Indirect and Direct Aggression

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What is Indirect Aggression in Adults?

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In this chapter, I outline research on indirect aggression in adults, derived from the work of Kaj Björkqvist and his colleagues on children and adolescents. Although linked to direct aggression, in that the same types of people tend to commit both forms, indirect aggression is more linked to measures indicating the person is uncomfortable in their social networks, and is not linked with the tendency or ability to confront people directly. The range of situations in which indirect aggression occurs is typically in a friendship or acquaintance group, but it can also be manifest in dyadic romantic relationships and in contexts where people have not chosen to be together, such as the workplace or prison. The functions of indirect aggression are different in these contexts but overall its function can be characterised as seeking to damage another’s social standing or reputation or to remove them from a social group.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of research on indirect aggression in adults. Most of this research is based in some way on the original work by Kaj Björkqvist and his colleagues on indirect aggression, which concentrated on children and adolescents. The first section describes measures of indirect aggression applied to adults and how these measures were derived from the earlier research concentrating on younger ages. This is followed by a consideration of what indirect aggression is in adults, a question that is answered largely by considering which other measures are associated with it. The different forms of indirect aggression in adults, which shows both similarities with and differences from that in children, are discussed, in relation to the variety of contexts in which indirect aggression is found. This leads to the final important issue of the function of indirect aggression, a question that is answered in terms of its adaptive significance. Overall, the chapter describes an important strand of research on indirect aggression that arose out of the pioneering work of Kaj Björkqvist and his colleagues.

Studies of Indirect Aggression in Adults

Most of the research carried out on indirect aggression by Kaj and his colleagues involved peer ratings of children’s behaviour, in terms of acts of direct and indirect aggression. Following their original paper (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988), a number of subsequent articles described the use of this method to
investigate age and sex differences (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992), with the important finding that this type of aggression is more characteristic of girls than boys. Further studies compared different national and ethnic groups (Österman et al., 1994, 1997, 1998), establishing a degree of generality in the findings, as well as some cultural differences.

The age range used in this research was typically from 8 to 15 years. A subsequent study extended the investigation of indirect aggression to adults, in the form of a victimization survey of university employees (Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). Although the survey involved victims’ rather than perpetrators’ reports, the sex of the aggressor was investigated and these findings reported by Björkqvist, Österman, and Hjelt-Bäck (1994). Both male and female employees showed similar incidences of victimization, although they reported that male perpetrators used a form of indirect aggression termed “rational-appearing aggression” more often than female perpetrators did, whereas female perpetrators used a form termed “social manipulation” more often than male perpetrators did. Rational-appearing aggression involved being interrupted and having one’s work judged in an unjust manner, activities that could be attributed to a non-aggressive motive if the aggressor was challenged. These had to be activities the victim regarded as aggressive, as the survey instructions emphasized that it was dealing with acts of aggression. Social manipulation was more similar to some of the items of indirect aggression investigated in children, such as “spreading false rumours” or “backbiting”, although others involved a general negative attitude or demeanour, such as “insinuative negative glances”.

A study published in the same year (Hines & Fry, 1994) also addressed indirect aggression in adults, among a sample from Buenos Aires. From self-reports, this was identified as a distinct form of aggression in adults, involving manipulation, malicious gossip and exclusion of others. For two of these items, insulting behind the person’s back and saying bad things behind their back, women reported more of the activities than men did, consistent with the findings for children, and with the Finnish study of university employees.

Subsequently, there have been a number of studies on indirect aggression in adults, mostly basing their measures on those used to study children’s and adolescents’ aggression (the Direct and Indirect aggression Scales, DIAS: Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992), transferring them to self-report rather than peer-rating scales. Campbell, Sapochnik, & Muncer (1997) divided the items into those that could be viewed as “expressive” such as “avoided the person”, or “cursed when they had gone”, and “instrumental”, such as “excluded them” and “told stories”. The scale that this produced when completed by a sample of students consisted of two factors, corresponding to this distinction. Women scored higher on the measure described as instrumental, which corresponds to some extent with “social manipulation” identified by Björkqvist, Österman, and Hjelt-Bäck (1994).
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There are some reservations about the measures used by Campbell et al., as they involved only 3 items. In order to address this, Archer, Monks and Connors (1997) added some of the items from the study of university employees (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994): when administered to a sample of students comparable to that used by Campbell et al., indirect aggression was found to be loaded on two factors, which did not correspond to those in the previous study. Retaining only those items used by Campbell and her colleagues did not alter this finding. These results suggest that the earlier distinction made between different forms of indirect aggression were not robust across samples and measures. There were also no sex differences in indirect aggression in this study, a finding that has been replicated a number of times subsequently (see below).

At about the same time, other researchers were seeking to produce reliable measures of indirect aggression in adults. Green, Richardson and Lago (1996) developed a self-report scale for adults designed to measure direct and indirect aggression. Most of the items were based on those used to study children through peer-ratings (the DIAS: Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992). Among a sample of students, they found the usual higher male values for direct (mainly physical) aggression (Archer, 2004), but no sex difference in indirect aggression, consistent with other studies of adults using this or other self-report measures (Archer, 2004; Basow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, & McGillicuddy-DeLisa, 2007; Forrest, Etaugh & Shevlin, 2002, 2005; Forrest & McGuckin, 2002; Loudin, Loukas & Robinson, 2003). This finding might be the result of using self-report rather than peer ratings, in view of the following: (1) a study of indirect aggression amongst Spanish adolescents (14 to 17 years of age), using a self-report version of the DIAS, also found no overall sex difference in indirect aggression (Toldos, 2005); and (2) a study of indirect aggression in young adults (students) using a laboratory scenario method did find that women showed more indirect aggression than men, in the form of retaliating to an incident of indirect aggression towards them (Hess & Hagen, 2006). Thus, a self-report study found no sex differences at an age when peer-reports have, and a study of adults did find a sex difference using an alternative to self-reports. Since this is evidence is limited, further studies are required to follow up this suggestion.

The original scale designed by Green et al. contained 7 items of direct aggression and 7 items of indirect aggression. These were both extended to 10 items in a subsequent study (Richardson & Green, 1999, 2003), and the scale was referred to as the Richardson Conflict Response questionnaire (RCRQ). Again, there were no sex differences among college students for the indirect aggression scale, at least as far as a same-sex target was concerned; for an opposite-sex target, the level of indirect aggression shown by a man to a woman was lower than that showed by a woman to a man. This lowering of the amount of indirect aggression by males to female compared to male targets is consistent with the evidence for physical aggression (Archer, 2004, Table 1), that there is less by males
to female than to male targets. Richardson and Green’s findings indicate that this extends to indirect aggression.

Forrest et al. (2002, 2005) derived a new self-report measure of indirect aggression for adults. In contrast to the other scales which were based wholly or partly on the DIAS used for children, this measure (the Indirect Aggression Scales: IAS) involved items derived from qualitative interviews with a small number of young adults. The final scales, one for perpetration (IAS-A) and one for victimization (IAS-T), each contained three subscales, labelled “malicious humour”, “social exclusion” and “guilt-induction techniques”. All three showed high internal consistency and (as indicated above) did not differ between the sexes. Although this scale has not been used in research to the same extent as the shorter, simpler, RCRQ, it is potentially a more complex and detailed instrument, and certainly warrants further use.

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One way of answering this question is to examine the other variables with which indirect aggression is associated. Green et al. (1996) found that, among male students, those who had higher-density social networks reported more indirect aggression (and less direct aggression) than those with low-density social networks. These findings were consistent with predictions derived from the earlier studies of indirect aggression in children (Lagerspetz et al., 1988), that this form of aggression is more effective in close social networks. A subsequent study (Richardson & Green, 2006) found that indirect aggression among young adults was typically a form of aggression shown to friends, rather than to siblings or to partners (where there was more direct aggression). These findings provide some indication of the context of indirect aggression in adults, that it is effective among social networks that are voluntarily entered into, and that can be more readily severed than those based on kinship or an established sexual partnership.

There are now several studies investigating the type of personal characteristics that are associated with frequent use of indirect aggression. First, it is moderately correlated with measures of direct aggression, such as the RCRQ direct scale (Forrest & McGuckin, 2002; Loudin et al., 2003; Richardson & Green, 1999, 2003; Walker, Richardson, & Green, 2000), although the two scales were relatively independent of one another in a sample of young Indian men (Archer & Thanzami, 2009). A similar measure to the RCRQ indirect scale (Archer & Webb, 2006) found correlations between same-sex indirect aggression and the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992), ranging from $r = .44$ (for anger), to $r = .53$ (physical aggression, and hostility). Correlations with indirect aggression to a partner were slightly lower. Most of these studies indicate that the same people tend to show both types of aggression.

Several studies have investigated the associations between indirect aggression and measures unrelated to aggression. Forrest and McGuckin (2002) found that the RCRQ indirect scale correlated with neuroticism, low self-esteem and with
low emotional intelligence. Richardson and Green (2003) administered a revised version of the RCRQ to a sample of college students, along with a variety of aggression-related and dispositional measures. Since direct and indirect aggression were, as in other studies, significantly correlated ($r = .34$), they calculated the semipartial correlations with the other variables to identify their distinct relationships. The pattern of correlations showed both similarities and differences between the two types of aggression. They were both related to measures of anger, irritability, manipulating others and lack of self-control. Whereas direct aggression was associated with measures indicating comfort in social situations, such as extraversion, indirect aggression was not, being associated (as in Forrest & McGuckin’s study) with neuroticism and distress. This suggests that it tends to be used by people who are not comfortable expressing themselves openly with others, and who experience social anxiety and discomfort.

Loudin et al. (2003) found that indirect aggression was negatively associated with perspective-taking in a sample of male and female students. Their measure was derived from a much-used empathy scale, and it assesses the ability to spontaneously adopt the viewpoint of others. Another measure from the same scale, empathic concern, was negatively related to indirect aggression in males but not females. The findings supported previous ones linking aggressiveness with lower empathy, including one study involving indirect aggression in children (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Loudin et al. also found that those who were more afraid of being negatively evaluated reported more indirect aggression, possibly to seek to deflect criticism away from themselves to others.

Archer and Thanzami (2007) obtained a number of measures related to size and strength from a sample of young Indian men to assess the hypothesis that such measures would be positively associated with the use of physical aggression but not with indirect aggression. The rationale for this was that larger, stronger, men would avoid direct physical confrontations to a lesser extent than weaker, smaller, men; this rationale would not apply to indirect forms of aggression, which can be regarded as low-cost aggression (Archer, 2004, 2009; Björkqvist, 1994). Consistent with these predictions, the measures of size and strength were positively associated with direct aggression but were not associated with indirect aggression.

Overall, the relatively few studies indicate that indirect aggression, while tending to occur in those people who are also directly aggressive, has a number of distinguishing features. It tends to occur more in those people who have wider friendship and acquaintance networks, and in those who are less comfortable in such social networks, and are afraid of themselves being negatively evaluated. Unlike physical aggression, it showed no relation to size and strength in men.
ing children and adolescents. In particular, these measures concern social manipulation, following the definition of indirect aggression given by Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen (1992, p. 52), that it is “a kind of social manipulation: the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim, or, by other means, makes use of the social structure in order to harm the target person, without being personally involved”. These types of aggression are typically used in forms of social networks such as friends or acquaintances. Categories of aggression that are similar to indirect aggression in terms of the manipulative acts they involve have been referred to as “relational” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) or “social” aggression (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989; Galen & Underwood, 1997). In a review of the studies using the three names (Archer & Coyne, 2005), we concluded that they essentially refer to the same forms of behaviour, but that the emphasis is different (cf. Björkqvist, 2001). The term “relational aggression” emphasizes the importance of relationships for this form of aggression, and hence the potential to harm others by manipulating them. The term “indirect aggression”, following Buss (1961) and Feshbach (1969), places the emphasis on the roundabout nature of the harm delivered to the other person. However, later definitions of indirect aggression (e.g., Björkqvist, 2001) emphasize the social manipulation involved, and include the possibility that the victim of the aggression may know the perpetrator’s intentions, and hence are very similar to “relational aggression”.

The original scope of the term “indirect aggression” in the studies of children covered mostly verbal forms of indirect aggression. The revision of RCRQ (Richardson & Green, 1999, 2003) included some items of indirect physical aggression (such as “destroyed or damaged something of theirs”), which enlarged its scope compared with the original measure used for children. A study of prisoners (Archer, Ireland, & Power, 2007) extended this by covering such indirect forms as damaging a person’s property in a scenario measure, and studies of workplace and prison aggression (see below) have included these forms of aggression.

Some studies of indirect or relational aggression in adults involve social manipulation in the context of a dyadic relationship rather than a social group or network. This fundamentally alters the social context in which the aggression occurs. Some studies of relational aggression in young children have involved dyadic relationships, where typical acts are a threat to end the friendship or to stop playing with that child (e.g., Crick, Casas & Mosher, 1997). Clearly these are enacted in a context where a different type of harm is possible, that connected with disruption or ending of a valued relationship. When we turn to adults, the distinction is more important in relation to studies of aggression labelled as indirect or relational between romantic partners. Here, the function is to control the other person’s behaviour, for example by ignoring them, or by threatening to break up the relationship if they do not comply with a request (e.g., Bagner, Storch & Preston, 2007; Linder, Crick & Collins, 2002; ). As Ar-
cher and Coyne (2005) noted, this behaviour is different in its form and strategic aims from indirect aggression enacted in a wider social network. This type of indirect aggression is similar to controlling behaviour, which is used by partners to seek to control the others’ behaviour (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003, 2009).

Wolfe et al. (2001) derived a series of scales for measuring different types of conflicts in adolescent dating relationships (the CADRI: Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory). Two of these are related to indirect aggression. One is termed “relational aggression” and contains three items which are clearly indirect ways of harming a partner’s reputation, i.e. they are actions that fit the original definition of indirect aggression as social manipulation in a wider group, for example, “I tried to turn her friends against her” and “I spread rumours about her”. Another of the five scales was termed “emotional and verbal abuse” and it contained items involving jealousy, threatening to end the relationship, and others that involved using a third party to belittle the person. These clearly overlap with the behaviour labelled “relational aggression” by Linder et al. (2002) and Bagner et al. (2007), also with controlling behaviour (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003, 2009), and to some extent with that labelled as “psychological” aggression (Hammock & O’Heron, 2002). In view of the factorial separation of these scales, it would be useful to keep this distinction in mind for future studies of indirect and relational aggression among romantic partners.

The workplace is another context in which forms of indirect aggression occur. There have been a number of studies of workplace aggression that have included measures of indirect aggression, although they have not necessarily been identified as such. Baron and Neuman (1996) did distinguish between physical or verbal, direct or indirect and active or passive forms of workplace aggression. However, their findings were restricted to frequencies of the three categories aggregated, so that the category of indirect aggression contained a passive form typically not included in other studies (e.g., “failing to transmit information needed by the target”), which is probably better conceptualized as “passive aggression” (e.g., Richardson, Fortenberry & Boykin, 2008).

Subsequently, Baron, Neuman and Geddes (1999) distinguished overt and covert aggression in the workplace, but again included items that are perhaps best regarded as “passive aggression”, such as the item quoted above and “failing to defend the target’s plans/proposals to others”. Factor analysis produced three factors, the first being a variety of “expressions of hostility” which contained a few items of indirect aggression but a greater variety of others, some of which were direct and others passive. A second factor was termed “obstructionism” and its items can be identified as seeking to obstruct or sabotage the target’s work. The third factor was termed “overt aggression” and contained direct items of physical aggression and threat, as well as indirect items of physical aggression, such as “destroying mail or messages needed by the target”. Rutter and Hine (2005) used scales derived from these factors, and found that male em-
ployees used all three to a greater extent than female employees, with moderate effect sizes ($d = .33$ to .36).

It would seem from these studies of the workplace that items of indirect aggression are distributed on two relatively independent scales, although it should be borne in mind that classic items indicative of manipulating the social network in order to disadvantage someone are in the minority in these studies. Perhaps the concept of indirect aggression will have to be reconsidered when applied to behaviour in the workplace context. This may be because of differences in the social context from that involving freely-developed friendship or acquaintance groups, and therefore the aims of manipulation are different: this may be to disrupt the position and effectiveness of the target in the workplace, which, in combination with the different context, will produce different forms of behaviour.

A further context in which aggression has been examined is the prison. Here, aggression has been conceptualized in terms of “bullying”, which represents a form of aggression which is repeated or is severe and induces fear of future victimization (Ireland, 2002). In the first of an extensive series of studies of bullying in British prisons, Ireland and Archer (1996) described the various forms such bullying could take, including “gossiping” and “ostracism”, which are central to the concept of indirect aggression first applied to children’s social groups. In this study, women reported using such indirect forms of aggression more frequently than men did. Subsequently, Ireland (1998, 1999) developed a detailed self-report measure of bullying behaviour in prisons (the Direct and Indirect Prisoner Behavior Checklist, DIPC), which (as its name indicates) includes indirect forms. In her study of young offenders and adult prisoners, Ireland (1999) found no sex differences in indirect forms of bullying behaviour, contrary to the previous findings. Similar findings have been reported in subsequent studies (Ireland, 2002), including a large-scale one across 11 prisons in the United Kingdom (Ireland, Archer & Power, 2007). Prisons, like the workplace, contain people who are unrelated and have not chosen to interact together. They therefore represent more hostile social environments than the friendship or acquaintance group, and we should expect both the forms and the intensity of indirect aggression to be greater. Of course, both the reality of incarceration, and the individual characteristics of the people housed there, will accentuate this further in prisons: indirect aggression forms part of a variety aggressive acts aimed at increasing the social and material and social capital of the aggressor.

In this section, I first considered the typical social context of indirect forms of aggression, involving social exclusion or manipulation in the context of a friendship or acquaintance group. I then considered the context of a dyadic romantic relationships and the forms indirect aggression would take in these. The workplace and the prison provided two further social contexts, again associated with different forms of indirect aggression.
The Function of Indirect Aggression in Adults

Consideration of the different forms and contexts of indirect aggression leads to the final topic, the function of indirect aggression in adults. Archer and Coyne (2005) have argued that a fuller understanding of the significance of indirect aggression can only be gained by appreciating that it has different functions than direct aggression. Instead of putting the other individual at an immediate competitive disadvantage, by physically injuring them, indirect aggression may serve to remove a competitive rival from the arena of competition by excluding them from a social group. In many instances, physical aggression will have similar functions in animals, for example when a defeated rival is driven from an optimal area (Archer, 1970), and there are many historical examples of people being excluded or banished from an area as a form of punishment (Ruff, 2001).

A second major function of indirect aggression is to adversely influence the social standing of another individual. Again there are parallels with consequences of direct aggression. In all-male groups involving “the culture of honour” (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996) to be defeated in a fight or to back down when challenged or insulted leads to an important loss of social status (Ruff, 2001). The label associated with a man who is unwilling to accept a physical challenge in such a culture is a “coward” or “chicken”. As Campbell (1995, p. 115) noted, the equivalent reputational loss for a woman is to be labelled as a “slut” or “slag”, as someone who is promiscuous. This fits the analysis of Baumeister and Twenge (2002) that a woman who readily provides men with sexual access poses a threat to other women as she lowers the value of sexual access, and hence women’s bargaining power with potential mates. The ways in which women seek to suppress the sexual activity of other women are varied and were documented by Baumeister and Twenge. A similar reasoning was applied to indirect aggression by Geary (1998), who viewed it as part of women’s strategies to restrict men’s mating opportunities with other women. This is supported by an experimental study in which a woman confederate who was dressed in a sexually provocative way elicited more derogatory verbal comments from female participants than the same women dressed conservatively (Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2008).

This view of indirect aggression sees it as a more subtle way of excluding people from a social network, or of decreasing their social status, than is possible with direct aggression. As Björkqvist (1994) pointed out, indirect aggression is typically a lower cost form of aggression than direct forms are, achieved either by hiding the aggressor’s identity or by enabling them to deny aggressive intent. Indirect aggression is perhaps most well developed in the social networks of female adolescence and young women, and this fits with its suggested function, to reduce the social standing of potential rivals.

Archer and Coyne (2005) also argued that aggression between romantic partners, which has been investigated in terms of indirect or relational aggression, has a different function than that used in social networks. Here the aim is to con-
trol the partner’s behaviour, for example by threatening to break up with them, or by withdrawing from social interactions with them, if they do not comply. As noted before, this overlaps with activities labelled as “controlling behaviour”. However, it is apparent from studies of indirect aggression in dating relationships that indirect aggression in its original sense of manipulating relationships to someone’s disadvantage, can also occur, for example when someone spreads rumours about his or her partner. Perhaps this extends the more direct ways of seeking to control a partner, by disadvantaging them with potential mates. In this way, it would be similar to seeking to lower the social standing of a potential sexual rival.

In the context of the workplace and the prison, where the social network comprises people who have not chosen to be together, the forms of indirect aggression will have been modified to fit the social and physical environment. They will take new and more subtle forms in the workplace, where there are greater potential penalties for overt, and particularly physical, forms of aggression. The aim will be to disadvantage another individual with colleagues and with those in positions of power in the organisation. In prison, indirect aggression will be one of a number of strategies to gain power and influence over others and to out-compete them in terms of tangible rewards and status.

Overall, indirect aggression can be viewed as an alternative aggressive strategy that is used under certain conditions and by certain individuals when it is more adaptive than direct confrontation. It is also likely to be used particularly by women in the context of mate competition, to lower the social standing of potential rivals, and by both sexes where the costs of direct forms of competition may be high, or where it is less effective is achieving aims.

References


