

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AND MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS:
WHY THEY PARTICIPATE AND WHAT MEANING
THEY MAKE OF THIS AGGRESSION

by

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ABSTRACT

Relational aggression seems to invoke more emotional and academic difficulties for girls in middle school than any other age group. In this research, the author describes the different types of aggression often used by middle school girls in their social relationships. The author sought to find out why girls participate in relational aggression, either as perpetrators or as victims and what meaning they make of this aggression. The author concludes with implications for school personnel with emphasis on school counselors.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Girl bullying usually does not take the customary physical and verbal behavior tactics that are often labeled as methods boys use in their social relationships. Girls' aggression tends to take a different approach, often referred to as relational aggression (Crick, 1996). Relationally aggressive acts are usually private; therefore, they are often unnoticed by those who might be in a position to intervene. Relationally aggressive acts, including backstabbing, exclusion, rumors, gossiping, name-calling, and manipulation, are techniques girls use to cause psychological pain on targeted victims (Bjorkvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005; Simmons, 2002). Simmons states that boys tend to bully people who are familiar to them or strangers, whereas girls frequently attack within their pool of friends, making aggression more difficult to identify and increasing the harm to the victims.

The term *relational aggression* was coined by Crick (1995) to describe the use of relationships to harm others. Relational aggression (i.e., including socially and direct relationally aggressive behavior) can include a variety of emotionally hurtful behaviors. Socially aggressive behaviors include gossiping, social exclusion, isolation, or alienation, writing notes or talking about someone, and stealing friends or romantic partners. Direct relationally aggressive behaviors are confrontational strategies that achieve interpersonal damage. These behaviors include not talking to or hanging around with someone, deliberately ignoring someone,

threatening to end friendship, and excluding someone from a group by informing her that she is not welcome in the group (Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002).

Prior studies have shown that, as a group, boys exhibit significantly higher amounts of aggression than do girls (Block, 1983). These findings have been translated as an overall lack of aggressiveness in girls' peer interactions. However, it might be that the forms of aggression looked at in the past are more prevalent among boys than girls. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found that females may use unique forms of aggression that have been overlooked in past research--relational aggression. Michell (1999) purported that, "Girls' friendships are characterized by strict hierarchies and highly differentiated peer groups in which being popular (rather than having close friends) becomes increasingly important (p. 37).

There are a number of popular press articles, books, and movies that have focused on the issue of girls and their social relationships. A sampling of titles include *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (Wiseman, 2002); *Girl Wars* (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003); *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Simmons, 2002); *See Jane Hit* (Garbarino, 2006). The preceding titles clearly indicate the negative style in which girls relate to one another. The fact that popular media has addressed the issue indicates how widespread the problem is. Society's interest in the subject is evident from the amount of money spent on books and movies relating to social aggression and girls. While these depictions sometimes seem to glamorize the issue of aggression and girls, their popularity validates research findings that show relational aggression as a major problem for middle school girls and their social relationships (Talbot, 2002). These popular press publications seem to popularize the ways in which girls participate in relationships with other girls. However, most are not based on research studies on the topic. These

assumptions made by popular press authors might inform society that there is a problem, however, they also might misconstrue and possibly enhance the problem.

For example, Wiseman's (2002) popular press text describes how "the first step to understanding girls and their relationships is to study closely the 'Girl World'--what it looks like, who has power, who intimidates, who gets intimidated, where girls feel safe, and where they do not" (p. 9). One argument offered is that girls are under tremendous pressure to fit in, especially during adolescence. This is one of the reasons why some girls suffer a decrease in self-esteem as they enter adolescence (Wiseman, 2002). According to Coloroso (2003), "to gain acceptance and security during the preteen years and throughout their teens, young girls form groups called cliques, which have a commonality of interests, values, abilities, and tastes" (p. 26). Girls tend to lose some of their sense of self and the standards that were instilled by their parents for the values and interests of the clique. Tastes in clothing, hair styles, makeup, and boys are those required by the clique. School cultures that nurture cliques and dignify some groups above others also nurture discrimination and bullying (Coloroso). Coloroso purports the media not only glamorizes but brings the issue of girls and aggression into full view of the general public. Wiseman does not blame the media but the girls themselves. Wiseman argues that we should not ignore the ways girls treat each other and simply justify it as girls being girls while learning to cope socially. Wiseman argues that,

girls will only reach their full potential if they are taught to be the agents of their own social change. We must guide girls through adolescence, acknowledge the issues surrounding relational aggression, explain to girls the nature of relational aggression, and act to change the effect of Girl World on girls. (p. 10)

By giving attention to these issues, and giving girls an explanation of their feelings, a positive action can be established to teach girls the necessary approach for changing the effect of relational aggression on girls' social relationships (Wiseman).

Statement of the Problem

Research has established that relational aggression is the most frequent form of aggression affecting girls in school, especially during the middle school years (Crick, 1996; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000). Garbarino (2006) states that, “today the empowerment of girls and women is evident throughout our society in newly opened jobs, new athletic and artistic roles, expanded educational possibilities, and greater presence in public spheres than ever before” (p. 67). Garbarino (2006) also professes that,

the culture of girls is shifting away from the stifled femininity of the past toward a more egalitarian social reality in the present and the future. Talented girls are now free and empowered to achieve in traditionally male domains, and the victimized, angry, troubled girls are looking for a fight and are willing to deliver the ultimate blow against anyone who gets in their way or pushes their buttons. (p. 167)

According to Owens, Shute, and Slee (2000), the most common explanations given by girls as to why they use relational aggression in social settings with other girls are as follows: boredom/creating excitement, getting attention, and being included in a group. Girls are eager to find out about the latest rumor or gossip. For a girl to know the latest rumor or gossip gives her power within the group. The sharing of social information, for instance through talking about others’ faults, creates a bond for those within the group (Owens et al., 2000). Once a girl is accepted in the group she must continue to work to retain her position within the group by agreeing with nasty stories spread about others, and participating in the spreading of rumors or the exclusion of “undesirables” (Owens et al., 2000).

A significant study conducted by Crick (1996) focused on the stability of relational aggression over time. Crick found in this study “the first evidence that relational aggression is relatively stable over time and that it is predictive of future social maladjustment” (p. 2325). Research has shown that relational aggression can be detrimental to girls during their middle

school years (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Crick further purported that “without intervention, relationally aggressive children are likely to remain aggressive over time” (Crick, 1996, p. 2326). Girls who use relational aggression will most likely develop this as a pattern in relating to peers (Crick). This finding provides motivations to further study girls’ social relationships and use information gained to lead their behavior in a direction that will decrease their risk of difficulties in future relationships with peers.

The media hype around the issue of girls and aggression has increased the awareness of relational aggression as a social problem. The observations of many contemporary authors have created a perception about girls’ social structure which has enlightened our society. This popular media attention might actually cause the problem to continue. Talbot (2002) observes,

in paying such close attention to the cliques, in taking Queen Bees so very seriously, the relational aggression movement seems to grant them a legitimacy and a stature they did not have when they ruled a world that was beneath adult radar. (p. 24)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore why adolescent girls, either as perpetrator or as victim, participate in relational aggression. A second focus of this study was on how girls make meaning or understand the aggression within their social groups.

As a school counselor and researcher of this study, I especially had interest in gaining insight into helping middle school girls have healthy social relationships with other girls. I too became the victim of relational aggression in 1976 as a sixth grade student moving into a new school. As a very shy student who wanted to please everyone and make good grades, I became the target of girls who did not have those same goals and felt I was a threat to the world in which they had grown accustomed. I wanted to make friends and fit in so I fell into the routine of

giving them my snack daily only to go home crying because of further insults. As a researcher I explored why girls use aggression in relationships and why some girls fall victim to aggression, in hopes of gaining insight into helping middle school girls. I explored where on the school campus the aggression most often takes place and why these places are chosen.

Research Questions

As will be discussed in the literature review, relational aggression seems to invoke more emotional and academic difficulties for girls enrolled in middle school than any other age group. Relational aggression is a relatively new area of inquiry and there is much to be understood with this style of aggression. The focus of this research was therefore on middle school girls. The literature review highlighted the fact that girls are an under-studied population in the area of aggression. Dellasega and Nixon (2003) reveal that girls who engage in relational aggression are at risk for social maladjustment and emotional distress and there is overwhelming evidence for harm to victims (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002).

This study considered the following research questions:

1. Why do adolescent girls, either as perpetrators or as victims, participate in relational aggression?

2. What meaning do girls make of this aggression?

The present study was a qualitative study. The study took place in a middle school in Calhoun County in northeast Alabama. I interviewed 10 girls about the issues surrounding relational aggression. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. I then analyzed the data to get descriptions of the girls' experiences with relational aggression. Questions as to where girls feel relational aggression most often takes place were asked of the 10 girls who

participated in this study. Observations of the girls in their “school spaces” were planned; however, this was not approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Alabama.

Significance of the Problem

Dellasega and Nixon (2003) purport that girls who engage in relational aggression are at risk for social maladjustment and emotional distress (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). Within the hidden culture of aggression, girls fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives. Every day of school can be a new social dilemma that appears with no warning in girls’ hidden culture of aggression. During times of conflict, girls will turn on one another with a language and justice only they can understand. Behind the image of female intimacy lies an area of secrets, marked with anger and held by silence (Simmons). Research has touched the surface of why girls use relational aggression in their social relationships. Further research is needed to substantiate current research and broaden our knowledge of the usage of relational aggression in girls’ social relationships. Research is ill-developed as to the school spaces in which relational aggression prevalently takes place. Investigating the locations in schools that are conducive to relationally aggressive situations is needed to enhance current research and provide information for school personnel to assist girls in developing healthy social relationships with other girls.

Limitations

This study was confined to sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls, ages 11 to 14. The study was limited to girls attending public school in northeast Alabama. Participants were limited to those who voluntarily agreed and whose parents gave them permission to participate in the study. The cultural norms of the town in which the research was conducted may have influenced the

way participants thought about friendships and relational aggression. Girls living in rural Alabama may think and behave differently than those living in urban cities.

The Institutional Review Board at The University of Alabama did not allow me to do field observations and to present the participants with scenarios relating to relational aggression by. This lack of information might have presented a limitation.

My personal investment in the issue of girls and the use of aggression might also have been a limitation. I attempted to bracket my subjective opinions as much as possible.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined for use in this study:

Aggression--behavior which includes two criteria: it is intended to harm and the victim feels hurt (Underwood, 2003).

Bullying--“a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students” (Olweus, 2001, p. 12).

Indirect aggression--type of behavior in which the perpetrator attempts to inflict pain in such a manner that he or she makes it seem as though there has been no intention to hurt at all (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992, p. 118), or a style of aggression which allows the perpetrator to avoid confronting her target (Simmons, 2002, p. 21).

Relational aggression--harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 711).

Social aggression--aggression that is intended to damage self-esteem or social status within a group (Simmons, 2002, p. 21).

Summary

In this study, I explored why girls use relational aggression in school settings and tried to gain further understanding of the social structures of girls' peer groups as created by this aggression. I studied how girls make meaning or understand the aggression within their social settings. I conducted a qualitative study by interviewing girls and analyzing the data to get descriptions of girls' experiences with relational aggression. Chapter 2 is a review of the current literature on the topic of aggression and girls. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used for the current study. Chapter 4 presents the research findings and analysis of data of the present study. Chapter 5 summarizes and concludes the study. Chapter 5 also discusses implications and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Interest in the issue of girls and their social relationships has become evident in recent years (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). Women's rights have evolved over time and how women and mother roles have now changed the groundwork for their daughter's attitudes, goals, and achievements. It is evident in the history of women's rights that adolescent girls have been left out in research studies until recent years (Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Girl studies are an emerging field. Therefore, girl studies will first be examined in this review to establish the groundwork in the explanation of where girls are today in their social relationships with other girls and how it has evolved over time. I will review the different categories of aggression as described in research literature and popular press texts. I will explore what types of aggression are most often used by girls. I will also focus on how school counselors address bullying in schools. I will then identify how my study will expand the current research on relational aggression.

Many feminist scholars into the 1990s viewed girlhood as passage from childhood to womanhood, a transition that requires no action and compliance (Brown, 1998; Brumberg, 1997; Pipher, 1994). As a result of that misconstrued image, research has largely ignored the natural ability of the female to express distress in a physically and/or verbally aggressive manner. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007) profess,

Girlhood as a culturally constructed "way of being" is regulated by conventions that girls must be pretty but not "self-absorbed" about their appearance; they must be attractive to

boys but not seen to be too sexually “forward”; they must be noticed and liked by the “right people” but not a “social climber” independent but not a “loner”; and so on. Girls’ agency therefore comes from a culturally mandated formation of girlhood that, although ever-present “in girls’ heads,” is typically absent in adult panic about girls’ aggression. Within peer culture, power comes from the ability to invoke the unspoken ‘rules’ that police the boundaries of acceptable middle-class femininity. (p. 24)

Since our society tends to be judgmental and discriminatory against the girls who choose to cross gender boundaries, it is not surprising that research ignores typically male behavior in females. The fact that significant, often life-altering instances of aggression, which occur often among girls in social situations, are ignored, passed off as unimportant, and given little or no attention leaves females in our society at a disadvantage. By ignoring the potential for aggression among females, the professional community has created an environment that serves to increase such behavior, which very possibly may increase the chances that girls will become victims of more violent aggression later in life (Merten, 1997).

This study will seek to open awareness of relational aggression for aggressors and their victims. This study will potentially illustrate that the aggressors themselves are victims of a society that has disregarded their developmental progress by placing upon them roles and expectations that do not fit the reality of their true identity.

America has taken pride in being the land of the free; however, this freedom has historically been limited and imperfect for girls and women. In many ways, females have long been second-class citizens (Gabarino, 2006). Not until 1920, when the 19th amendment granted women the right to vote, did females achieve any genuine equality as citizens. It took the civil rights movement that began in the 1950s to initiate major changes in the rights of women. This was further advanced by a women’s liberation movement beginning in the 1960s. In the 1970s, women began to achieve legal and social equity when laws were changed giving women more

rights in marriage (Garbarino). More and more economic opportunities were opened to women in the 1980s.

This brief history of women's rights in America is important to establish the background of how women's rights have evolved over time and how women and mother roles have now changed the groundwork for their daughter's attitudes, goals, and achievements. However, it is evident in the history of women's rights that adolescent girls have been left out in research studies until recent years. It is apparent that until recent years, girls' issues have been seen as less important than those experienced by their male peers as well as their adult counterparts. This inequality is illustrated by the fact that girl studies are an emerging field (Garbarino, 2006).

Girl Studies

One can trace the evolution of the field of girls' studies to the influence of Angela McRobbie, at the Birmingham School in the 1970s, who argued for the need to study *girl* culture as distinct from *youth* culture (Mazzarella, 2007). Three decades later, girls' studies have come to life (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). Girl culture is a popular subject for media debate in the 21st century and the exciting crossovers between post-feminism, cultural studies and sociological research have ensured that girls' studies continue to be a growth area within feminism (Liggins, 2006). Harris (2004) surveys key publications in the development of girls' studies from the 1970s onwards, as she looks towards the future of feminist enquiry into the lives of young women. She argues that in the early days of the new century we have reached a turning point in girls' studies. She declares that there is now an increased focus on the differences between girls, as researchers pay more attention to the various natures of girls' identities, especially in terms of race and sexuality (Harris).

Many scholars of girlhood have documented that ideal girlhood is constantly being rewritten (Adams, 1999; Budgeon, 1998; Inness, 1998; McRobbie, 1993; Mitchell, 1995; Nelson & Vallone, 1994; Walkerdine, 1993). Girlhood now includes girls' participation in sports and demonstrating more self-confidence and assertiveness. Being quiet and passive is no longer a primary identifier of normal girlhood. The Girl Power movement of the mid-1990s altered how we view girlhood. Girls today are taught to be self-confident, assertive, and independent. This shift in how we view ideal girlhood still mandates certain markers of the ideal female, however (Bettis & Adams, 2005). One marker is that of attractiveness. A girl in Lemish's (1998) study stated: "A girl could be anyone--as long as she was pretty" (p. 155). Another marker is that of heterosexuality. Even today it is viewed that normal women eventually marry and have children (Bettis & Adams).

Popular discourses such as literature, fashion, cinema, and advertising demonstrate the significance to the changing ideas about femininity. However, feminine adolescence has been excluded as a crucial data source for development models of identity. The most influential texts on the study of feminist culture rarely focus on girls, feminine adolescence, or girl culture, or provide introductions to those concepts (Driscoll, 2002).

Bettis and Adams (2005) stated, "Normative femininity is in a liminal state with the old markers of normative girlhood such as prettiness alongside the new markers of assertiveness and independence" (p. 10). Female identity is also developed through the material landscapes and the requirements of these landscapes that girls belong. School is part of a girl's material landscape and is where race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation are filtered. What a girl does and the positions she assumes are different places (Bettis & Adams).

Girls have a tendency in their social relationships to form what are known as cliques. These cliques have a hierarchical structure. They are dominated by leaders, and are considered exclusive so that not all girls who want to be members are accepted (Adler & Adler, 1998). They function as bodies of power within grades, including the most popular girls, offering the most exciting lives, and demanding the most attention. Peer groups are a fixture of the landscape of girlhood. They tell girls where to sit at lunch, with whom to hang out between classes, what to wear, and how to “be” (Wexler, 1992).

According to Bettis and Adams (2005),

Middle schools and high schools have fewer places than elementary schools where adolescents can be in control so students typically create moving arenas of ownership where they can play and be in control. Hallways, bathrooms, lunchrooms, and even classrooms at times, all of which have utilitarian purposes, can become spaces in which girls can exert their power. (p. 11)

The spaces of a school where girls have more freedom, such as hallways, bathrooms, and lunchrooms, are often considered the territory of certain groups. These spaces often shift ownership (Bettis & Adams). In a school setting, students feel they have some control over creating peer status systems. Therefore, teenagers become obsessed with status systems (Milner, 2001).

American girls, according to Haag (2000), are being shaped around the continuing themes of popularity, boyfriend, and peer relations. Girls are self-conscious about the disconnection between their own lives and the mythical girls’ lives that society, in their judgment, creates and promotes. Girls face pressure to be somebody they’re not and struggle against complying with what society expects girls to be (Haag). The images in our culture begin to convince girls that the implications of power, prestige, wealth, and male attention are placed upon women who are culturally defined as “attractive.” Therefore, their value is measured by

physical attraction (Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999). The problem is that when girls are learning this female responsibility, they are experiencing extreme changes with their bodies--that is they are developing a woman's body (Orbach, 1978).

The role of femininity in girls' and women's psychological health and behavior has been a subject of recent study. Femininity has traditionally been measured either as a personality trait--most commonly by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1981) or by the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence, Hermreich, & Stapp, 1974)--or as feminine gender role--most commonly by the Attitudes Towards Women Scale (AWS; Spence & Halmreich, 1972). These measures were developed with and for adult women (Tolman & Porche, 2000). Pleck and colleagues, in their study of adolescent boys' masculinity, used a social framing approach to position and measure masculinity as an ideology, distinguished from masculine personality trait and the indifference of attitudes towards masculinity in the Male Role Norms Scale (MRNS; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1998, p. 87). A comparable psychological development and measurement of femininity ideology among adolescents has not yet been developed (Tolman & Porche).

The previous examples help to demonstrate that, girls' studies is an emerging yet undefined field of study. Girls and their use of relational aggression in their social relationships is an issue of recent research. Until recent years, research was most often conducted on the topic of aggression by looking at how boys and girls participate in aggression. These studies looked at physical aggression rather than relational aggression (Underwood, 2003). Few studies have used a qualitative approach to explore why girls use relational aggression and how they understand this aggression.

Aggression

Aggression is currently a topic of much interest in the media and there are many popular press texts that have been written on the subject in recent years. Both popular press texts and research studies were read as background for the current study. Popular press texts tend to make the stories of girls and their passions related to the issue of aggression come to life more explicitly than do research studies. Popular press texts seem to share detailed stories of girls' descriptions of coping strategies that were used when trying to cope with relational aggression. The research studies that were studied for the current research verified conclusions made by the popular press texts by giving actual numbers and findings. Research studies verified what girls were saying about their relationships with other girls and the aggression that takes place within them. Both research studies and popular press literature therefore will be discussed for the current study.

Early studies on bullying looked for direct aggressions like punching, threatening, or teasing and mostly male subjects were used since males tend to exhibit aggression directly (Simmons, 2002). According to Simmons,

It wasn't until 1992 that a group of Norwegian researchers questioned what lay beneath the surface. They published an unprecedented study of girls and their social interactions and discovered that girls were not at all averse to aggression, but rather expressed anger in unconventional ways. The findings bore out their theory: cultural rules against overt aggression led girls to engage in other nonphysical forms of aggression. The researchers challenged the image of sweetness among female youth, calling their social lives "ruthless," "aggressive," and "cruel." (p. 20)

In the early 1990s, Kaj Bjorkqvist and his team of Swedish researchers began to research whether males are in general more aggressive than females (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992, p. 4). Bjorkqvist and his team developed a peer nomination questionnaire, the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales or DIAS that contained 12 items that represented indirectly aggressive behaviors. Bjorkqvist set out to disprove earlier research that was male biased (Owens & Shute,

2000). He found that girls are as aggressive as boys if stages by positing a feminine and indirect form of aggression, different from that of boys--where boys fight physically girls manipulate (Bjorkqvist & Niemela).

Since that time, psychologists at the University of Minnesota, Crick and Grotpeter (1995), added to their findings. Crick and Grotpeter developed three subcategories of aggressive behavior: relational, indirect, and social aggression. Relational aggression was defined as acts that harm others through damage to relationships or feelings of acceptance or inclusion. Indirect aggression was declared as covert behavior whereas the perpetrator is able to avoid confronting her target. Social aggression was defined as aggression intended to damage one's social status within a group or their self-esteem (Simmons, 2002).

Evidence exists that girls are more likely than boys to engage in the form of aggression labeled "relational aggression" (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression includes behaviors that harm others through damage to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion (French, Jansen, & Pidada, 2002). Relational aggression, as compared to other forms of aggression (e.g., physical violence), is quieter, more secretly evil, and harder to detect. It includes starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, deliberately excluding another girl, and many of the stereotypical behaviors associated with girls (and women), and like most behaviors it exists on a continuum from mild to extreme (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Because the study of relational aggression has been the topic of discussion in the last 15 years, the current literature review will include many forms of bullying and aggression and how the different definitions have emerged over recent years.

Aggression has been studied for several decades and continues to receive attention from researchers. In the 1970s, a psychologist from the University of Bergen in Norway named Dan

Olweus, began to publish studies related to male aggression and bullying (Dake, Price & Telljohann, 2003). By the 1980s, research studies on bullying emerged from countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and England (O'Moore & Hillery, 1989; Stephenson & Smith, 1989). In the 1990s, research on bullying and its many categories such as indirect aggression, social aggression, and relational aggression began to take place in the United States (Crick, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; French et al., 2002; Galen & Underwood, 1997).

Older definitions of bullying tended to rely upon direct, physical behaviors that tended to be typical of boys (Olweus, 1997). Recent definitions have recognized that there are more than one form of bullying or aggression, and categories or subtypes have begun to branch from the original definitions of bullying. Today, several definitions exist that account for the variety of behaviors children use to harm one another. It is now understood that females are also aggressive, but use different means to inflict harm on their targets. In fact, some research has shown that when all types of aggression are considered, boys' and girls' overall levels of aggression may be similar (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Bullying

According to Beran (2005), much of what we understand today about bullying is a result of Dan Olweus' work beginning in the 1970s in Scandinavia. According to Olweus (2001), a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students. Fried (1997) termed bullying as what

occurs when one or more children repeatedly hurt another child through words or actions. Bullying may involve physical actions such as hitting or shoving, verbal assaults such as teasing and name-calling, or it may involve more indirect action such as socially isolating a child or manipulating friendship. (p. 127)

Harre' and Lamb (1983) identified over 200 definitions of aggression, but stated that all definitions shared two common features: first, any behavior defined as aggressive is a behavior that is intended to harm, and second, the aggressive behavior is perceived as harmful by the victim. While aggression and bullying may not be considered the same thing, they are similar constructs that portray one student acting out negative behaviors toward another student who is hurt by those behaviors.

Indirect Aggression

The next aggression subtype to be discussed here is indirect aggression. Indirect aggression is defined as social manipulation where the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim without being involved themselves (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Owens et al. (2000) elaborated on this definition by stating that indirect aggression usually involves spreading false stories about others and exclusion from the peer group. The defining feature of indirect aggression is that harm is delivered in a covert manner (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). Examples of physical indirect aggression include destroying someone's property or robbing them (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006).

Social Aggression

Social aggression is another category of aggression that has been identified in recent literature. The term social aggression is very similar to both indirect aggression and relational aggression (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989). Galen and Underwood (1997) expanded the term as behavior that is "directed toward damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take such forms as verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion" (p.

589). Social aggression appears to house all of the behaviors in indirect aggression and relational aggression, while adding harmful non-verbal behaviors (e.g., rolling eyes, giving dirty looks) to the mixture (Coyne et al., 2006).

Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is yet another subtype of aggression derived from research conducted by Nikki Crick and colleagues in the 1990s (Crick, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1995; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression is similar to indirect aggression, but focuses on behaviors that harm others through damage to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendships, or group inclusion (Crick et al., 1999). Relational aggression does not need to be covert. Rather, it is often carried out directly in front of the victim (e.g., a girl may tell her friend that they will no longer be friends unless she does what the girl wants). Relational aggression researchers argue that this aspect is distinct from indirect and social aggression (Crick et al., 1999). Other examples of relational aggression include making up stories to get someone in trouble, talking bad about a person behind her back, starting nasty rumors, and spitefully excluding someone (Crick, 1996).

Since the term “relational aggression” was coined by Nicki Crick and Jennifer Grotpeter in 1995, and Crick has conducted much research on the topic since, it is important to discuss her work in detail for background for the current research. Up until Crick and Grotpeter’s (1995) quantitative study, research had consistently shown that boys tend to harm others through physical and verbal aggression (e.g., hitting, pushing, or threatening to beat up others). These behaviors were consistent with goals that past research had shown as important to boys within their peer-group context--instrumentality and physical dominance. Crick and Grotpeter realized

that these concerns were not as prevalent for most girls, however. Girls are more likely to use relational issues during their social relationships (e.g., developing close, intimate connections with others). Therefore, Crick and Grotpeter predicted that aggressive behavior among girls would be compatible with their social concerns, as were found for boys. Thus, they expected that girls would be most likely to harm peers through relational aggression whereas boys most often harmed peers through overt aggression (Crick & Grotpeter).

Crick and Grotpeter had four goals to their 1995 study:

- 1) To develop a reliable measure of relational aggression with other forms of aggression;
- 2) To assess gender differences in relational aggression;
- 3) To assess the degree to which relational aggression is distinct from overt aggression (i.e., physical and verbal aggression as assessed in most of the past research in this area);
- 4) To assess whether relational aggression is related to social-psychological maladjustment.

They developed a peer nomination scale and used it to assess relational aggression and overt aggression. They chose peers as informants for two reasons. First, they have been used in past research to identify aggressive children. Second, relationally aggressive behaviors, because of their indirect nature and focus on peer relationships, might be difficult for people outside the peer group such as teachers or researchers. Used along with the peer nomination scale, subjects were asked to complete several instruments designed to assess social-psychological adjustment (i.e., peer social status, loneliness, depression, social avoidance, social anxiety, and their perceptions of peer relationships) (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Crick and Grotpeter selected 491 children in Grades 3 through 6 from four different public schools in a Midwestern town for their 1995 study. Results of Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) study showed the relation between relational and overt aggression to have a correlation coefficient, $r = .54$, $p < .01$. This correlation is expected for two constructs that are hypothesized as different forms of the same behavior. Therefore, relational aggression was found to be a distinct construct, although related, and relatively independent of overt aggression. Results showed almost equal numbers of each gender that were considered nonaggressive. Boys and girls, however, were not equal among the aggressive groups. The overtly aggressive group was mostly made up of boys (15.6% boys vs. 0.4% girls) and the relationally aggressive group was primarily girls (17.4% girls vs. 2.0% boys). Findings from the self-report social-psychological adjustment instruments provided evidence that relational aggression is related to maladjustment such as depression, loneliness, and social isolation. These findings prove that relationally aggressive children feel unhappy about their relationships with peers. In conclusion, results of their study in 1995 found that both boys and girls are aggressive but tend to use different forms of aggression (relational aggression for girls and overt aggression for boys) (Crick & Grotpeter).

Since Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) study, Crick has conducted several studies on the topic of relational aggression. Most, however, have been quantitative studies. It is necessary to conduct a qualitative study to further expand previous research on the topic of girls and relational aggression.

Unfortunately, researchers are still undecided about whether indirect, social, and relational aggression are all distinct forms of aggression, and what to call them, assuming they are essentially the same constructs (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Despite the variety of definitions used to describe aggression among girls, particularly during school-aged years, Underwood

(2003) noted that all of the constructs of aggression may in fact overlap in their definition and use in studies. She stated that the breaking down of these categories of aggressive behavior could offer an understanding of the overall phenomenon (Underwood).

Cyberbullying

An example of how the media makes a topic significant is the recent incident which became known as the “Watershed” case (2010) when a freshman girl that was new in town at a school in Massachusetts committed suicide after being harassed by a group of older teens. Cyberbullying was one source used by girls to harass this teen until she committed suicide.

The definition of bullying is certainly expanding. Another, more recent term added to the mix is called “Cyberbullying.” Cyberbullying has been included by many researchers into one or more of the previous categories discussed. Cyberbullying has been defined as

the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others. (Anderson & Sturm, 2007, p. 24)

Cyberbullying is the latest form of bullying. It is becoming more popular as children are becoming more technologically advanced. There are several types of cyberbullying, depending on the types of technology children have in their access.

Instant messaging services allow children to have private conversations with friends in real time. This type of communication allows the bully to send mean or obscene messages. This type of communication allows buddies to post slanderous remarks about their peers for everyone to read. Buddies can also create false profiles of their targets that insult them. Children can also block or refuse to add someone to their buddy list, thereby creating an effect of relational aggression.

Cell phones are another form of cyberbullying. All the bully needs is a target's phone number and a message or threat can be sent. E-mail bullying works about the same. Cell phones and email can be used to send pictures of the victim dressing in the locker room or even wearing the wrong outfit.

According to Anderson and Sturm (2007), "Bullying has spread to the computer because it provides a greater advantage for the bully. The bully can remain anonymous, inflict greater psychological harm, harass a victim at home, and rest easy knowing that most authority figures will be unable to trace or stop the harassment. A victim, on the other hand, feels more vulnerable and alone and experiences emotional damage that last longer than a Black eye. The aggressors know all about their target due to past friendly relationships. They know her address and how to contact her by phone, text and e-mail all of which may be used to send abusive and threatening messages (Besag, 2006).

The definitions utilized in the literature for aggression among girls overlap in many ways, as Underwood (2003) noted, and relational aggression appears to be a definition that incorporates each definition and behavior that surround this concept. For purposes of this research, aggression between girls was studied. It includes indirect, social, and relational aggression. This study will use the term "relational aggression" to describe the overall concept of aggression in girls.

Differences in Boys' and Girls' Aggression

Literature indicates that until recently girls have been perceived as less involved in bullying activities than are boys. This may have been an outcome of the definitions used, or the public, mostly physically aggressive behaviors with which they had to identify in previous research surveys. Thus, only those girls who engaged in public, physical bullying may have been reported (Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001).

According to the United States Department of Justice, criminal violence among teenage boys today still far exceeds criminal violence among girls; however, the gap is narrowing (Garbarino, 2006). Twenty-five years ago, for every 10 boys arrested for assault, there was only 1 girl. Now there are only 4 boys arrested for each girl arrested (Garbarino). The United States arrest rates for violent crimes in girls under 18 years of age increased by 125% between 1985 and 1994 compared to an increase of 67% for boys in this age group (Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996).

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) argue that whereas boys' social goals emphasize emotional and physical dominance, girls' goals are more focused on interpersonal issues, with the emphasis being on popularity and security within their social groups. According to Coloroso (2003), boys and girls use verbal bullying equally. It accounts for 70% of reported bullying. It is easy to get away with and can be whispered in the presence of adults and peers without detection. Boys tend to use physical bullying more often than girls do, while girls use relational bullying more often than boys. The difference has more to do with the socialization of males and females in our culture than with physical bravery or size. Boys tend to play in large, loosely defined groups, held together by common interests. Girls tend to play in small, more intimate circles with clearly defined boundaries, making it easier to harm a girl just by excluding her from a social circle (Coloroso).

According to Garbarino (2006), boys and girls start out aggressive, and for the first 3 years of life girls and boys are almost equally aggressive. Girls have been more ready and able to exchange physical aggression for more subtle and socially acceptable tactics for getting what they want. Garbarino lists two reasons for this: (1) first, little girls develop more social competence than little boys and as a result do not need the clumsy tool of physical aggression to

get their needs met, and, (2) powerful pressures are applied to girls to persuade them to “give up” physical aggression because it is not “feminine” to hit.

Aggression in girls is often disregarded as insignificant in relation to the magnitude of social problems associated with aggression in boys (Moretti et al., 2001). Schools tend to decline intervening in girls’ conflicts because they do not want to interfere in the emotional lives of students. Simmons (2002) states, “A strategy of noninterference resists the truth of girls’ friendships, remains aloof from the heart of their interpersonal problems, and devalues the emotional intensity that leaves permanent marks on their self-esteem” (p. 34). For the most part, girls’ friendships represent positive and rewarding experiences for those involved. Within this largely positive framework, however, is a web of social complexity and manipulation that is mostly negative, not readily seen, and is only just beginning to be explored and understood by researchers. The current research will further explore girls’ understanding of the concept of bullying and their perceptions of relational aggressive behaviors within the context of their social relationships.

Explanations for Using Relational Aggression in Girls

The teen years are a time of change and transition, both physically and socially. This maturing process can be very stressful for girls, having to adjust to the move from elementary school to middle school, while their bodies are changing on a near-daily basis. At the same time a girl must try to figure out who she is and in what group she might could be a member (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

As pointed out earlier, popular press texts have been most effective in showing detailed personal accounts of relational aggression which is why I am including it here. Wiseman (2002), one popular press example, details some factors that we must take into consideration when

dealing with middle school girls and their social relationships. Wiseman (2002) discusses the following as the way girls see the world:

- Most girls are obsessed about their looks. If they aren't, they've found another way to express themselves through a talent or skill that builds their self-esteem.
- If there's something about their physical appearance that they do like, girls will never admit it because they're afraid other girls will accuse them of being vain.
- If there's something about their physical appearance they don't like, they're obsessed by it.
- Girls need constant reassurance from each other that they fit in and look good.
- Girls are constantly comparing themselves to each other.
- Girls know they're manipulated by the media to hold themselves to an impossible standard of beauty, but that doesn't stop them from holding themselves to it anyway.
- When a girl has a friend who is starving herself, she's often torn between worry and envy, because thin equals good (this can change depending on race and culture, but the dominant culture dictates thin equals good).
- Being beautiful doesn't guarantee popularity, but it limits how low down the pecking order you go.
- The way a girl decides to "mark" herself – from piercing a nose, lip, or dyeing her hair to wearing GAP or BCBG – identifies how she sees herself and to what group she belongs. Her markers reveal her place in the social hierarchy. (p. 76)

Dellasega and Nixon (2003) use a timetable that can differ from child to child, to describe social development during this time period for girls:

1. In middle childhood (ages six to ten) children recognize that people have feelings but focus on more observable details, like what people are wearing, what they look like, and how they behave.
2. In the later elementary years (ages nine to eleven), girls are trying their best to please others and be seen as a 'good person.'
3. During adolescence (ages eleven to fourteen), close friendships gain even more importance and girls pay less attention to parents.
4. By late adolescence (seventeen to nineteen), a sense of independence is normal as girls begin to show greater self-reliance and more concern for others. (p. 16)

Research studies have supported some of these findings. For example, Lagerspetz et al. (1988) conducted a factor analysis on all items on an instrument measuring aggressive behavior. The items weighted for indirect aggression were such things as "starts being somebody else's friend in revenge"; "makes statements such as, let's not be with him/her"; "tries to put others to his/her side" (p. 409). The items measured were all consistent with what is now known as

relationally aggressive behavior. In this study, it became obvious that indirect aggression could be considered a separate and distinct form of aggression. A significant finding of this study, combined with a study by Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992), was that the usage of indirect aggression is dependent on the existence of a social network to achieve manipulation. This indicates that this age group is particularly prone to an indirect or relationally aggressive style of relating. In fact, researchers report that indirect aggressive tendencies were not yet fully developed among 8-year-old girls, but they were already very evident among the 11-year-old girls (Björkqvist et al.). This theory is consistent with Simmons' (2002) claims that bullying peaks between ages 10 and 14.

Several qualitative and quantitative studies have taken place in recent years in order to explain girls and their social relationships. Björkqvist (1994) proposed that girls are physically weaker than boys, and thus must resort to relational modes to express their aggression. For girls, social relationships are valued goals, and thus the most effective way to harm another girl is to damage those social relationships as opposed to physically harming her. Also, behaviors such as name-calling are hurtful because they threaten a child's identity (Crozier & Dimmock, 1999).

Relational aggression may also be a method for gaining social status within a social group for girls (Galen & Underwood, 1997). The definition of bullying indicates that there is typically an imbalance in power between the aggressor and victim (Dake et al., 2003; Isernhagen & Harris, 2002; Olweus, 2001). In males this may be either physical strength or social dominance, for girls the research indicates that the power imbalance tends to be in terms of social status. Lease, Kennedy, and Axelrod (2002) found that among girls, those who were perceived to be most popular, while not well liked, were looked up to in terms of attractiveness and their degree of social power, and were rated high on measures of social aggression.

Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, and Lagerspetz (2000) found that while aggression in general, particularly the physical type, tended to be linked with social rejection, use of indirect aggression actually contributed to social acceptance.

Gilligan (1993) conducted a study of female development and in her book, *In a Different Voice*. She redefined how girls relate to one another and how they develop in comparison to how boys develop. In her book she explained how female development cannot be fairly characterized by traditional male theories. Upon conducting similar research with females, Gilligan determined that females tend to value social relationships and cooperation over individualized goals. Her work, along with the other research mentioned above on girls and social status, indicate that girls may be relationally aggressive toward one another to improve their social standing and to enhance their relationships with other girls. The aim of this study was to further develop our understanding of explanations of relational aggression by asking girls themselves why girls behave in relationally aggressive ways.

Spaces where Relational Aggression takes Place

While bullying may affect anyone in any situation, childhood and school are the prevailing age and context for bullying, as children interact with peers and struggle to maintain their identity and understand appropriate social behavior. Society is moving away from the attitude that bullying is just a part of growing up, to understanding the deep, emotional damage it can cause. The recent rash of violence in schools has highlighted just how angry and helpless children can feel (Anderson & Sturm, 2007). Girls often use rumors, social exclusion, and other forms of quiet aggression to attack other girls. This form of bullying falls beneath the typical teacher's and parent's eye, and can continue for years without intervention (Simmons, 2002). It

is this quiet, psychological aggression that has moved into the digital world to become “cyberbullying,” as bullies of all ages and genders have taken advantage of the anonymity and accessibility of digital technology to harass their victims (Anderson & Sturm).

With regard to types of aggression that can take place at school, research shows that bullying can occur almost anywhere, but particularly where there is either inadequate or no adult supervision. Relational aggression takes place in the classroom, on the playground, in hallways, in gyms, in locker rooms, in bathrooms, and in lunchrooms (Mellor, 1990).

How School Counseling Addresses Aggression

Recent literature on youth victimization suggests that bullying by peers is a common experience during adolescence (Cash, 1995; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). These behaviors have social, academic, and psychological consequences that impact the wellbeing of both the victim and the bully (Crick & Grotpeter). In addition, bullying has a negative impact on the overall school climate (Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Most middle school children report having experienced being a victim, with attacks happening more frequently at school than elsewhere (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997). School counselors have an obligation to assess whether bullying is a problem for their students, to intervene appropriately, and to be proactive in preventing bullying behavior (Smith, 1991).

The impact of bullying extends beyond the individual victim to affect many other students (Hoover & Hazier, 1991). Students who observe bullying may fear that they could be the next target, or they may feel guilty that they stood by and permitted the bullying to take place. Worse, some students may be encouraged to emulate the bully and become bullies themselves (Hoover & Hazier). Bullying becomes more serious and more difficult to prevent the

longer it continues. “By the time these children reach middle school, they have not only developed a pervasive pattern of aggressive behavior but have also acquired sophisticated methods that can make them more difficult to detect as well as discipline” (Bonds & Stoker, 2000, p. 341). In order for school counselors to implement effective intervention strategies for bullying and aggression, it is necessary to develop better strategies to identify at-risk youth (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Peer-nomination (surveys), self-reports, teacher referrals, administrative/disciplinary referrals, or observations are often used by school counselors to identify student aggression (Cole, Cornell, & Sheras, 2006).

Some school staff members may have the mistaken idea that bullying is normal, unavoidable, and relatively harmless. School counselors play an important role in helping school staff to develop a greater awareness of bullying and a willingness to respond to it (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). As Hernández and Seem (2004) emphasized, “Due to their knowledge, skills, and education, school counselors are uniquely positioned to institute the development of safe climates in schools and can serve as advocates for school change” (p. 257). School counselors can oversee and coordinate a school-wide effort to implement surveys that measure bullying and its effects on school climate (Cole et al., 2006). To assist in implementing programs to eliminate bullying, it is critical for school counselors to understand the nature and extent of bullying in their school. School counselors need to know how youth interpret bullying experiences and how the experiences affect the way students feel about themselves and their relationships with other students (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001).

A number of studies have examined identity development or what Blasi and Milton (1988) term “a sense of self.” School counselors can play a role in assisting adolescents in developing their own “sense of self.” School counselors can conduct class activities and

exercises demonstrating healthy self-esteem. School counselors should provide activities where appropriate and safe choices are demonstrated. One approach to adolescent development is based on Erikson's (1968) widely accepted eight-stage theory. Using this framework, Archer (1982, 1989), Adams and Fitch (1982), Grotevant and Thorbecke (1982), Marcia (1980), and Streitmatter (1993) found that adolescent girls and boys move through identity development (Erikson's fifth stage) in a similar fashion. In other words, there are no significant differences between girls and boys in their research studies. Other authors such as Brown (1991), Brown and Gilligan (1992), Gilligan (1979, 1982), Lyons (1990), Miller (1976), and Stern (1990) have challenged Erikson's theory of identity development with respect to gender. Their view is that Erikson's developmental concepts are male-oriented and emphasize the resolution of traditionally masculine socialization issues such as autonomy, separateness, independence, and fairness. They argue that there are important differences in female development; mainly that emphasis is placed on connection and caring in the development of relationships with others. These researchers claim that boys and girls have a different experience in the development of sense of self. Identity achievement for boys generally involves separation and independence whereas for girls, it involves the development of relationships with others and interdependence (Marshall & Arvay, 1999).

Several researchers have suggested that early adolescence (ages 12 to 13) represents a major developmental transition for females in terms of psychological self-structure, gender-role identity, and body image (Marshall & Arvay, 1999). Reviewing the literature on early adolescence, Stern (1990) reported that girls lose significant psychological ground during adolescence. She cited several studies that indicate that girls are more depressed, have poorer emotional wellbeing, and exhibit more negative self-appraisal. Stern stated that "there are strong

indications that disavowing the self will be sustained into adulthood” (p. 114). In terms of body image, Offer, Ostrov, Howard, and Atkinson (1991) reported lower ratings among adolescent girls as a particularly striking gender difference across the 10 countries and the total age span investigated in their study. Compared to boys, adolescent girls rated themselves as having a more negative body image, a lower global self-esteem, a higher degree of social awareness, and a higher commitment to others (Marshall & Arvay). This study is supported by the recent research findings of Usmiani and Daniluk (1997), who investigated the relationship between self-esteem, gender-role identity, and body image with two groups of mothers and their adolescent daughters. Higher self-esteem was found to make a significant contribution to the body image scores of both groups of mothers and their daughters in this study (Marshall & Arvay).

Students who have discipline problems often come to the attention of school counselors. When a student with a disciplinary problem is referred to a school counselor, the school counselor is charged with finding the most effective counseling interventions (Cochran & Cochran, 1999). Selecting appropriate interventions can be difficult if little is known about the factors that influence school delinquency (Lee & Smith-Adcock, 2005). Identifying appropriate prevention and intervention efforts for girls’ school delinquency may be particularly challenging because girls’ delinquent conduct historically has been less frequent and serious than that of boys, has been studied less often, and is, therefore, less understood (Hoyt & Scherer, 1998).

Stahl (2003) reported that girls’ delinquency has increased 59% over the past decade in all categories. In response to the rising incidence of girls’ delinquency, there is a need for research to address the factors contributing to girls’ delinquency and the development of counseling programs to address the needs of girls at risk for delinquency in multiple contexts, including schools (Pepi, 1998). In the study of girls’ delinquency, social factors such as

relationships to families, peers, and schools have played a prominent role because girls are widely considered to be more affected by the nature of their relationships with others than are boys (Hoyt & Scherer, 1998).

By ignoring the potential for aggression among females, the professional community has created an environment that serves to increase such behavior that very possibly may increase the chances that girls will become victims of more violent aggression later in life. The inequality of the study of aggression between males and females increases images and roles between genders that are neither real nor realistic for today's society. By breaking the cycle regarding the approach to, continuation of, and environment surrounding relational aggression in girls, the present study sought to open avenues of understanding why girls use relational aggression in their social relationships and what meaning they make of this aggression. This study plans to add to research of recent years in hopes of attaining some contributions in the search for assistance for girls and their social relationships.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Underwood (2003) completed one of the most extensive works to date on the subject of relational aggression, as is discussed in chapter 2. Most of the research on the subject of relational aggression and girls has used quantitative methods (Crick, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Several popular press books, as discussed in chapter 1, have contributed to the research using case studies and anecdotal evidence on the subject (Simmons, 2004; Wiseman, 2002). The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate why girls use relational aggression and what meaning they make of this aggression.

A qualitative study of girls' attitudes and perceptions of relational aggression was needed to enhance the current research and information in the field of aggression. A qualitative study provided the framework for studying why girls use relational aggression in their social settings and studied the school spaces in which this aggression most often takes place. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003) there are five features of qualitative research:

1. Naturalistic--Qualitative research has actual settings as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument. Researchers enter and spend considerable time in locales learning about educational concerns.

2. Descriptive Data--Qualitative research is descriptive. The data collected take the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. The written results of the research contain quotations from the data to illustrate and substantiate the presentation.

3. Concern with Process--Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products. How do people negotiate meaning? How do certain terms and labels come to be applied? What is the natural history of the activity or events under study?

4. Inductive--Qualitative researchers tend to analyze data inductively. They do not search out data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses they hold before entering the study; rather, the abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together.

5. Meaning--“Meaning” is of essential concern to the qualitative approach. Researchers who use this approach are interested in how different people make sense of their lives.

These five features were used as a guide for this study. The third feature of qualitative research, according to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), “Concern with Process,” was especially considered in the current study in that the meaning girls give their aggression was looked at closely, how certain labels have been given to certain social groups of adolescent girls and how these labels or groups have developed over time.

I analyzed the data to get descriptions of girls’ experiences with relational aggression-- why girls use relational aggression and what meaning they make of this aggression. Characteristics established by Strauss and Corbin (1998) were a helpful reminder in the interviewing process of the need to be flexible, non-biased, sensitive, and to critically analyze the information girls were willing to share. The components generated through a qualitative study were complemented by the existing quantitative research and case study material currently dominating the literature and helped to deepen our understanding of relational aggression in girls.

According to Kvale (1996), “the use of the interview as a research method is nothing mysterious: An interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (p. 6). The

research interview is not a conversation between equal partners, because the researcher defines and controls the situation. The topic of the interview is introduced by the researcher, who also critically follows up on the subject's answers to his or her questions. Historically, girls have been left out of the research on aggression and have been marginalized in other ways by society. The fact is girls themselves are the most capable of lending insight and understanding into the phenomenon of relational aggression. A research design that allowed girls to tell their own story about relational aggression and their experiences with friends in their own words seemed especially fitting.

Research Questions

The following questions served as a guide for the research study.

1. Why do adolescent girls, either as perpetrators or as victims, participate in relational aggression?
2. What meaning do girls make of this aggression?

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical concepts that framed this study of girls' relationships were those discussed by researchers of Girl Studies. According to Driscoll (2002), analysis of girl culture is not just a matter of finding out more about girls but of considering their interaction with conversations that name and form them. The theoretical concepts that framed this particular study were the interaction between the school spaces where girls' social relationships are most likely to be developed, peer pressures involved in the development of girls' relationships, and the social tensions that affect girls' relationships during the middle school years.

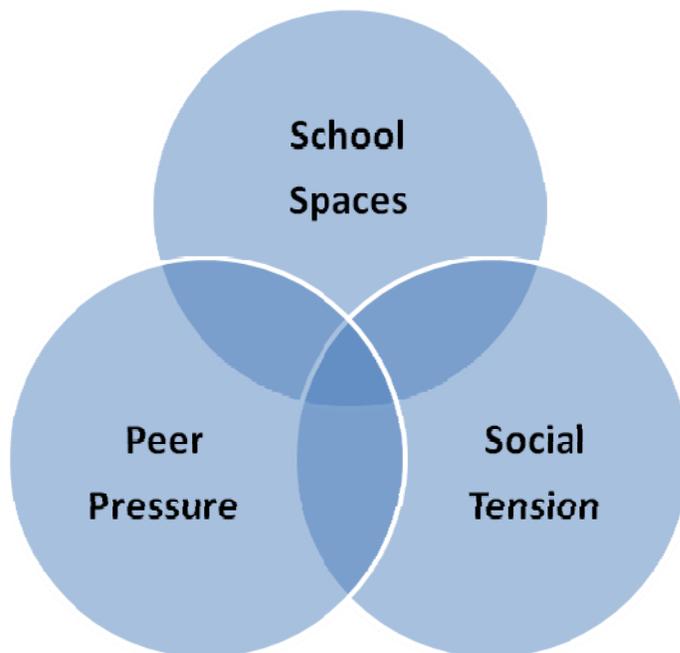


Figure 1. Conceptual framework Venn Diagram.

Figure 1 illustrates, through a Venn diagram, the ways in which each of the elements of the conceptual framework overlap. At the point where all three overlap with each other is the point at which the analytic lens that guide this study emerged.

School Spaces

School spaces are where girls spend a tremendous amount of time. The physical space and the symbolic space are where discourses about how to be a girl are circulated (Harris, 2004). Girls develop adolescent female identity by the material landscapes that they inhabit. The social habits that are created by the group girls belong to and the spaces of a school make up a girl's material group (Bettis & Adams, 2005). As Shinew and Jones (2005, as cited in Bettis & Adams)

purport, “their identities as leaders reside in the intersections between the regulated spaces of the classroom and the unsupervised spaces of the hallways, playground, and sidewalks to and from school” (p. 65). One focus of this study was the spaces within a school where girls’ relationships and aggression most often occurs.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure and fitting in are major struggles for young girls. There is pressure to act in a certain way, dress a certain way, and look a certain way. When girls do not meet these qualifications they are ridiculed and teased (Haag, 2000). Girls do not stay true to themselves. While trying to fit in they become clones of each other (Haag). Peer groups are a fixture of the landscape of girlhood. They tell girls where to sit at lunch, with whom to hang out between classes, what to wear, and how to “be” (Wexler, 1992). School is one of the most dangerous places for girls to be genuine. It is where the rules for being a girl are most strongly enforced (Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999). Another focus of this study was to investigate the role that peer pressure plays in “why” girls participate in relational aggression and the aggression that takes place among and between the cliques of girls in the middle-school setting.

Social Tension

According to Haag (2000), American girls describe adolescence as being shaped around the continuing themes of popularity, boyfriends, and peer relations--and clashing is the exposure to sexuality and pregnancy, peer hostility and sexual violence in school, and casual drug and alcohol use. As a result, girls are left to struggle with adult-scale problems largely in silence and often on their own. Girls are self-conscious about the disconnection between their own lives and

the mythical girls' lives that society, in their judgment, creates and promotes. Girls face pressure to be somebody they are not and struggle against conformity to what society expects girls to be (Haag).

Girls begin to understand from the wide array of images from cultural sources that the connection of power, prestige, wealth, and male attention are given to women who are culturally defined as "attractive." Consequently, their value is measured by physical attraction (Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999). The problem is that when girls are learning this female responsibility, they are also experiencing profound changes--that is to say they are developing a woman's body (Orbach, 1978). A third focus of this study is what role social tensions/pressures play in "why" girls participate in relational aggression. What role does social tensions/pressures such as attractiveness, sexuality, drugs, and alcohol use play in membership of certain cliques or groups of girls in middle school and the aggressions these social tensions may cause within these groups?

Interaction of Three Elements of the Conceptual Framework

While each of the elements of the conceptual framework have the strength to stand alone in their guidance of this type of study, the use of each is significant for the purposes of this study. Schools are understood as both the physical space where girls spend considerable amounts of time, as well as a symbolic space where conversations about how to be a girl can be circulated and taken up (Harris, 2004). Peer pressure is a major struggle for girls. There is pressure to act a certain way, dress a certain way, and look a certain way. Societal pressures also help to shape girls into whom they become. Girls are self-conscious about the disunion between their own lives and the mythical girls' lives that society, in their judgment, creates and promotes.

Participants and Setting

The researcher sought approval to study this population from the Institutional Review Board at The University of Alabama prior to beginning the research. Permission to conduct the study was requested from the superintendent of Bullmont High School (see Appendix A). The Bullmont City School System lies in a rural area in a southeastern state of the United States. With the superintendent's permission, the researcher made a written request to the principal of Bullmont Middle School for permission to conduct the study in his school (see Appendix B). The principal granted permission and the researcher met with the counselor at the school to develop a purposeful sample of approximately 15 to 20 girls chosen from a range of girls in Grades 6, 7, and 8. The counselor's assistance was used in selecting a range of girls that might have experienced the phenomenon of relational aggression either as the aggressor or as the victim of aggression. The counselor's experience with these girls was most helpful in selecting a variety of girls from each grade. The counselor considered her knowledge of counseling sessions/referrals, discipline referrals, and her observation of the girls in Grades 6, 7, and 8 in the selection of girls that might share their insights into the phenomenon of relational aggression. When 20 to 25 girls were selected, parental permission forms were mailed to the parents of all girls that were selected (see Appendix C). The sealed and stamped envelopes were given to the counselor to affix address labels and were mailed from the school in order to insure that the school district observed all of the privacy laws required of them. A sample of the contents of the mailing was given to the principal. Bullmont Middle School consisted of approximately 251 students in Grades 6-8. There were 75 students in sixth grade, 33 of which were girls; 95 students in seventh grade, 40 of which were girls; and 81 students in eighth grade, 44 being girls. Bullmont Middle School's ethnic breakdown was as follows: Grade 6--19 Black students, 56 White students;

Grade 7--16 Black students, 79 White students; Grade 8--15 Black students, 66 White students. Ten parental permission forms were returned in the 2-week timeframe that was designated for them to be returned to the researcher.

The study took place in the 2008-2009 school year. The setting of the study was in a middle school in northeast Alabama. The middle school lies in a small city school system that consists of one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. It is evident from the billboards, signs at fast food restaurants, and shirts people wore at the small town supermarkets that these schools were the focal point of this small town.

The initial interview consisted of 12 questions. The girls who participated in this study were given a pseudonym in order to protect their identities. The school was also given a pseudonym to further protect confidentiality. Girls were interviewed after spring testing so that any preparation for standardized tests would not be interrupted. Interviews were scheduled so that the girls did not miss class work. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. All girls were asked the same questions (see Appendix F), and their responses were audio-taped and later transcribed. After the completion of this study all tapes and transcripts were destroyed.

All of the participants seemed enthusiastic about being involved in the study and were very much at ease about discussing their relationships with other girls although at times I realized the girls were using language that would be used around an adult. In other words, they chose not to repeat to me the inappropriate words that girls had called them or that they had said about other girls. They would state that it was "very nasty." The girls all seemed to bring varying degrees of emotion with them on the issue of girls and their relationships with other girls although some were more expressive than others about the issue. Some girls tended to have more withdrawn personalities than others who were very outgoing. Therefore, some responses were in

much greater detail than others. Things were also learned from some of the girls' silences. What some did not say sometimes categorized them as being bullied.

Bullmont Middle School was originally the high school. When a new high school was built on the bypass it became the middle school. An elementary school has now been built on the same campus directly behind the middle school. It is hard to distinguish one from the other. They share the same lunchroom but aside from that they are completely separate entities. As you enter the building the office is directly on your right and the teacher workroom and bathroom is on your left. As you walk past the office you can go either left or right down hallways that contain the old hardwood floors from the original construction of the building many years ago. Through the years they were covered with other types of flooring but when it was remodeled as the middle school they opted to refinish the hardwood floors. This gives the building wonderful character. You sense that you are walking through many memories. Lockers line the hallways on both sides of classroom and restroom doors and the library is directly in the center of the building right past the office. On each end of the hallway there are entrances to the gym and lunchroom. There is a break area behind the building between the lunchroom and gymnasium. There were several places that students seemed to use in order to get social time. Students gathered with friends at their lockers between class changes. Girls also congregated in the bathroom together between locker breaks and often used this as social time. Different grades entered every 10 minutes into the lunchroom and grades sat together. However, grades were only assigned to a certain section of tables. Therefore, students got to sit with friends that were in the same grade. This allowed cliques within grades to socialize during lunchtime. The gymnasium was like most gymnasiums. It had several rows of bleachers on each side and students participated in whatever exercises or activities were required, and at the end of the class period

they were allowed 10 minutes of social time. The break area was a large outdoor area with a smaller area that was covered. Break times were staggered as the lunch times were staggered and break time was considered social time for students.

Data Collection Methods

After parent permission forms were received each participant was asked to sign a child assent form after a thorough review of the form and an opportunity to ask questions. It was made clear to each girl that even though her parents had given permission for her to participate in the project, she had the opportunity to refuse participation. Ten girls returned parent permission forms and assent forms to participate in the study. There were three sixth grade girls that participated in the study. All were of the White race. Three seventh grade girls participated in the study. One seventh grade girl was biracial (Black and White) and the other two were White. There were four eighth grade girls who participated. Three of these eighth graders were White and one was Black. The researcher contacted the school counselor and interview dates and times were scheduled. Interviews were conducted in the school building, in a private room in the library that was designated by the principal. The researcher arranged with the principal and counselor for participants to be released during a time that was not disruptive. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Five of the girls were interviewed on a day when several students and teachers were on a field trip to Washington, D.C. The principal felt that particular week would be a good time to interview those who did not attend the field trip since instructional time at the school had already been disrupted. All but one of the remaining girls were interviewed after spring testing during break and Physical Education class because students were

getting free time in Physical Education class that week. One girl was absent on that day so I returned to the school later that week to conduct her interview.

All interviews and observations were conducted by the researcher between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., excluding lunch. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. A copy of the Interview Protocol is included in Appendix F. Introductions were made and an explanation of the study was given to each participant prior to beginning the interview. Each participant was reminded that the interview was voluntary and that they had the option to stop the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. The interview questions were audio-taped. During the process of interviewing, if it was discovered that a girl was being abused or at risk of suicide the ethical standards related to Duty to Warn or Report Abuse/Neglect of minors in the counseling Code of Ethics would have been taken. This would have been reported to the school counselor who would then provide counseling, contact the Human Resources Department, and contact the parents. This did not take place; therefore, these procedures did not have to take place.

Interview Questions

Interview questions were developed with the intention of seeking information about the girl's experiences in their social relationships and relational aggression. Introductions were made on the first visit and explanations of the study were given to each participant prior to beginning the interview. Each participant was reminded that the interview was voluntary and that they had the option to stop the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. The interviews were audio-taped.

Data Collection and Analysis

As the researcher, I conducted the interviews, transcribed all interviews from audiotape, and then reviewed the transcriptions. Coding and memoing were done at this stage, adding insight and comments about nonverbal communication. The frequent interaction with the data allowed me to become acquainted with the data and provided the opportunity for comparison, as these activities were done concurrently during the data collection process. I analyzed the data to get descriptions of the girls' experiences with relational aggression. Copies of all transcriptions were given to the dissertation Chairperson, Dr. Nirmala Erevelles, for her review. The other four committee members were given the opportunity to review transcriptions as well.

The first step in the analysis process was open coding. In this process, transcriptions of interviews were reviewed, to look for emerging themes or categories. This process continued until saturation occurred (Creswell, 1998, pp. 150-151). Subcategories were looked for from the broader themes. Then the process of looking at the interrelationship between the categories began. Several themes emerged centered around Research Question 1. (1A) Girls were made fun of and/or teased other girls themselves. (1B) Girls were ignored or excluded by other girls and/or excluded or ignored other girls themselves. (1C) Girls told untrue stuff/rumors about other girls or had experienced it themselves. (1D) Girls expressed a great need to "belong" to a group. (1E) Girls felt social status "things" were necessary in order to "belong" to certain groups.

Triangulation of Data

Copies of all transcriptions were given to the dissertation Chairperson, Dr. Nirmala Erevelles. Marshall and Rossman (1999) refer to triangulation as using more than one data source to illustrate a particular point. Triangulation serves to corroborate findings as they have emerged from multiple sources. Triangulation was achieved in this study through the use of

individual interviews with students. After transcribing interviews, a copy was given to a counselor with 25 years of experience in another school system, which was in the same system where research was taking place. This allowed a double check the researcher's interpretations and translations, as well as for suggestions in the translation of certain themes that were emerging from the data.

Role of the Researcher

Relational aggression between girls is a common and long-standing problem. As a woman, it has had an impact on my life as well. I moved to a new school in 1976 as a sixth grader and became the victim of relational aggression simply because a group of girls felt I might be a threat to the world to which they had become accustomed. I have been exposed to this phenomenon several times in my lifetime. As a school counselor I have experienced the phenomenon and looked at it at many different angles. My own experiences have given me a deep curiosity about the causal conditions, experiences, environments, and motivations of those who are perpetrators, followers, observers, and even victims of this style of relating. While this experience provided insight, it also was a potential for bias as I gathered and analyzed the data.

Limitations

This study was confined to sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls, ages 11 to 14. The study was limited to girls attending public school in northeast Alabama. Participants were limited to those who voluntarily agree and whose parents gave permission to participate in the study. The cultural norms of the town in which the research was conducted may have influenced the way participants thought about friendships and relational aggression. Girls living in rural Alabama

may have thought and behaved differently than those living in urban cities. The Institutional Review Board at The University of Alabama did not allow me to do field observations and to present the participants with scenarios relating to relational aggression. This lack of information might have presented a limitation.

The researcher having a personal investment in the issue of girls and the use of aggression might also have been a limitation. I, again, bracketed my subjective positions as much as possible.

Conclusion

The methods outlined in this chapter provided a means of exploring girls' experiences with social relationships in school spaces, the peer pressures and social tensions involved in those relationships and the aggressions that take place due to these circumstances. This study sought to draw out the relationship between the participants and the meanings they construct regarding their experiences with aggression and their social relationships in middle school. The data collected through individual interviews provided sufficient means for achieving triangulation, therefore making interpretation of the findings more reflective of the data.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

This study sought to explore why girls use aggression in relationships and why some girls fall victim to aggression in hopes of gaining insight into helping middle school girls. It explored where on the school campus the aggression most often takes place and why these places are chosen. In particular, student responses were used to address the following research questions:

1. Why do adolescent girls, either as perpetrators or as victims, participate in relational aggression?
2. What meaning do girls make of this aggression?

This chapter will tell the stories of 10 girls who participated in the study. Of the girls who participated in this study, three were sixth graders, three were seventh graders, and four were eighth graders. The three sixth grade girls were White. The seventh grade girls consisted of one biracial (Black and White) and two White girls. Of the eighth grade girls, three were White and one was Black. The information generated in the interview formed the descriptions of the students presented in this study. The data analysis of the students' narratives revealed themes about girls and relational aggression.

Analysis of Data

Based on analysis of the data, the participants in this study were originally grouped into three categories in which girls were experiencing relational aggression. However, after further

analysis it was found that these categories were not distinct. Girls often fit several categories or played different roles in different situations. The first category, the *Aggressors*, consisted of girls who most often tended to be the aggressors in relationships with other girls. They were not considered the most popular girls in school but were considered the most popular among the girls that they associated with in school. After analyzing responses from the interviews, three girls in this study were categorized as *Aggressors*. The categories and the girls that seemed to fit each category are described below. Further description of the girls will be given in the next section of the paper where major themes are discussed that emerged after further analysis of the data.

Tina, a seventh grader, carried herself confidently, although she seemed to be somewhat shy or reserved. She tended, however, to be very blunt about what she thought about others and did not smile very much. She could be very intimidating to girls her age due to her straight-faced expression and her size. She appeared to be very mature but admitted that she was not interested in boys yet. Jenna was another seventh grader that was considered an *Aggressor*. She was a White girl and was an athletic tomboy. She was tall and average weight and tended to love being in the middle of everything. Although she tried to make it appear that she was being nice to other girls she was often instigating trouble, according to her peers and the school counselor. She had never moved to another school and seemed to be very confident in her surroundings. Her maturity level seemed to be what adults would expect a seventh grader's maturity level to be. Danielle was a sixth grader and was also categorized as an *Aggressor*. She was White and much larger and more mature looking and acting than others in her grade. This seemed to give her some power within her grade. She appeared to have material things that also helped her maintain power. Older boys were attracted to her since she was so much more mature than a sixth grader. This also added to her power.

A second category that emerged was the *Aggressees*. These were girls who were usually picked on by other girls. They lacked the self-confidence and/or the social items to make them have a higher status in groups of girls. Four girls in this study were categorized as *Aggressees*. Jessie was a seventh grader. She appeared to be younger than her age. She had been to eight different schools and admitted that her family did not have much money for material items such as clothes, cell phones, and internet. She had a large vocabulary and seemed to use it when spitting back comments to her aggressors. She did not seem to use much profanity but had become quite creative in speaking and acting as though her aggressors were not affecting her. Erika was a sixth grader and was Jessie's sister. She too fit the *Aggressee* category. She was not as vocal as her sister and did not seem to speak out to her aggressors as her older sister did. She tended to try and ignore her aggressors, although sometimes she agreed with her sister's aggressors when her sister was vocally embarrassing her. Candie was an eighth grader and fit the *Aggressee* category. She did not smile often and seemed to be an aggressor to girls who tried to be her friend. However, she was bullied by many girls in her grade. She seemed to be somewhat immature for her age and seemed not to have the social skills to develop friends. She had moved schools once in her educational career. Anna, a sixth grader and the fourth member of the *Aggressee* group, was a skinny White girl with glasses. She appeared to be a nerd and somewhat shy. She stated that she was clumsy and things happened to her often and girls made fun of her for being so clumsy. She was a girl whose silences spoke for her. She said that she got her feelings hurt often for the way she looked, the fact that she was a nerd and was not interested in the things other girls her age seemed to be interested in, and because she did not act the way they acted. She appeared to be saddened just hearing some of the questions, although she wanted to

continue talking with me. She had attended two schools and said that she had been considered different at both of them.

The third category that emerged from the data was *Girls in the Middle*. This group was composed of three girls who had easy-going personalities and could usually get along with both the other groups when necessary. They were sometimes considered followers of the *Aggressor* group and leaders of the *Aggressee* group. Tamika, an eighth grader was very outgoing and always smiling. She tended to see the good in everyone but recognized the bad. It appeared from my observation that she was liked by almost everyone at school including the teachers. She was considered smart by her peers and teachers and it was evident in her mature responses to the interview questions. She appeared to try and remain quiet when girls were spreading rumors and bullying. It appeared she was liked sometimes by the *Aggressors* because they liked for her to help them with their class work. She had never changed schools and seemed to know many people in her small town and school. Alexie was also an eighth grader that fit this category. She appeared to be mature and confident in who she was and who she planned to be. She seemed to do the things she wanted to do with other girls and did not do the things she did not believe in or was not comfortable with doing. She seemed to get along with most girls her age when needed because she did not get caught up in the drama and gossip. Brandy, an eighth grader, was an athlete, although not a starter on most teams she played. She was a somewhat quiet girl who seemed to know, as Alexie did, what type girl she wanted to be in life. She was a good student and let teasing get to her sometimes but tried not to let girls see it. She was liked by most in her class but said she was not what you would consider popular. She tended not to get involved in ridicule and teasing of other girls so she was therefore accepted by both the other groups.

Aggressors	Aggressees	Girls in the Middle
Girls who most often tend to be aggressors in relationships with other girls	Girls who are usually picked on by other girls	Girls who often have easy-going personalities and can usually get along with both the other groups when necessary
Not the most popular girls in school but considered the most popular among the girls they associate with in school	Girls that lack the self-confidence and/or social items to help them have a higher status in groups of girls	Sometimes considered to be followers of the <i>Aggressor</i> group and leaders of the <i>Aggressee</i> group
1) Tina: biracial 7 th grader	1) Jessie: White 7 th grader	1) Tamika: Black 8 th grader
2) Jenna: White 7 th grader	2) Erika: White 6 th grader	2) Alexie: White 8 th grader
3) Danielle: White 6 th grader	3) Candie: White 8 th grader	3) Brandy: White 8 th grader
	4) Anna: White 6 th grader	

Figure 2. Categories of relational aggression.

Emerging Themes

Research Questions: (1) Why do adolescent girls, either as perpetrators or as victims, participate in relational aggression? (2) What meaning do girls make of this aggression?

Several themes emerged centered around the research questions. Girls were made fun of and/or teased other girls themselves. Girls were ignored or excluded by other girls and/or excluded or ignored other girls themselves. Girls told untrue stuff/rumors about other girls or had experienced it themselves. Girls expressed a great need to “belong” to a group. Girls felt social status “things” were necessary in order to “belong” to certain groups.

Aggressors

Two of the three girls in the Aggressor group expressed that girls had teased or made fun of them. However, all three admitted teasing other girls. They said that it was fun and made them feel like they were in control. Danielle, a White sixth grader, depicts her experience:

This girl liked a football player and she wanted to go out with him but he really liked me so I sent a girl--one of her friends--a weird text--it was really ugly because I was saying bad stuff/lies about stuff she had done. The girl texted me back asking who I was and I sent her a picture of the girl that I really didn't like--you know her friend who liked the football player. I was trying to get her friend mad at her.

Tina, a biracial (Black and White) seventh grader, describes spreading a rumor about another girl:

There was this girl and her mama told her that she couldn't go out with this boy so I spread rumors that she had kissed him and she got in trouble.

When asked why she started the rumor she gives details:

I didn't like her and she didn't like me. She walked around all pretty and stuff. She was smart but she thought she was too. She thought she was all good and that everybody liked her and so I just wanted to be mean to her.

I asked her what she meant about "all pretty and stuff" and she explained:

She had everything--nice clothes, hair, makeup, phone--she was spoiled—she made good grades and stuff and it just made me sick. It was like she thought she was perfect.

I asked her if she thought that the girl was perfect--if she was a little jealous of her and she stated,

No, me and my friends didn't like her--we didn't want to be like her. She just made us mad.

Jenna is a White seventh grader and is an athletic tomboy. She has blond hair and green eyes and freckles across her nose. She admitted spreading rumors about other girls and teasing them in order to belong to the group. She explains why:

When you are in on the stuff it makes you feel good and in control. If you don't do it and have fun with it then it might be you next and you don't want that. It's just part of it I guess.

The three girls in the *Aggressor* group admitted ignoring or excluding girls from their group of friends. They described it as often ignoring a girl that was trying to be in their group of friends. The girls in this group seemed to agree that if they were ignored or excluded that it was always due to a misunderstanding among their friends in the group and that it usually got resolved.

Jenna explains a situation of ignoring another girl:

I ignored this girl that wanted to be my friend but I had tried being her friend before and she would go behind your back and start stuff. She would just make up stuff. She would go tell one of our friends that I was mad at her. And then that girl would get mad at me and I'd have to get it cleared up with her.

All three girls in the *Aggressor* category discussed having rumors spread about them. They all gave the same reasoning as to why they felt girls spread rumors. They all said that they felt girls were jealous of them. The girls stated that girls were jealous and wanted to belong to their group of friends. They felt girls wanted to like some of the boys they liked so they spread nasty rumors about them. Danielle depicts a rumor spread about her:

I liked this boy and a girl that used to be my friend liked him too so she spread a rumor that I held hands at the ballgame with another boy in my class because she was jealous because he liked me and didn't like her. She wanted him to break up with me.

When asked what she did when she found out about the rumor she explained:

I got my group of friends to spread the rumor that she was a lesbian.

Aggressees

Four girls who participated in this study were categorized as *Aggressees*. All of the girls in this category talked of having girls make fun of them. Jessie is a White seventh grader and is

slightly overweight. She appears to be younger than a seventh grader. She describes her experience of being teased at the eight schools she has attended:

Girls have made fun of me at every school I've been to. They call me weirdo or something I like--like vampire. I'm a vampire fan. I get called a freak and other names by people who just love to make fun of me. They call me Emo--which I'm not--just Goth. They are really mean. They tell me I don't dress good. They say my hair is greasy. I get picked on a lot. I get called a freak, weirdo--Um, I've also been called creepy. I even try to act that way sometimes. There's this one time I came to school looking really creepy. I wanted the girls to think I was scary. It worked--they stopped for a while but then it started back again. It hurts but I act like it don't.

Erika is a White sixth grader and is Jessie's sister. She also belongs in the *Aggressee* category. She is a very petite girl. She admitted that girls made fun of her and seemed to want to think that it was because of her sister. She stated that girls call her names and tell her that her sister is a weirdo. She said that it was always about her sister. The two sisters act as though they do not love each other but it is obvious that they do. They both admit to spreading rumors about each other. Erika describes an incident where she started a rumor about Jessie because she knew that someone was going to say something about the way Jessie was dressed that day so she said it first so that girls would not think that she approved of what her sister was wearing:

One day Jessie wore all black and painted her nails black and stuff just trying to be weird. I told everybody that she thought she was being Goth but she really just looked goofy. I thought if I said that she looked goofy first (which she did) everybody would not make fun of me for how she was acting. It works sometimes but sometimes they make fun of me anyway.

It appears that they compensate being picked on themselves by picking on each other. It is as if they experience feeling powerful, if only for a moment, by picking on each other.

Candie, a White eighth grader, who sometimes is an aggressor when she has friends, admitted being made fun of for the way she looks and dresses. She stated that she did not care, but it is obvious that she does. She told me of one incident where she wore heels to school and girls made fun of her. Anna is a White sixth grader who wears glasses and is what some would

label a shy nerd. She conceded that girls often made fun of her because she was so different from most of the girls in her class. I asked her what she meant by “so different” and she replied:

I’m not interested in getting boyfriends and going to parties and making fun of people. I like to mind my own business, do my schoolwork, and make good grades and they make fun of me for it. They make fun of me because I’m clumsy. I’m always getting hurt and so they call me “stitches.”

She stated that she did not cry because she was about used to it. It was obvious from her facial expressions and her quiet sad answers to my questions that she was very much affected by girls aggressions toward her.

Three of the four girls in this category admitted being excluded or ignored by other girls.

Erika, when asked why she thought the girls ignored her stated:

Because they think they’re cool and more popular--because they wear better clothes and have money to buy stuff they think they’re better.

Candie and Anna stated that they had rumors spread about them which in turn led to them being ignored or excluded by girls. Candie described having the rumor spread that she was a lesbian because the girl was trying to get other girls to ignore her.

Girls in the Middle

The three girls in this category all acknowledged that girls had made fun of them. All their stories seemed to be similar. They had all been picked on for not acting like the group wanted them to act. It appeared that each of these girls had enough sense of self not to conform to the group when they did not like what they were being asked to do by the group. This got them teased. Tamika, a Black eighth grader, is a *Girl in the Middle*. She is an overweight girl and is very friendly. She is very outgoing and always smiling. She describes her experience of being teased:

You know how it is. Some girls aren't going to like you. They're always going to try to pick fights with you and stuff like that. I guess it's just back and forth--you know how it is. Sometimes you can't help but argue back. They make fun of my size. They get mad at me because I answer a lot of questions in class quickly. They say I don't give everybody else time to answer. They always tell me I'm the teacher's pet.

Alexie is a White eighth grader. She is a slim girl with brown hair. She appears to be somewhat confident in herself but stated that she got teased about the way she acted and dressed:

I don't act like other girls and stuff. I act like I want to be myself and people always think that I should act like the group I hang out with and I don't act like people. I just act like what I want to act like.

Brandy is also a white eighth grader. She is tall and skinny and has a big smile and freckles across her nose. She, too, stated that she was made fun of because she did not do the things the group liked and so she got teased because they thought she was different.

All three girls in this category stated that they had been excluded or ignored by a group of girls. None admitted doing the same to another girl. Tamika describes an experience she had:

They did it (excluded) because I didn't follow them around like they wanted me to. Like, when they said to do something they wanted me to do it. I told them that we could hang out together but that I wasn't going to be their little lapdog or something.

Brandy depicts a different experience:

They ignored me maybe because I wasn't as popular as they were and thought that me being in the group would have some negative effect toward the group. I felt like nobody wanted to be my friend.

Alexie described being ignored because the group thought that she had said something and they believed it instead of asking her if it was true.

All three girls in the group conceded that they had not spread rumors about other girls. Brandy and Alexie, however, stated that they had rumors spread about them because the girls were trying to get other girls not to be their friend. Brandy gives details of her experience:

She didn't like me and was trying to make an impression on somebody else that wanted to be my friend. She told everybody that I was going around saying things about people that wasn't true behind their back and a lot of people would have gotten in a lot of trouble if it would have been true.

Alexie stated that a girl told everyone that she was pregnant trying to freak everyone out and cause them not to be her friend.

Conclusion: Research Question 1

Relational aggression, as stated in chapter 2, includes making up stories to get someone in trouble, talking bad about a person behind their back, starting nasty rumors, and spitefully excluding someone (Crick, 1996). These behaviors harm others through damage to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion (French et al., 2002). The current research further demonstrates these findings. Girls in all the categories admitted to being made fun of or teased. Girls in the *Aggressee* and *Girls in the Middle* groups stated that it hurt very much. Most of the girls admitted that being the prettiest, the smartest, or the wealthiest probably would not stop the teasing. However, most thought that these things would definitely improve their social standing and relationships with other girls due to the superficial needs or desires of most girls at this age. These findings validate research indicating that there is typically an imbalance in power between the aggressor and victim (Dake et al., 2003; Isernhagen & Harris, 2002; Olweus, 2001). The power imbalance in girls tends to be in terms of social status and girls who are perceived to be more popular, while not well-liked, are looked up to in terms of attractiveness and their degree of social power, and are rated higher on measures of social aggression (Lease et al., 2002).

Of the 10 girls who participated in this study, most had experienced being ignored or excluded or had participated in ignoring other girls. Girls in the *Aggressee* groups felt that they

were ignored or excluded because they were not as popular as the other girls were or did not have the nice clothes and money that were required to belong to the group. *Girls in the Middle* felt that they were ignored or excluded because they would not comply with requirements of the group. The *Aggressors* that were ignored or excluded stated that it was a merely a misunderstanding among their friends that eventually got resolved.

Girls in all categories expressed that they had rumors spread about them and most admitted to spreading rumors about others. However, their rationale for it was very different. For the *Aggressees* and the *Girls in the Middle*, it was either because they did not feel they were good enough or had done the appropriate things required by the group to belong; therefore, the girls spread ugly rumors about them. The *Aggressors*, on the other hand, felt that rumors had been spread on them because other girls were simply jealous of them.

Findings in this study corroborated findings of Gilligan's (1993) study of female development whereas she indicates that females tend to value social relationships and cooperation over individualized goals. Her work, along with the other research mentioned above and in chapter 2 on girls and social status, indicates that girls may be relationally aggressive toward one another to improve their social standing and to enhance their relationships with other girls. This study further developed our understanding of explanations of relational aggression by asking girls themselves why they behaved in relationally aggressive ways.

Based on further analysis of the data, there were two major themes that continued to emerge centered around the reasons why girls choose to participate in relational aggression. A theme that kept emerging in analysis of the data was "wanting to belong." The girls kept speaking of doing things in order to be members of a group. A second theme that emerged, social status, seemed to be something that all the girls felt was important in relationships with other

girls. The attributes of social status kept appearing in the girls' discussions of what it takes to have successful and/or fulfilling relationships with other girls.

Wanting to Belong

Alfred Adler (1870-1937), a renowned philosopher and psychiatrist, stressed the need to understand individuals within their social context. One of the basic premises of Adlerian theory is that "Man is a social being and his main desire is to belong. This is true for adults and children alike" (Dreikurs & Cassell, 1972, p. 8). The social "things" that the girls in this study felt were important in their being popular, whether they were physical, material, or psychological all centered on their "belonging" to a group. The desire to belong was very important to each and every girl who participated in this study. It all seemed to be about the girls finding their group and having a sense of being someone in that group. The data in the current study further demonstrates that relational aggression is a social strategy that results in peer perceived popularity and power.

Erika, a sixth grader, was a very petite White girl with brown hair and brown eyes. She was wearing a green checked shirt and jeans, which were clean and in good shape, although she let me know that she did not have the name brand stuff that other girls' wore. She had an independent demeanor and seemed to be quite intelligent. She admitted attending eight different schools since her kindergarten year. She discussed being excluded or ignored by girls at all the schools. When asked why she thought the girls ignored her she explained, "Because they think they're cool. They think they're more popular than me." Her response as to why she thought they were more popular than her will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. It was apparent by the end of our interview that her independent demeanor was merely a front that she had

developed. It was merely a defense mechanism to cope with the various experiences she had confronted in the many moves her family had made throughout her life. She often tried to blame the fact that girls made fun of her or her sister Jessie, a seventh grader, who also participated in the study. She explained that Jessie was always saying and doing stuff to make people tease her. She explained how Jessie would act like a vampire and wear black fingernail polish and clothes just trying to get people's attention. She also discussed that Jessie would talk loudly about vampires and anything that she thought might draw attention to her. Erika explained that she was quieter than her sister and this behavior embarrassed her and made her mad at her sister. She did not know why Jessie would intentionally try to draw negative attention. She said that girls often made fun of her also because they thought that she must be weird since her sister was so weird. She said that they just assumed she must be weird if her sister is but she rarely spoke out loud, so people did not know her. Erika admitted to joining other girls that were making fun of her sister. I asked her why she joined them and she interjected, "Because she is always doing stuff that she knows they'll make fun of her for and I don't want them to think that I am like that. I don't want them making fun of me." Based on her responses it appeared that she had a deep desire to belong to a group.

Jessie, Erika's sister, a seventh grader, was slightly overweight and appeared to be younger than her sister, although she was a year older. She had sandy blond hair and hazel eyes. Although she spoke of being "Goth" she was not wearing anything that would make you think that she was "Goth". She wore a simple brown shirt and jeans that were not displaying any name brand labels but did appear clean and in good shape. She was very vocal and expressive in her details when asked questions. She conceded that she was made fun of frequently for being

“weird” or “freaky.” She said that she did it on purpose many times because she liked being different. She described the girls in her class,

They are really mean. They call me a freak. They tell me I don’t dress good. They say my hair is greasy and if anything their hair is greasy--because it is mostly Black girls who do that. I get called a weirdo--I’ve also been called creepy. I take them as compliments because I know I am. I even try to act that way sometimes. There’s this one time I came to school and I looked ree-a-lly creepy. But I did that mostly because the boys and girls kept making fun of me. It worked--they stopped for a while but then it started back.

After interviewing these sisters, I had a break before my next participant arrived. I sat outside my designated interview room in the back of the library and reflected back on my own middle school years and remembered that groups of girls with the same economic standing and similar interests seemed to find each other over time and develop friendships, when it became obvious to them that they could not compete for membership within groups of different economic statuses. Within these groups competitions developed whereas at times each individual felt as though they were successful or the most popular. I realized that Jessie and Erika were never members of a particular school long enough to find “their” group. Therefore, they were each other’s best friend. They competed within their own group. Each talked about the other as if they were talking about members of their social group. Each had developed defense or coping mechanisms to survive in the world in which they lived, whatever school that might be. They were, most of the time, at the various places in which they moved, all each other had to fill the need to belong.

Brandy, an eighth grader, was categorized somewhat different than the sisters discussed above in that she was a member of several athletic teams and would probably be considered middle class by girls her age. She had a tie-dyed t-shirt on that she had bought when the school’s varsity volleyball team went to the state playoffs the year before and won the championship. She played junior high volleyball and basketball. She was a White girl, tall and skinny with a big

smile and freckles across her nose. Her smile was very warming and her eyes were quite cheerful but she said that she was not considered pretty by other girls. She said that she was very close to her parents and wanted to please them. I found out from our first conversation that a few years ago she became an only child again when her 2-year-old brother was killed in a car accident. This had been very difficult for her family she explained, and they had become even closer than they had previously been since this horrific accident. She describes why she thought girls made fun of her: “Um, I guess they make fun of me because I’m not able to fit in. I don’t do the things they like so I get made fun of because they think I’m different”. When asked why she thought or they thought she was different she replied,

I won’t do some of the things that they do. I’m not going to say and do some of the things they do with boys and stuff. About a year ago some girls wouldn’t allow me in the group unless I went and said something to some older guys. I wouldn’t do it so they ignored me and went and told everybody that I was going around saying things about people that weren’t true behind their backs--and a lot of people would have gotten into a lot of trouble if it would have been true.

It appeared from Brandy’s interview that she wanted to be a good girl and wanted to please her parents, as well as, her teachers and coaches, but she also wanted to belong to a group of girls her age.

Jenna, a seventh grader, was an athletic tomboy. She had blond hair and green eyes and freckles across her nose. She had a school t-shirt and basketball shorts on and her hair pulled up in a knot in the back as if she had just come from athletics class. She was a cute girl with a sweet disposition and it was apparent from our interview that she was not the least bit interested in boys yet. She was interested in many of the things that, in my days as a White middle-class youth, were considered typical interests of a seventh grader: hanging out with friends, playing sports, making good grades, and pleasing adults. She was the daughter of a teacher, although her mom did not teach at the school where she attended but had during several of her elementary

school years. She expressed that she often got teased about being a lesbian because she was not wearing makeup and was not interested in boys. She also discussed how in Physical Education class she often got picked on by other girls because they were jealous because she liked playing basketball and was pretty good at it. She explained,

The girls pick on me at PE or after we get back from PE because I like playing basketball and I guess I'm o.k. at it. They pick on me calling me a lesbian and say that I won't ever get a boyfriend.

When asked why she thought they made fun of her at that time, she interjected,

I guess because they are jealous because I am better at basketball than they are. They would be o.k. too if they weren't standing around worrying about their hair or stuff like that. That is the one thing that I'm better than them at and they can't stand it.

When I asked her why she thought girls teased other girls she replied, "I think because they are jealous of something and they're trying to make themselves feel better or they're just doing it because their friends are doing it." I asked her why girls did things to go along with the groups and she replied,

Well, you have to go along with them sometimes because you don't want them to pick on you so you just do what they're doing. You have to just decide if it is something you can live with doing. You have to think about how bad it is and decide if you think they'll then do it to you. If they are good friends most of the time you go along with it--if they aren't so good or are doing stuff you don't want to do a lot then you need to find some new friends. Then they are going to make fun of you again. It's hard keeping friends.

Tamika discussed similar circumstances about following the group. Tamika was a Black eighth grader. She was an overweight girl but was very friendly and outgoing. She was wearing a black t-shirt with a teenage quote on the front and jeans. From my observation in the hallway between class changes it appeared that students and adults liked her very much. Students were saying hello to her and several teachers teased her in the hallway during the class change that I observed. She agreed that she was often picked on for being overweight and for being smart. She discussed a situation where she was expected to follow the group:

A couple of weeks ago me and a girl that was sort of friends--we just hang out sometimes together. She told me to do something for her. I told her that we could hang out together but that I wasn't going to be her lapdog or something. She always wanted to copy my work.

I asked her what happened when she stood up for herself. She replied,

I got called fat and the teacher's pet and she ignored me and stuff. She also went and told some other girls and they all started trying to ignore me. You know how it is some girls aren't going to like you. They are always trying to pick fights with you and stuff like that. I guess it's just back and forth--you know how it is. Sometimes you can't help arguing back.

It appeared that Tamika was confident enough to stand up for herself when she felt uncomfortable about something the group was doing, but she admitted allowing girls to copy her work and stuff just to keep her friends and to keep from having to argue.

Alexie, a White eighth grader, was a slim girl with brown hair and brown eyes. She looked much younger than an eighth grader but spoke very mature. She was not an unattractive girl but she was not considered pretty by her peers. She was dressed in a simple shirt and jeans and was not decked out in name brand or provocative clothing. She was a tiny girl but appeared to be somewhat confident. She portrayed herself at the start of the interview as a girl who knew what type of person she wanted to be and did not seem to care if anyone knew who she was and what she believed. Although she appeared confident and sure of herself in the early part of our interview, she described teasing a girl because the group was doing it, "I don't really remember what we teased her about--it was a while ago. I just teased her because everybody else was doing it and I thought that if I didn't they'd stop talking to me." I then asked her if she had ever ignored or excluded another girl and she replied, "I haven't but my friends--like my group has. I didn't want to jump in and get anything started but I was just hanging with the group." I asked her if she spoke up when the group ignored the girl or just went along with the group. She conceded,

I didn't really take up for the girl. I did ask why we were doing it and they said that she just didn't act the way she needed to in order to belong to our group. It wasn't the way she dressed or her grades or anything--just the way she acted and I really don't know how she was acting wrong--I just went along with it.

She also discussed how she was not allowed to be a member of her group until she made fun of another girl. I asked if she still liked the other girl. She explained, "I do but she doesn't like me anymore because of what I said to her. I don't guess I'd like me either. But I'm a member of the group now because I made fun of her." At the end of our interview I realized that her confident demeanor probably did assist her in dealing with relationships with other girls; however, she was much more sensitive than she first appeared.

Tina, a biracial (Black and White) girl, was a very attractive girl and appeared to be quite shy. She was a big girl and somewhat overweight and had extremely unique facial features. She entered the interview room very shy and reserved. As we chatted for a while she began to smile and look directly at me when I commented on her beautiful eyes and smile. She was dressed in a simple yellow shirt and Aeropostle jeans. She described an incident where a girl had wanted to fight her:

Last year this girl named Heaven, she's in eighth grade, she tried to spread a rumor about me. I forgot what it was about (I felt she definitely remembered but didn't want to discuss it with me) but it was really mean. Um, and then she tried to fight me right in front of the whole school. I wasn't going to do it.

When I asked her why she thought she did it she explained, "I think because she was jealous. I really didn't do anything to her." I then asked her why she thought she was jealous and she interjected, "She wanted to belong to the group of friends that I was hanging out with and she got mad at me because I was in the group and she wasn't." It became clear from our discussions that she was shy; however, she did what she needed to socially in order to belong to her group. She talked of attending two schools in her educational career and that she had liked them both. She

admitted that girl drama was everywhere and that she had teased other girls and ignored or excluded them when her group had done so. It appeared by the end of our interview that she would stand up for herself and/or anyone in her group of friends when necessary. She was a big girl and it appeared by the end of our talk that she served as somewhat a protector for members of her group. She stated in our interview that she would take up for herself and her friends when she felt they were being done wrong. That appeared to be her position in belonging to her group.

Candie, another White eighth grader, had sandy-blond hair with freckles and was of average size. She entered the interview room wearing a white blouse and jeans and was wearing make-up, although it was not applied very well. She was very talkative and used facial expressions and head movements to express that she could have an attitude when necessary. She spoke of girls making fun of her for what she wore or how she looked and acted as did most the other girls, but she got very vocal about what she did or had to do to belong to a group. She explained how she was told that she could be a member of a group if she would make fun of what her current friend was wearing when she entered the classroom. She interjected,

I wanted them to like me because they were popular and so the next class period when my friend entered the classroom I made fun of her new hair cut. They acted like I was their friend when I made fun of my old friend all day. Then the next day I wore some high heels and they all laughed at me when I walked in and I was so mad and sad because I had given up my old friend for them. I felt so alone.

When I asked if she realized how her old friend had felt or if she apologized to her she stated,

I didn't at first because they were trying to get her to be their friend and trying to get her to do the same thing that I had done. She was smart--she didn't do it and we later talked about it and I apologized for being so mean to her. Thank goodness she accepted my apology and we are still friends today. That was so mean but I hope I learned a lesson.

I asked her what lesson she thought she had learned from her experience. She replied simply,

“Who your real friends are.” Based on our interview, it appeared by the end of our discussion

that she was a girl who was a follower and tended to believe whatever girls told her. She wanted

so badly to be popular and belong that she tried to dress certain ways and do or say certain things in order to try to achieve girls' attention. However, it most often backfired on her and only made her more of a misfit in girls' eyes. She was a very sweet girl but spoke what she was thinking, and sometimes certain things should just be thought and not spoken--this often got her into trouble with girls her age. She would do or say whatever they asked her to and they knew that and used her frequently as a joke or to get a laugh. She discussed another incident where she was told by a group of girls, who were what she considered popular that a football player liked her. They told her to go up and say something vulgar to him at break where everyone was watching and she did so, which made her a huge joke for several days when he laughed at her and the group of girls were standing back laughing as well.

Most of the girls who participated in this study had similar answers to most of the questions answered. They all had something about themselves that they were not comfortable with or did not like and they felt that other girls picked on these insecurities. It did not matter to which group the girls belonged, whether it be what some considered popular or what was not considered popular, they all felt that having something different or more of something would assist them in being popular. In other words, in their minds being "popular" most often meant having more "stuff." Popular to them did not exactly mean having everyone like you, they interpreted popular as having stuff and having stuff would make people be your friend. All the girls seemed to want whatever they felt would help them "belong" to the group of which they wanted to be a member. All the social status things they discussed as being important were all things they felt would help them "belong." As I analyzed my notes at the closing of the interview sessions I realized that many aspects of middle-school life have changed for girls since my time

as a middle school youth; however, most things have remained the same. They felt, as did girls in my day, that certain “things” were what they needed in order to “belong.”

Social Status

Girls’ friendships undergo considerable changes when transitioning from an elementary to a middle school setting. Middle school students have a larger population from which to select friends, which encourages the development of more distinct friendship groups or cliques. Middle school students can also participate in more extracurricular activities, which provide new areas of peer status (Eder, 1985). Milner (2001, as cited in Bettis & Adams, 2005, p. 6) purports, “Adolescents possess little economic or political power in the school setting, but the one kind of power they do have is the ability to create peer status systems. Several of the girls described “things” that other girls had that they felt would help them achieve popularity if they too had them. They all perceived some of the following characteristics as being important in their relationships: popularity, good looks, nice clothes, athleticism, and/or boys’ attention.

In the previous section, when I asked Erika why she thought girls thought they were more popular than her, she replied,

They wear better clothes than I do. They have money to buy stuff. They have cell phones and stuff like that. My family doesn’t have a lot of money or a nice house and stuff. We don’t even have a phone in our apartment. So they don’t like me.

Jessie, Erika’s sister, also conceded that her family did not have a lot of money and therefore they did not have many of the “things” that other girls had that would help to make her more popular. Erika and Jessie were attractive girls but did not appear to have the name brand clothing and material items that they felt would help them achieve the popularity they desired.

Throughout the interviews, issues related to social status were mentioned. Oftentimes it was related to clothing or other items that were considered popular. At other times it was being pretty and/or a member of an athletic team. Whatever quality an individual girl might not have she always seemed to feel that was the “thing” she needed in order to keep girls from teasing or excluding her.

Brandy, as did Jessie and Erika, explained how she could not fit in with the popular group because she did not wear the kind of clothes they wore and did not have the pretty hair and face that she needed to belong to their group. She admitted that she was not interested in makeup and material items like that so she fit in better with the groups that were not interested in such things yet. She said that she “hung out” with the girls on her team that were not the most popular girls on the team and many of them were not interested in boys and makeup yet. She conceded that her coach would “kill” them if he heard that they were doing bad stuff and that he looked at their grades to make sure they did well in school. When asked what qualities she thought she needed in order to stop girls from picking on her and/or to be popular, she interjected, “It still probably wouldn’t stop but it would help to be pretty and always to have more money for stuff.” I later found out from her counselor that she had a red birthmark on her nose and had had surgery to remove it when she was in elementary school but she still seemed self-conscious of her appearance.

Danielle, a sixth grader who looked much older than her age, was a beautiful girl with big blue eyes. She had long blond hair and was slightly overweight. She was not dressed provocatively but wore a nice white Tommy Girl shirt and jeans. She appeared to be very confident and enjoyed telling me how popular she was, especially with boys. She said that older boys liked her because they thought she was older. She discussed getting texts from other girls

calling her names because they were jealous of a boy liking her. She explained, “This girl sent me a text calling me a whore because this football player liked me and she wanted him to like her. Later she put ugly stuff on her blog about me, too.” I asked her if a girl had ever asked her to do something in order to be her friend and she said that no one had ever done that to her. She also said that girls did not make fun of the way she dressed. She said that if they ever do make fun of her it is because she has big hips. She said that girls often called her “little miss goodie-goodie.” I asked her why they called her that and she conceded,

I’m not really sure. They usually call me that until they get to know me. Like, one of my friends told me that she used to think that because everybody likes me and I had nice clothes and stuff but that when she got to know me she found out that I am down to earth.

At first I thought that Danielle might be just pretending to be confident, or rather trying to convince me that she was popular; however, as our conversation progressed I truly began to feel that she actually was pretty comfortable with who she was and thought that girls sometimes teased her because they either were jealous of her or was trying, in an odd way, to be her friend. It became evident as our conversation developed that she was extremely popular with the crowd in which she associated with daily. It also became evident that she was sometimes snickered at for her flirty behavior by the athletic group of girls who were more interested in sports and keeping the grades necessary to do so, but other than the occasional snicker she was hardly noticed by this group of girls.

Alexie, as did many of the other girls who participated in this study, spoke of girls teasing her about the way she dressed and the way she acted. She explained, “I don’t dress like everybody else. See they like to dress slouchy and I don’t dress slouchy and they get mad at me for it”. She conceded, “In other words, they don’t like me because I like to dress nice and neat.”

The 10 girls who participated in this study gave various places that were chosen for girls to participate in aggression. The girls stated that such places as hallways, bathrooms, Physical Education classes, and lunchrooms and sometimes classrooms were all places where aggression between girls took place. All 10, however, agreed that places were where there was less teacher supervision and an audience were always chosen. In the current study it did not appear to matter what social status group girls' belonged, relational aggression took place within all groups. It was apparent in what the girls described that it had to be a place with an audience in order to accomplish what the girls wanted to accomplish. Previous research validates the places girls involved in the current study chose as places where aggression most often takes place. You often hear that school buses are also places where aggression takes place. School buses might also have been chosen by the girls in this study if they had not been students in a small city school system that did not run school buses inside the city limits.

The current research further validates research that shows bullying can occur almost anywhere, but particularly where there is either inadequate or no adult supervision. Relational aggression takes place in the classroom, on the playground, in hallways, in gyms, in locker rooms, in bathrooms, and in lunchrooms (Mellor, 1990). The current research concurs with research conducted by Bettis and Adams (2005) where they found that middle schools have fewer places than elementary schools where students can be in control so they create areas of ownership where they can be in control. Bettis and Adams (2005) research, as did the current research, found hallways, bathrooms, and even classrooms at times are spaces where girls exert their power.

Conclusion Summary

All 10 girls who participated in this study expressed that being a middle school girl was difficult. They admitted that the pressures required of them to be a member of a certain group were often impossible and/or went against what they really wanted to do or say. Such things as certain clothes, shoes, hairstyles, and accessories--“things”--needed to belong to certain groups were financially impossible. Also, the pressures of sex, drugs, and how they should treat other people were sometimes more than they could handle.

The feelings the 10 girls who participated in this study shared seemed to validate that many things have not changed since I was a middle school girl experiencing relational aggression. If anything, the pressures of sex and drugs are at even earlier age than when I was a teen growing up in the early 1980s.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore why adolescent girls, either as perpetrator or as victim, participate in relational aggression. There are two research questions that guided this study. The final chapter will summarize this study according to the research questions as well as provide implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

The following review attempted to link the findings and the discussion to the research questions that guided this study. The goal of this research was to identify why adolescent girls participate in relational aggression. As discussed in the literature review, relational aggression seems to invoke more emotional and academic difficulties for girls in middle school than any other age group. The focus of this research was therefore on middle school girls. The 10 girls in this study were originally categorized as *Aggressors* (girls who tend to show aggression toward other girls), *Aggressees* (girls who tend to be bullied by other girls), and *Girls in the Middle* (girls who at times fall into both categories). Later, after further analysis of the data it was found that the girls sometimes played several roles. They tended to belong to different categories at different times. The girls told their stories of the social status “things” they felt were necessary in order to “belong” to certain groups of girls. They explained why they felt girls teased other girls, and it became apparent that the girls just wanted to “belong” to a group and have a sense of themselves in that group. They discussed the places that were usually chosen by girls to participate in relational aggression and it was always where an audience was present.

Research Question 1: Why do adolescent girls, either as perpetrators or as victims, participate in relational aggression? What meaning do girls make of this aggression?

As research shows, girls have a tendency in their social relationships to form what are known as cliques. These cliques have a hierarchical structure. They are dominated by leaders and are considered exclusive so that not all girls who want to be members are accepted (Adler & Adler, 1998). Of the 10 girls who participated in this study, most had experienced being ignored or excluded or had participated in ignoring other girls. Girls tended to believe that they had been ignored or excluded because they did not have many of the social items such as clothes and phones that were required of the clique. They also felt it was oftentimes because they did not do the things the clique required, such as dating and attending parties and similar activities. Girls stated that they were excluded or ignored because they would not comply with some of the things the clique wanted them to do. Girls admitted excluding other girls when they did not fit the requirements of the clique. Girls also admitted excluding, ignoring, or teasing other girls in order to belong to a group.

As defined by Crick (1996), relational aggression includes making up stories to get someone in trouble, talking bad about a person behind their back, starting nasty rumors, and spitefully excluding someone. Most of the girls who participated in this study described having rumors spread about them. Some girls seemed to think that it was because other girls were jealous of them. Other girls felt that rumors were spread about them in order to try and get girls not to be their friend--trying to get other girls to exclude them.

Girls stated that they were teased often for their clothes their hair, their size, the things they are interested in, and, at times, their grades. They admitted that they were picked on for anything girls thought would upset them. Girls were often teased for not conforming to the rules

of the clique and often for their size or appearance. Some girls admitted being teased but wanted to believe that it was a misunderstanding and/or was before they became members of their group. Most admitted teasing, however, and said that it was fun and made them more popular among their friends.

According to Owens et al. (2000), the most common explanations given by girls as to why they use relational aggression in social settings with other girls are as follows: boredom/creating excitement, getting attention, and being included in a group. Girls are eager to find out about the latest rumor or gossip because sharing this social information gives them power and creates a bond within their group (Owens et al.).

All of the girls who participated in this study expressed a great need to “belong” to a group. All admitted to doing certain things required in order to belong to groups. It was found from this study that all the social status “things” that the girls discussed as necessary to belong to certain groups were items that they themselves did not have and felt that others had. In other words, if a girl was poor she felt that she needed money in order to belong. If a girl was athletic she might think she needed to be pretty to belong. It never was that a girl thought she had everything she needed to be popular.

When girls were asked why they thought girls were mean, sometimes they stated that they had done mean things to other girls in order to belong to the group. They all seemed to participate but did not enjoy when it was against them. Girls seemed to think that having “stuff”-a higher social status--and doing what girls asked of them would end all aggression against them. However, they all stated that it was only for a period of time before it would be on them again.

The 10 girls who participated in this study validated findings of previous studies as to where they most often experienced relational aggression. The girls in this study stated that they had experienced or witnessed aggression between girls in hallways during locker breaks, bathrooms, the lunchroom, Physical Education class, and sometimes classrooms. The girls all shared a variety of places where aggression often took place among girls; however, it was almost always where there was little or no teacher supervision and usually a crowd so that aggressors had an audience. The current research further validates Mellor's (1990) findings that relational aggression takes place in the classroom, on the playground, in hallways, in gyms, in locker rooms, in bathrooms, and in lunchrooms. The current study demonstrated that it did not matter to what social status a girl belonged or what group of girls of which she was a member, relational aggression can happen anywhere in a school. However, it is almost always where there is an audience so that the aggressors feel successful in seeking the attention for which they were striving.

Implications

The findings from this research have implications for educators who are responsible for middle school girls in their school and/or school system. The findings have implications for school administrators, teachers, and school counselors who supervise the spaces of a school and who assist adolescent girls in developing their well-being while learning to cope socially. A key factor for school personnel is assisting adolescents in developing healthy relationships. It is ultimately how adolescents relate and build relationships with each other that is vital to their successful development.

Implications for School Administrators and Teachers

With regard to types of aggression that can take place at school, research shows that bullying can occur almost anywhere, but particularly where there is either inadequate or no adult supervision. As research has found, relational aggression takes place in the classroom, on the playground, in hallways, in gyms, in locker rooms, in bathrooms, and in lunchrooms (Mellor, 1990). Educators must make sure these places are well supervised in order to help minimize aggression. As Bettis and Adams (2005) found in their research, middle schools and high schools have fewer places than elementary schools where adolescents can be in control. Therefore, it appears that school systems are aware that there is more aggression that takes place in middle school and high school and school officials are attempting to minimize and/or prevent it.

When peer groups begin to define identities, spaces are chosen or marked as belonging to particular groups. This could be particular areas in hallways or certain tables in the lunchroom. Educators must closely monitor these areas and identify when particular changes must take place. For instance, it might become necessary to assign tables in the lunchroom. There needs to be areas in schools, however, where students get opportunities to be independent and have free time. This is necessary for their social development. Educators merely need to monitor closely and intervene when necessary.

Educators have reported that they feel unprepared to recognize and handle the kinds of bullying that they are encountering in the classroom. As a result, they feel they are more likely to overlook serious bullying behaviors or to ignore those behaviors they recognize but feel unprepared or afraid to deal with (McAdams & Schmidt, 2007). For middle school educators to understand middle school social development, for both boys and girls, school systems should provide professional development programs on adolescent social development. A defining

feature of relational aggression is that it is harm that is often delivered in a covert manner (Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Therefore, it is important that middle school educators, in order to intervene and/or prevent relational aggression among girls, understand how middle school girls think. For example, what do they feel is important and what do they feel is not important in order for them to feel they “fit in?”

Teachers, administrators, and school staff can be educated in staff meetings and professional development workshops on what constitutes bullying, and on the short- and long-term negative effects of bullying. Administrators must declare and enforce a no tolerance policy for bullying in their school and/or school system. Principals should read and have teachers read a book on bullying and how girls tend to bully in more covert ways than boys. Parents should also be encouraged to read a book on girls and bullying. The following books have been listed in other studies as suggested reading: *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, (Simmons, 2002), and *Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (Wiseman, 2002). This reading could then lead to a school study on the topic of girls and bullying. The school study could also encourage school staff to find current articles on bullying and its effects on middle school students. The study could then be expanded to the bullying of students perceived to be gay, students of different races, and different genders. Opening the topic for discussion among school staff would certainly enhance awareness, but it might also lead to prevention programs or ideas that were developed and/or suggested by the entire staff. Therefore, the success of the program would be more successful.

Implications for School Counselors

Research proves that aggression may affect anyone in any situation. However, childhood and school are the prevailing age and context for aggression, as adolescents interact with peers and struggle to maintain their identity and understand appropriate social behavior. Society is moving away from the attitude that bullying is just a part of growing up, to understand the deep emotional damage it can cause. The recent rash of violence in schools has highlighted just how angry and helpless children can feel (Anderson & Sturm, 2007). For example, incidents such as the Columbine shootings of 1998 made it apparent that schools must get more involved in stopping bullying. However, we still have incidents such as the “Watershed” case (2010) where a freshman girl that was new in town at a school in Massachusetts committed suicide after being harassed by a group of older teens. It is imperative that school counselors lead the way in educating school personnel about bullying and in seeing that it gets handled appropriately.

The literature on school counseling reports most middle school children admit having experienced being a victim, with attacks happening more frequently at school than elsewhere (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997). School counselors have a responsibility to assess whether bullying is a problem for their students, to intervene appropriately, and to be proactive in preventing bullying behavior (Smith, 1991). Research states that we need better strategies for identifying at-risk youth (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). It is hard to identify girls who might be experiencing relational aggression. The current research demonstrates girls experience relational aggression in different ways. For example in this study, Alexie handled being bullied by becoming more reserved. Jenna, on the other hand, seemed to do things to bring attention to her. Girls made fun of the way she dressed and said that she dressed “Goth.” She then began to dress even stranger to draw attention from others as if she was confident.

School counselors must have one-on-one contact with students in order to identify students' needs in social relationships. These students can be identified through peer-nomination (surveys), self-reports, teacher referrals, disciplinary referrals, grade reports, and/or observations of students. These tools can be used by school counselors to assist in identifying at-risk youth and youth experiencing aggression (Cole et al., 2006). Once school counselors have determined at-risk adolescents, they can then implement relevant interventions including social skills training. School counselors can assist adolescents in exploring their beliefs regarding friendships. For example, counselors can help students examine the successful elements of their relationships as well as the problematic areas of those friendships. School counselors should reinforce the meaning and importance of being a good friend and also what constitutes a healthy friendship. School counselor encouragement is also very important when students reach out into new avenues and try new ideas that have been shared in the counseling process. For example, when a student that has been known as a bully is nice to another student or helps another student in need, it is important for the counselor to give positive feedback to the student for their efforts toward a more positive attitude.

School counselors should play a role in assisting middle school girls in developing their own "sense of self." School counselors can conduct class activities and exercises demonstrating healthy self-esteem. School counselors should provide activities where appropriate and safe choices in friendships are demonstrated. School counselors can help in preventing children from turning into bullies by going to elementary students and training children early in life to be empathetic and teaching social skills classes at an early age.

School counselors should play an important role in helping school staff to develop a greater awareness of bullying and a willingness to respond to it (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). School

counselors should oversee and coordinate a school-wide effort to implement surveys that measure bullying and its effects on school climate (Cole et al., 2006). In order for school counselors to implement programs to eliminate bullying, it is critical for them to understand the nature and extent of bullying in their school. School counselors need to know how middle school girls interpret bullying experiences and how the experiences affect the way students feel about themselves and their relationships with other girls (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). In order for school counselors to implement effective intervention strategies for bullying and aggression, it is necessary to develop better strategies to identify at-risk girls (Atlas & Pepler, 1998).

School counselors can assist administration with school staff professional development workshops and book studies on the topic of bullying. Counselors can consult with teachers to acquire strategies of observing classroom behaviors and provide feedback that would help reduce bullying incidents in their school. The success of creating a welcoming and safe classroom helps to create certain habits that serve to unify students (Peterson, 2005). School counselors can also assist in educating parents about bullying. Parent workshops or PTSO presentations can be provided on bullying. Parents can be included in the school-wide book study on bullying. Counselors should send pertinent information on bullying to parents. School counselors should make sure parents know how important it is for them to assist in making sure children's voices are heard when bullying is occurring. Counselors should also let parents know how important it is to assist in creating healthy self-esteem in their children and how important it is for them to encourage empathy in their children.

Implications for Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities should provide adequate training on adolescent psychology--not just one course on the topic. Since the topic of relational aggression and girls is a topic of recent years, colleges and universities can assist teachers in training by inserting curriculum on the topic of relational aggression into the educational programs. College students seeking middle school certification especially need training in the development of middle school students. The physical and emotional changes that are taking place in middle school age girls is extremely important in understanding how they think and feel about issues they are exposed to daily. Colleges and universities can assist teachers in their understanding this development.

It is evident in the research and professional literature that counseling for identified or suspected bullies is a necessary part of programs aimed at preventing or stopping bullying behavior. However, less evident in the literature are specific strategies for school counselors to use in their direct work with bullies. School counselors are more apt than ever to find themselves face-to-face with students referred for bullying. To succeed in helping these students stop their aggressive behavior, school counselors must be able to recognize and appropriately address the underlying needs and motivations behind their behavior (McAdams & Schmidt, 2007). Colleges and universities can assist in counselor training on the issue of bullying and the underlying motivations of adolescent aggression. It is also vital that colleges and universities implement classes or training to all education students on bullying and how to identify it and handle it in the classroom.

Recommendations for Future Studies

While this study provided much needed research on why girls participate in relational aggression and the “school spaces” that are chosen for this aggression, there are still areas in which this research can be expanded to enhance our understanding of girls and relational aggression. Expanding the study to include a larger number of girls and girls from several school systems would be beneficial in that it would cover a wider geographical sample and experiences from a larger sample of girls. This study was limited to the data from a middle school in a small city school system in northeast Alabama. While this research offered experiences from 10 middle school girls, it by no means provided an exhaustive account of how girls experience relational aggression. Also, this study could be strengthened if it were extended over a longer period of time providing observation of girls in their “school spaces” at school. This study could be strengthened by researching the requirement of school uniforms. Do uniforms lessen social status problems or do the higher economic groups purchase the name brand clothing for their uniforms? If all students are required to purchase uniforms of the same brand from the same place would it help social status issues? Further research is needed in this area in order to assess how it affects girls in their social relationships at school. Also, further research is necessary related to assisting adolescent girls and boys in their development of healthy relationships.

Finally, research on the college and university preparation of middle school teachers and school counselors is needed in the area of middle school girls and aggression. Also, research needs to be conducted on how school systems are preparing teachers and school counselors to assist middle school girls in developing healthy relationships with other girls. Research is also needed that takes a look at the role parents play in bullying. Are children who are abused by their

parents more likely to be bullies? Are the children whose parents encourage empathy toward others less likely to be bullies?

Summary

The research conducted in this study provides insight and research on a topic that has become popular in recent years. This study provided a means of exploring girls' experiences with social relationships in school spaces, the peer pressures and social tensions involved in those relationships and the aggressions that take place due to these circumstances. All 10 girls who participated in this study expressed that being a middle school girl was difficult. They admitted that the pressures required of them to be a member of a certain group were often impossible and/or went against what they really wanted to do or say. Such things as certain clothes, shoes, hairstyles, and accessories--social "things"-- needed to belong to certain groups were financially impossible. Also, the pressures of sex, drugs, and how they should treat other people were sometimes more than they could handle. This research underscores the importance of the issue of relational aggression and middle school girls and hopefully opens avenues for future researchers to expand.

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APPENDIX A
LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENT

Dear Superintendent:

You are being asked to allow the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls at the middle school to participate in a research study about the interactions middle school girls have with each other both in and out of the classroom. The counselor at the middle school will be asked to assist the researcher in selecting a purposeful sample of approximately 15 to 20 girls from a range of girls in grades 6, 7, and 8 based upon counselor and/or discipline referrals. Parental permission forms will be sent home with students prior to administering the interviews. The interviews will consist of questions involving girls' use of relational aggression in their social relationships. Questions will include items such as asking girls if they have ever been teased or excluded from a group of girls.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with girls' participation in this study. There are also no direct benefits to you or your students, although the knowledge gained from the study may benefit in the implementation of educational programs or awareness campaigns on the research topic.

All information provided by your students will be anonymous. Your students' participation is completely voluntary.

If you have questions about the study, you may contact Christie Lewis (researcher) at (256) 447-2979 or Dr. Nirmala Erevelles (Dissertation Chairperson) at (205) 348-1179. If you have any questions about your student's rights as a research participant, please contact Ms. Tanta Myles, Research Compliance Officer at The University of Alabama at (205) 348-5152 or e-mailing cmyles@fa.ua.edu.

By signing this document, you give your consent for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls at the middle school to participate in the study.

Superintendent Signature: _____

Christie Lewis

APPENDIX B
LETTER TO PRINCIPAL

Dear Principal:

You are being asked to allow the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls at your school to participate in a research study about the interactions middle school girls have with each other both in and out of the classroom. Parental permission forms will be sent home with students prior to administering the interviews. The interviews will consist of questions involving girls' use of relational aggression in their social relationships. Questions will include items such as asking girls if they have ever been teased or excluded from a group of girls.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with girls' participation in this study. There are also no direct benefits to you or your students, although the knowledge gained from the study may benefit in the implementation of educational programs or awareness campaigns on the research topic.

All information provided by your students will be anonymous. Your students' participation is completely voluntary.

If you have questions about the study, you may contact Christie Lewis (researcher) at (256) 447-2979 or Dr. Nirmala Erevelles (Dissertation Chairperson) at (205) 348-1179. If you have any questions about your student's rights as a research participant, please contact Ms. Tanta Myles, Research Compliance Officer at The University of Alabama at (205) 348-5152 or emailing cmyles@fa.ua.edu.

By signing this document, you give your consent for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls at your school to participate in the study.

Principal Signature: _____

Christie Lewis

APPENDIX C
LETTER TO COUNSELOR

Dear Counselor:

A researcher from The University of Alabama will be conducting a study about the interactions middle school girls have with each other in and out of the classroom. Parental permission forms will be sent home with students prior to administering the interviews. The interviews will consist of questions involving girls' use of relational aggression in their social relationships. Questions will include items such as asking girls if they have ever been teased or excluded from a group of girls.

You are being asked to provide a list of 15 to 20 girls from grades 6, 7, and 8 that you feel might be able to provide the researcher with knowledge on the topic of relational aggression and girls' social relationships. The following criteria might be used when developing the list of girls: counseling referrals from teachers/principal, counselor observations, discipline referrals, counselor experience of girls willing to discuss and share information about their relationships with other girls. Also, when the researcher provides assent to participate forms already enclosed in sealed and stamped envelopes, you will be asked to place mailing labels on the envelopes for each of the girls chosen and mail from the school in order to follow the school's privacy laws.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with girls' participation in this study. There are also no direct benefits to you or your students, although the knowledge gained from the study may benefit in the implementation of educational programs or awareness campaigns on the research topic.

All information provided by your students will be anonymous. Your students' participation is completely voluntary.

If you have questions about this study, you may contact Christie Lewis (researcher) at (256) 447-2979 or Dr. Nirmala Erevelles (Dissertation Chairperson) at (205) 348-1179. If you have any questions about your student's rights as a research participant, please contact Ms. Tanta Myles, Research Compliance Officer at The University of Alabama at (205) 348-5152 or emailing cmyles@fa.ua.edu.

By signing this document, you agree to assist the researcher by selecting 15 to 20 girls to be sent assent to participate forms and by placing mailing labels and mailing from the school the already sealed stamped forms.

Counselor's Signature: _____

Christie Lewis

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR PARENTS

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT (Under Age 19)

Dear Parent/Guardian:

A researcher from The University of Alabama is conducting a study about the interactions middle school girls have with each other both in and out of the classroom. Your daughter has been identified by the school counselor as someone who could provide helpful information about the climate of the school and how to improve it. As part of that study, your daughter is being asked to participate to assist the researcher in learning more about the social interactions between girls during the critical middle school years.

Your child's participation will involve answering interview questions concerning how girls use relational aggression in their social relationships. Questions will include items such as asking your child if they have ever been teased or excluded from a group of girls. The interviews will take place in a private room designated by the principal. The interviews will be audio-taped for the researcher's use only unless otherwise specified by you or your child.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with your child's participation in this study. There are also no direct benefits to you or your child, although the knowledge gained from the study may lead to the implementation of educational programs and awareness campaigns on the topic of relational aggression and middle school girls.

All information provided by your child will be anonymous. Your child's participation is completely voluntary. Your child may choose not to answer any questions that make her feel uncomfortable. Participation may be discontinued at any time. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled.

If you or your child has any questions about the study, you may contact Christie Lewis (researcher) at (256) 447-2979 or Dr. Nirmala Erevelles (Dissertation Chairperson) at (205) 348-1179. If you or your child has any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ms. Tanta Myles, Research Compliance Officer at The University of Alabama at (205) 348-5152 or e-mailing cmyles@fa.ua.edu.

By signing this document, you give your consent for your child, _____, to participate in the study.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____

I have read and understand the above consent letter and agree to be a research participant.

Student's Signature: _____

Christie Lewis

APPENDIX E
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR PARTICIPANTS

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT (Under Age 19)

A researcher from The University of Alabama wants to get the viewpoints of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade girls about the interactions middle school girls have with each other both in and out of the classroom. Girls will be asked to answer interview questions involving girls' use of relational aggression in their social relationships. The study will take place at the middle school during the Fall Semester 2008.

If you are willing to take place in this study you can stop at any time, and if you do not like a question you do not have to answer it. No one will know your answers, including your teacher, parents, and other students.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Age _____

Christie Lewis

APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Have girls ever made fun of you? If so, tell me about your experience.
2. Has anyone ever sent you an ugly text message or said something ugly to you by phone or on the computer? If so, discuss it with me.
3. Have you ever been excluded or ignored by a group of girls? If so, tell me about why you think they excluded you? How did it make you feel?
4. Have you ever made fun of another girl? If so, what did you tease her about? Why did you tease her?
5. Have you ever ignored a girl or excluded a girl from your group of friends? If so, why?
6. Have you ever spread rumors about another girl? If so, tell me about it.
7. Have you ever sent a girl an ugly text message or said something ugly to a girl on the phone or computer? If so, tell me about it and why did you do it?
8. Has another girl ever spread rumors about you? If so, what do you think the girl was trying to accomplish? Discuss with me what happened.
9. Tell me about an experience you might have had where girls told you that you could not be their friend unless you did something they wanted you to do. Have you ever done this to another girl? If so, tell me about the experience.
10. Have girls ever made fun of the way you look or dress? Or have you ever made fun of the way someone looked or dressed? Discuss it with me.