and say believe in God. Let God into your heart. These kids weren't even Christian which made it so hilarious and I'd laugh at them and say, "you're Jewish." They weren't anything either but still we were the ones that would admit to it but its better now because I'm friends with seniors and juniors and sophomores. I don't like my grade. My grade has always been the immature one so now that I'm not in the middle school cafeteria anymore I'm in the high school one. They are more mature.

**That's good they're more accepting. So it sounds like you really handled this well, talking to people. I know other girls may sometimes write in their diary or listen to music have you tried any things like that? Or what is the most helpful thing you have done?**

I tried a diary once. It didn't work out because whenever I'd write in it, I'd get really angry and just tear the page out. It was a mess. I do listen to music and that's really helpful. I don't know I go on the computer a lot and I blog a lot about it. So just writing about it and even if I just set the blog to private. Just writing about it and typing away. Because writing in a diary isn't that helpful because I have sloppy handwriting and I get frustrated with myself and scribble it out but with typing it doesn't feel like. I don't know it seems less personal.

**Right and that's sometimes anonymous right?**

Right not everyone needs to know who you are

**Participant #2**

Age: 14

**I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?**

No

**Relational aggression is commonly experienced among girls your age. It sometimes involves talking about someone behind their back, spreading rumors, trying to become between two friends. Does that sound familiar?**

Yeah yeah.

**So that's happened to you before?**

Yes

**Ok. Could you tell me about one incident?**

There was this one time when my friend, said something to my other friend that was bad about me. She told everyone I was pregnant. So then I went up to that friend and was like if you have something to say why don't you say it to me. And then she was denying she said it. So I said fine you don't need to talk to me then. Then the next day she came up to me and said ok I'm sorry and she did say that she spread a rumor or whatever but no one believed it. Then after that someone said that my friend was pregnant and she wasn't. I got mad about that.

**So it sounds like you know what relational aggression is. Has anything else like that ever happened to you?**

No but it's happened to my friends.

**So your friend saying something about you behind your back when you preferred she would have said it to you. Yes that's what relational aggression is. I'm talking to you because we know that this happens and we don't want it to happen. So we want to find out the best way to cope with this. That is how you handle the situation. After this first happened, how did you feel?**

I got mad. I won't say something about that person. I'll just go up to them and be like if you have something to say, say it to my face.

**So you didn't do what your friend did. You didn't talk about her behind her back. You just went up to her. That's a good way to deal with it. So how did you first react after you said you were mad. But what did you do.**

I started swearing down the hallway and made sure everyone could hear me.

**And what happened because of that?**

When the teachers saw the girl they went after her and tried to stop.

**So did the swearing down the hallway work?**

Oh no. Made ME feel better.

**Made you feel better but it do anything to resolve the issue with your friend?**

No

**What else did you do to try and make things better.**

I went up to her after a little bit after I had calmed down and was ok like what really happened? And she said that she said that because she liked a boy that really liked me so that's why she said it.

**So it was sort of a jealousy thing**

But then she apologized and I was like ok whatever I don't know why you'd choose a boy over your friend.

**And are you close friends?**

Kinda

**At the time?**

We were never really close friends

**So after you talked to her, were you satisfied with the way things went?**

I was ok with it. Because she really really did like him. And she liked him for like a year and after she found out that he liked me, she got a little jealous. But I didn't really like him

**So after talking to her, and telling her you really didn't have feelings for this guy, did you feel better about yourself?**

Yeah but then I started laughing because I thought this thing was retarded.

**Well do you feel better about your friend now? Do you have a good relationship with her?**

Yeah we were close but not best friends. But I understand why she did.

**Like I said when this happens, a lot of girls find different ways to cope with it. Sounds like you talked to your friend directly. Did you do anything else? Some girls might talk to their parents or write in a diary, listen to music, blog?**

Well the way it really got resolved was when Mrs. V called us down to her office and all three of us started talking about it and I was like ok I understood why she did it.

**So talking with an adult and having her intervene helped?**

Yes

**Did you do anything else on your own? I know some of the girls said they like to go online and blog?**

Sometimes I do this but not with this friend

**Participant #3**

Age: 13

**I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?**

No

**Well, relational aggression is commonly experienced among girls. It sometimes involves spreading rumors, gossiping, talking about a friend behind her back, trying to come between friends. Have you experienced anything like that?**

Yeah

**Ok well why don't you tell me a little about one incident.**

Last year, I'm friends with this girl and she because my cousins used to go to this school and now they don't. She said that my aunt went to jail and stuff and this wasn't true at all and she kept saying stuff about me. We talked and then I didn't talk to her forever and then she said she didn't do it and I know she did because one of my friends told me. I kept talking to my other friend about and she told me about it. We came down here and talked to Miss V and Mrs. A about and I forgave her but I still remember what she did and it hurt because it was my cousin.

**Is that the only incident or were there other things that happened with other friends?**

We get into little fights

**I'm talking to you because we know this happens all time among girls and although we don't want it to happen we know it does. So when it does we want to find out what the best**

**way to cope with this is so how you handle the situation successfully. So after this happened how did you first feel?**

I felt hurt and really upset and like someone saying that about a family member. I don't see how they could have done that.

**I could see how that could be upsetting. So how did you first react? I flipped and then I started talking crap about her because it wasn't the right thing to do but I was mad at the time. So that was the first thing you did was started talking about her? That's a common reaction. What happened because of that?**

She got really mad and came to Mrs. A. Mrs. A had both of us in and then we talked about it and things got better but I never trusted her again

**The first thing you did was kind of flip out and talk about your friend. Do you think that worked?**

No

**What else did you try to do to make things better?**

I would talk to Mrs. A a lot and she would tell me the best thing to do is just to talk to her but I didn't want to because it made me mad just looking at her and talking about it. So Mrs. A said we could come to her office and talk about it with the three of us and that's why I finally realized that I shouldn't get revenge on someone that did something bad to me.

**So before you talked to Mrs. A, were you satisfied with the way things were going with your friend?**

I really didn't care at the moment because my family is more important to me than friends. But some friends are really close like family but she was a good friend because I had known her for like years but I didn't care that we were fighting because she said something about my family

**How about after you talked with Mrs. A were you satisfied then with the way things went?**

It was ok. We are close again now.

**So did that make you feel better about yourself? Talking with an adult and your friend together?**

Yeah because I wanted to beat her up for it but all my friends were saying it's not worth it so I didn't and realized and thought about it. Because I was just gonna go up and hit her.

**Well, you said your relationship is better with your friend now. Do you feel better about that?**



Cause we were friends from like second grade but now she moved out the school. We do still talk but everything I said to her about what happened I didn't mean it but I was just mad at the time. And that girl would never hurt me or beat me up but what she said hurt me so much and she said I would never fight me. And I think she is one of my good friends because she would never fight any of us

**A lot of girls told me when this happens they find other ways to cope. They might write in a diary, listen to music, blog online. Did you do anything like that?**

I go on myspace and talk

**How about talking to your parents or anything like that?**

I don't talk to my parents. The closest people I talk to are my friend G and Mrs. V

**So what do you think was most helpful in trying to resolve all this?**

My best friend K was in the school last year when this happened. She's not here anymore but I have another best friend G that I'm really close to. But K helped me through it all and she made it easier for me.

#### **Participant #4**

Age: 12

**I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?**

No

Relational aggression is commonly experienced among girls your age. It can involve friends gossiping, spreading rumors and friends trying to come between friends. Has anything like that ever happened to you?

Yeah

**Can you describe an incident when that happened?**

Well, my friend T and me, we used to be friends. Then we weren't friends anymore. We would get in fights all the time and stuff. He would sometimes say mean things about me. He would talk to his friends about me. But no one would listen to him because he was one of those people that was bullied too.

**I'm talking to you because we know this happens all time among girls and although we don't want it to happen we know it does. So when it does we want to find out what the best way to cope with this is so how you handle the situation successfully. So after this happened how did you first feel?**

Mad. I cried. Because he was my best friend. We are friends now and it was a long time ago. But before I couldn't go to the garbage can without them screaming at me. So I decided not to go near them and I told the teachers I wanted to sit at a different table.

**How did you first react? You said you said you couldn't go to the garbage can or you would sit at different table. Is there anything else you did?**

Ignore them and just walk away and stuff and sometimes I would yell back

**What happened because of that?**

I had to go to a different garbage can and I had to get teachers and 9<sup>th</sup> graders to help me. I had to sit at a different table

**So you had to change a lot of the things you used to do. Did that work for you? Did they stop talking about you.**

They stopped and then T asked to be my friend again.

**So after, T asked to be your friend again were you satisfied with the way things went?**

Yes

**Did you feel better about yourself?**

Yeah because I didn't care about those other kids

**Did you feel better about T**

Yeah

**You were happy he tried to make peace with you**

Yeah

**So, sometimes when this happens girls find other ways to cope. Sounds like you changed your behavior, sat a different table got other people involved. Other girls might write in a diary, listen to music, blog online. Did you do anything like that?**

I don't have the internet and even if I did I wouldn't have a myspace and stuff

**Did you try talking to other people like your friends or parents?**

I didn't really talk to my parents but I talked to my other friends.

**A lot of people do that...talk to friends**

**Overall what do you think was the most helpful thing that helped to resolve the conflict between you and Travis?**

Probably staying away from him for a little bit

**So keeping your distance, and making him realize you wanted to be friends again?**

Yeah

**Participant #5**

Age: 14

**I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?**

Gossip

**Yes that's right. Things like gossip, spreading rumors, trying to come between friends. Why don't you briefly tell me what happened to you.**

Well in the beginning of the year I had a slight bully problem because in Spanish class a girl would say an answer and I was saying it too and she was like "excuse me" and I was like could you say it a little nicer. Then after that class she said she was going to beat me up but she never did and now we're kind of friends. She was really mean though she told everyone that I was a slut and said that I slept with everyone I saw. I forgave her though and now we are friends

**So, you're exactly right that's relational aggression. I'm talking to you because we know this happens all time among girls and although we don't want it to happen we know it does. So when it does we want to find out what the best way to cope with this is so how you handle the situation successfully. So after this happened how did you first feel?**

I was very scared and one of my friends was helping me. After school we went to cheerleading practice and I walked through the girls locker room and she was in there too and she was like I'm going to beat you up right now and I was like ok do it. Because I was talking back to her she actually backed away. So I was actually ready for her to beat me up and so she just stopped

**So what was your first reaction to all this?**

I was scared. When I went home I told my mom and she said just try and ignore it and basically that was the best advice I could get.

**And what happened because of that? Ignoring it at first?**

Well because I ignored it she became less repeating of it so I was able to talk to her and she was fine with hit.

**And what about when you confronted her and stood up to her?**

She kind of backed down a little.

**So do you think that worked?**

Yeah

**What else did you do to try to make things better?**

I didn't do anything else

**Were you satisfied with the way things went**

Yes

**Did you feel better about yourself?**

Yeah

**Did you feel better about this other girl?**

Yes even though she does have an attitude. She understood that I just wanted to talk to me a little nicer.

**I know other girls have told me they sometimes might find other ways to cope. They might talk to their parents, you said you did that. They may go online and blog or listen to music. Did you do anything else?**

Well sometimes I write small stories on my laptop just to get out my anger and sometimes I blog

**What do you think was the one thing that was the most helpful?**

Talking to my mom.

**Participant #6**

Age: 14

**I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?**

Yes

**Ok why don't you tell me a little bit**

When people like bully you and know what to do

**Well, relational aggression is commonly experienced among girls. It sometimes involves spreading rumors, gossiping, talking about a friend behind her back, trying to come between friends. Have you experienced anything like that?**

Yeah

**Ok why don't you tell me a little bit about what happened**

Some people said I wasn't good at a sport. But you can get better at it so I kept sticking with it even though I wasn't that good at it.

**So some people were saying you weren't good at a certain sport and that's the situation that happened to you?**

Yeah

**Well, I'm talking to you because we know this happens all the time among girls and although we don't want it to happen we know it does. So when it does we want to find out what the best way to cope with this is so how you handle the situation successfully. So after this happened how did you first feel?**

I felt like mad at them but then I got over it because it didn't matter what they said I just wanted to do that sport and I do other things like play instrument and they would say I wasn't good but I'd work hard at it to get better at it.

**How did you first react after you heard this? After you heard people saying you weren't good at it**

I just ignored it

**Did you do anything at first other than ignore it?**

I kind of talked about it with them. I said I might not be good at it but I like doing this sport.

And what happened because of that?

They kind of just left me alone. Even though they spread it to their friends, I didn't really care.

**Do you think that worked? Confronting them at first?**

I think it worked because it didn't go around the whole school, just their friends

**Did you try to do anything else to make things better?**

Not really

**Were you satisfied with the way things went after you confronted these people?**

Um yeah

**Did you feel better about yourself?**

Yeah

**Did you feel better about the sport?**

Yeah because they thought I wasn't good at it so it pushed me to prove them wrong

**Did you feel better about these people?**

Yeah

**I know other girls have told me they sometimes might find other ways to cope. They might talk to their parents, maybe talk to their friends. They may go online and blog or listen to music. Did you do anything else?**

I talked to some of my friends

**Through all this, what do you think is the one thing that was the most helpful to make things better?**

Talking to my friends

**Participant #7**

Age: 13

**I understand you have experienced what we call relational aggression. Do you know what that means?**

No

**Well, relational aggression is commonly experienced among girls. It sometimes involves spreading rumors, gossiping, talking about a friend behind her back, trying to come between friends. Have you experienced anything like that?**

Yes

**Ok, why don't you tell me about one instance.**

Well the other day I told my friend something and then she turned around and told my other friends I was talking about them but she like whispered it so she made it sound like I said something bad about them when I didn't.

**That's exactly what relational aggression is. Well, I'm talking to you because we know this happens all time among girls and although we don't want it to happen we know it does. So when it does we want to find out what the best way to cope with this is so how you handle the situation successfully. So after this happened how did you first feel?**

I felt bad that she was trying to backstab me and try to turn on me

**So, how did you first react?**

I asked the people what she said and I was like oh no that's not what I said and I actually told them what I said and they were like oh wow that's not what she said. And they were mean and the girl that said it got mad at me even though I didn't say that.

**What's the first thing you did?**

Go up and confront her

**And what happened because of that?**

She got more mad at me and just started spreading more rumors.

**Do you think that worked?**

No

**What else did you do to make things better?**

I talked to her last night but she hung up on me.

**Were you satisfied with the way things went?**

No

**Do you feel better about yourself?**

Kind of because I had the guts to confront her.

**How do you feel about your friends? Do you feel better about them?**

Yeah because they trust me more. They know I wouldn't say that about somebody

**How about the girl that twisted your words? How do you feel about her?**

I know not to trust her anymore and not to say anything to her.

**I know other girls have told me they sometimes might find other ways to cope. They might talk to their parents or friends. They may go online and blog or listen to music. Did you do anything else?**

I write in my journal and it's good for me because I don't have to tell people. If I tell someone I don't want it to get back to the person I'm mad at.

**So what do you think is the one thing that has been most helpful to you?**

Just talking to my friends that I know won't backstab me.



## Appendix C

## School Psychologist's Introduction to Student

(Name of student) remember when we talked about relational aggression and how girls can sometimes bully one another? When this happened to you, you handled the situation very well (you didn't let it upset you, bring down your grades, interfere with clubs sports, etc.). We know that this happens a lot among girls but not everyone knows how to handle the situation as well as you did. Becky Haderer, a graduate student at R.I.T. is doing a study to learn how girls effectively cope with relational aggression. She wants to find out what you did to not let it interfere with your life so that we can teach other girls who experience this form of bullying how to effectively deal with it. She would like to talk with you for 15-20 minutes during a study hall or lunch period. Does that sound like something you would be interested?

If student is interested they will be provided with the parental consent form to take home and the student assent form.

## Appendix D

**INFORMED PARENTAL CONSENT FORM****INFORMATION**

My name is Rebecca Haderer and I am graduate student in the School Psychology Program at the Rochester Institute of Technology conducting a thesis study. Your daughter is interested in participating in this study about how girls effectively cope with relational aggression. Relational aggression often occurs among adolescent girls and involves spreading rumors, gossiping or trying to cause problems between friends. In order to understand relational aggression and how girls are able to effectively cope with this experience, one interview session will be conducted with your daughter for approximately 15-20 minutes. Information disclosed during the interview will not be shared with anyone in the school. The interview session will take place during non-instructional times (i.e., study hall, lunch). Interview sessions will be audio recorded and later transcribed then the recording will be destroyed. The interview will be confidential and the transcriptions will be coded anonymously. Upon completion of the study I will write a report that will not include your daughter's name or any other identifying information. This report will be submitted to R.I.T. where faculty members and students may view it.

**RISKS**

Risks associated with this study are minimal. Although the experience of relational aggression will be discussed, this study looks at the positive aspects of how girls are able to effectively cope with being a victim of relational aggression.

**BENEFITS**

The results of this study will help school professionals gain knowledge of how we can help girls who have been victims of relational aggression effectively deal with it. By examining how other girls have successfully dealt with this experience, interventions can be developed that may help other girls cope with relational aggression.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your daughter's name will not be associated with her data. The only form that will have your child's name on it will be the assent and consent forms which the researcher will hold on to. The audio tape of the session will be transcribed and then destroyed.

**CONTACT**

If you have any questions, you can contact Rebecca Haderer at [rmh3992@rit.edu](mailto:rmh3992@rit.edu) or the school psychologist, Keri Pratt at [kpratt@holleycsd.org](mailto:kpratt@holleycsd.org).

**PARTICIPATION**

Your daughter's participation in this study is strictly voluntary. She may withdraw from this study anytime without penalty. If your child does withdraw from this study before all the data is collected her data will be destroyed. It will not be included in the results.

**CONSENT**

I have read and understand this information stated above. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to allow my daughter to participate in this study.

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E

**Student Information Assent**

Dear Student,

My name is Rebecca Haderer and I am graduate student in the School Psychology Program at The Rochester Institute of Technology. I am doing a research study for my thesis project about a type of bullying that sometimes occurs among female adolescents known as relational aggression. Relational aggression may involve things like gossiping, spreading rumors or excluding another girl from a group. This is an important topic to study because all of us who work in the schools want to see it stopped. In my study, I want to learn how you deal with being bullied, that is, how did you cope with it. If you decide that you want to be part of this study, you will be asked to meet with me once for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. During this session, you will be asked a few questions about how you cope with relational aggression. Whatever you tell me during this interview will not be shared with anyone at your school. You will not be missing any school for this study as it will be conducted during lunch or your study hall. This session will be audio recorded. Nobody will listen to this tape but me, the researcher. Your tape will be transcribed and destroyed. Your name and the school you go to will not be used in this study to ensure confidentiality.

There are very minimal risks associated with this study. Some people may feel irritable or find it stressful to talk about relational aggression. I want to look at the positive aspects of this experience. That is, how you were able to successfully handle the situation. However, if you feel uncomfortable or want to talk further about this study you can contact me or the school psychologist, Keri Pratt.

Not everyone who takes part in this study will benefit. A benefit is something good that will happen to you. I think a benefit of participating in this study is that we will be able to understand how you were able to effectively handle this situation. Then, in the future, we can tell other girls who have experienced relational aggression how they can effectively cope with this experience

When I am finished with this study I will write a report about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study. The report will be submitted to R.I.T where faculty members and students may view it.

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. If you decide to stop after the study begins that's okay too. There is no penalty for stopping. Your parent knows about this study also.

Thank you for your participation,

Rebecca M. Haderer  
rmh3992@@rit.edu

If you decide you want to be in this study, please sign your name.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, want to be in this research study.  
(Print your name here)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Sign your name here)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

