

# Gender Differences in Self-reported Social Aggression among Young Adults



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## Introduction

In the past, research on aggression largely focused on males, as females tend to be viewed as less aggressive than males (Bjorkqvist, 1994). Contemporary research, however, indicates that females may be just as aggressive as males, but may manifest this aggression differently, in the form of social aggression (e.g. Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Ireland & Archer, 1996). Researchers typically define social aggression as utilizing behaviors to harm the friendships or social status of others (Underwood, 2003), and can include either relational aggression or indirect aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) recognize relational aggression as including the manipulation of others, inflicting damage to relationships, as well as the social inclusion and exclusion of others. The term indirect aggression, on the other hand, primarily involves the use of covert behaviors to harm others (Bjorkqvist, 1994). Such behaviors include gossip, rumors, or other secretive behaviors. The current study uses the blanket term social aggression, as it appears to encompass including both verbal and nonverbal ones, without strictly identifying the limitations (i.e. determining whether the behavior was either of a covert or overt nature). Little research has examined social aggression in young adults, however, as most has focused on adolescents and preteens. The current study was designed to examine gender differences in self-reported social aggression in college students.



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## Method

### Procedure

Prior to study onset, the Arkansas Tech University institutional review board approved all study methods. Undergraduates were recruited from psychology and sociology courses, with extra credit being given for participation. All questionnaires were completed online at the participant's discretion, with completion taking approximately 20 minutes.

### Measures

Participants completed a series of questionnaires that included a demographic questionnaire and an aggression questionnaire of both social and physically aggressive behaviors (Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Table 1).

### Participants

Participants in this study were males and females, selected from a small, state university, who were currently enrolled in an undergraduate psychology or sociology course. Participation was voluntary, with participants obtaining extra credit as an incentive. The sample included 183 participants (127 female) that successfully completed the entire survey. The majority of participants were in the 18-19 year age range (71.2%), followed by those in the 20-21 year age range (12.5%) and those 24 years of age or older (12.5%). The sample was also mostly Caucasian (89.0%), with African-American and Hispanic/Latino each making up 4.8% and 3.2% of the sample population, respectively. The majority of participants were freshmen (48.6%) or sophomores (32.2%), followed by juniors at 11.4% and seniors at 7.7%.

**Table 1**

Social and physical aggression questionnaire

When angry or mad at a peer, how likely are you to:

1. Give him/her the silent treatment?
2. Try to damage his/her reputation by passing on negative information?
3. try to retaliate by excluding him/her from group activities?
4. intentionally ignore a peer until s/he agrees to do something you want them to do?
5. make it clear to a peer that you will think less of him/her unless they do what you want them to do?
6. threaten to share private information with others in order to get a peer to comply with your wishes?
7. try and steal that person's dating partner to get back at them?
8. physically attack (e.g. hit, kick, or punch) him or her?
9. tease him or her?
10. argue with him or her?

## Results

### Aggression questionnaire

For the total sample, social aggression had a mean of 5.98 ( $SD = 3.96$ ), while physical aggression had a mean of 3.91 ( $SD = 2.38$ ). For comparison, Loudin, Loukas, and Robinson (2003) reported their total social aggression mean as 6.33 ( $SD = 3.45$ ) and physical aggression mean as 4.57 ( $SD = 2.50$ ).

### Gender Differences

For females, the social aggression mean was 5.77 ( $SD = 3.49$ ) and the mean for physical aggression as 3.80 ( $SD = 2.19$ ). For males, the social aggression mean was 6.59 ( $SD = 4.86$ ) and the mean for physical aggression was 4.27 ( $SD = 2.72$ ).

In order to examine the differences between scores (see Table 2), two independent-samples t-tests were conducted. Analyses showed no statistically significant differences between males and females on either social aggression ( $t = -1.287, p = .20$ ) or physical aggression ( $t = -1.223, p = .22$ ).

**Table 2**

Statistics for self-reported aggression

	N	Mean	SD
<b>Females</b>	127		
- Social Aggression		5.77	3.49
- Physical Aggression		3.80	2.19
<b>Males</b>	56		
- Social Aggression		6.59	4.86
- Physical Aggression		4.27	2.72

## Discussion

Despite the wealth of literature demonstrating that school-age females tend to aggress more in social ways and school-age males tend to aggress more in physical ways, the current study did not support that finding in young, college-aged adults. Instead, no difference on self-reported social and physical aggression was found, similar to previous research (Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003). There are several possible explanations for this finding.

1. The self-report nature of the study and the socially unacceptable nature of aggression towards others may have resulted in conscious underreporting of aggression levels across genders.
2. Females may decrease their levels of social aggression during young adulthood, while males increase theirs, and vice versa for physical aggression.
3. Self-report of aggression is an unreliable means of measuring these behaviors in young adults.

Future research using a combination of environmental measures, peer ratings, and self-report measures should be conducted to rule out the above explanations. In addition, a new, less face valid measure of aggression should be developed to assess for potential bias in reporting of aggression.

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