

Relational Aggression and Suicidality in African American Girls

What is the study about?

Due to increased suicide rates among African American females' and the relationship between bullying and suicide, the authors wanted to understand social workers' current knowledge about relational aggression (distinct from bullying) and knowledge about how it presents for African American females.

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: “...any form of behavior that is intended to impart harm by destroying or manipulating relationships with others...often displayed by close friends...”	VS	BULLYING: “...unwanted aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance among non-acquaintances.”
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What did they find?

SWs' perceived barriers to building rapport

- Mistrust in the school system due to systemic racism (how Black girls are viewed)
- Possible history of rejection by peers, family & others
- Mislabeling relational aggression as bullying can leave students to feel invalidated.

Factors to consider when assessing social behaviors

- External influences that can impact expectations in relationships (learned behaviors, past experiences in other relationships, attitudes and behavior)
- Anger, oppositional interactions, irritability or negative attitudes can result from experiencing relational aggression but can lead to disciplinary action more often for African American females than White females.

Why is it important?

- Relational aggression can be seen as assertiveness or leadership skills in White females but perceived as non-feminine or delinquent in African American females.
- Mislabeling behaviors stands to impede the therapeutic process and worsen symptoms.

What can School Social Workers do?

- Validate the intensity of students' experiences with relational aggression (as not just bullying)
- Educate other school staff on the intensity of relational aggression and the possible resulting symptoms (so African American targets of relational aggression are not singled out for discipline)

How was the study done?

Authors conducted an online focus group with six licensed social workers who worked in schools. Participants were asked about their experiences working with African American girls and their understanding of relational aggression.

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