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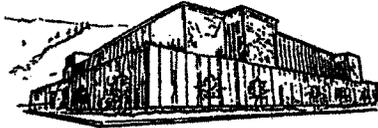
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AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE
OF FRIENDSHIP, JEALOUSY, AND RELATIONAL AGGRESSION
IN PREADOLESCENT GIRLS

by

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May 2005

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An Exploration of the Experience of Friendship, Jealousy, and Relational Aggression in Preadolescent Girls

Chairperson: John Sommers-Flanagan, Ph.D.

This Grounded Theory study looked at the phenomenon of relational aggression and friendship in light of the current literature with particular emphasis on the roles of jealousy, defense mechanisms, and social cognition.

Twenty-nine fifth through seventh grade girls were questioned about their experiences with friendship and relational aggression. They also responded to a hypothetical scenario designed specifically to elicit responses that might be associated with the role of jealousy in relational aggression.

Interviews were transcribed and extensive analysis resulted in the emergence and identification of one central theme, The Need for Belonging. Three additional categories also emerged: Social Status, Girlfighting, and Social Strategies.

All categories were divided into subcategories and dimensionalized, according to grounded theory methodology. The analysis resulted in the following conceptualization of the central theme: The Need For Belonging a Prime Motivation in Relational Strategies for Preadolescent Girls.

Discussion includes implications for future research and recommendations for intervention programs are also offered.

Acknowledgments

There are many people I would like to thank for helping make the completion of this project a reality. Writing a dissertation takes a commitment of time and energy and because I am a wife and mother this commitment was not mine alone. I would like to thank my husband, Drew, for his patience and willingness to take on additional responsibilities at home so that I could write. You are a true partner in life and show your friendship and love for me in all the ways that matter most. Thank you to Rachel and Peter for always giving me a reason to laugh. You two are the song in my heart and the delight in my days.

My chairperson, John Sommers-Flanagan was a tremendous resource and lent good humor and perspective when I needed it most. Thanks for encouraging me to breath and sleep. My committee, Roberta Evans, Cathy Jenni, Rita Sommers-Flanagan, and Darrell Stolle were all helpful contributors to this project as well. A special thanks to Roberta Evans for your words of empowerment. They meant more than you know.

To my family, especially my Mom and Dad -- your loving sacrifices have been an example to me of how to live. You've taught me that giving to others is the best reward and you have instilled in me a desire to contribute something to this world.

Thank you to the girls who have shared their stories and experiences with me. I was inspired by your courage and your commitment to friendship. Thank you to the administrators and counselors of the schools who allowed me to do research in their schools.

Finally, I want to thank my God and Creator. I know that every talent and ability I possess is a gift from Him. My desire is to use what He's given me in a way that will honor that reality.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A considerable number of recent articles and books have focused on the subject of how girls relate to each other. A sampling of titles include: *“Girls Just Want to Be Mean;”* *“Girl Wars;”* *“Relational, Indirect, Adaptive, or Just Mean;”* *“Cool to be Cruel: Mean Girls Sometimes Grow Up to Be Mean Women;”* *“Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls.”*

The preceding titles clearly indicate the negative style in which girls relate to one another. The titles also reflect assumptions and generalizations about girls – they are mean and they choose to be mean. Relational aggression is defined as “Harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 711). Relationally aggressive acts are usually covert, often unnoticed by adults who might be in a position to notice and possibly intervene. These acts include such things as “gossiping, suggesting shunning of the other, spreading vicious rumors as revenge, breaking contact with the person in question, and becoming friends with someone else as revenge” (Bjorkvist, Kaz, Lagerspetz, K. & Kaukiainen, Ari, 1992, p. 125).

This social problem is no longer a “hidden” one, as has been suggested by some of the literature as recent as 2002 (ie. Simmons). The plethora of recent material on the subject is a testament to that fact. Even Hollywood has become interested in what is now considered a social phenomenon. The movie, *Mean Girls*, released in Spring of 2004 is based on Rosalind Wiseman’s book, *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (2002). The book is a startling wake up call to parents and others involved with pre-adolescent and

adolescent girls regarding their behavior and the sub-culture in which they exist. There is little doubt that girls can be and often are *mean* (Hadley, 2003, Mendelsohn, 2004; Simmons, 2002; Talbot, 2002; Wiseman, 2002).

The reality is relational aggression has been going on for a very long time. Ask any woman alive today if she has ever experienced or known anyone who experienced the type of indirect aggression described in contemporary literature and she would most likely say “yes.” The fact that it is only now being discussed openly doesn’t mean it is a new phenomenon. Rachel Simmons wrote, “Silence is deeply woven into the fabric of the female experience. It is only in the last thirty years that we have begun to speak the distinctive truths of women’s lives, openly addressing rape, incest, domestic violence, and women’s health. Although these issues always existed, over time we have given them a place in our culture by building public consciousness, policy, and awareness. Now it is time to end another silence” (Simmons, 2002 p. 3).

That time has come. “For many school principals and counselors across the country, relational aggression is becoming a certified social problem and the need to curb it an accepted mandate,” asserted Talbot (2002, p. 27). However, this mandate by Talbot runs contrary to the experience of some including Rachel Simmons who quotes a school counselor as saying, “It’s always been this way. It will always be this way. There’s nothing we can do about it” (Simmons, 2002 p. 33). There is a tension between those who accept this style of relating between girls as “normal” and those who are quite disturbed and surprised by the viciousness that characterizes girls’ relationships and the damage that it can do.

Statement of the Problem

There has been very little research conducted to examine specific predictors, precursors, or outcomes of relational aggression among girls. This fact is part of what adds to the confusion about what is “normal” for girls or which interventions (if any) are appropriate.

The media hype around this issue has certainly heightened the awareness of relational aggression as a social problem, but most of the information shared has not been empirically validated. Much has been observed, but much of that is not yet understood. The “opinions” and observations of many contemporary authors have created a perception about girls’ social structure, which has enlightened our society, but also may have misinformed us about what is actually going on. Even worse, the popular literature and media may actually perpetuate the problem, or at least confound those who are trying to understand it. Talbot 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” (Talbot, 2002, p. 42).

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand more about the phenomenon of relational aggression in preadolescent girls. The focus will be on trying to learn more about the motivations, personalities, and cognitions of girls who are perceived as relationally aggressive as well as those who have experienced relational aggression as a victim or an observer. Of particular interest is the role of jealousy in this phenomenon.

It has been established that aggression in children can result from a perceived threat (Crick, 1996). In relational aggression this threat may be a social one (Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002). For example, the threat may take the form of another girl being more popular, getting better grades, or having nicer clothes. This study intends to examine this more closely. The role of defense mechanisms will also be considered. Anecdotal evidence in the literature suggests that girls are not always aware of the effect of the behavior on others, nor do they seem to have much insight into their own motivations (Simmons, 2002). The very nature of aggression is that there is an *intent* to harm (emotionally or physically). Socialization plays a significant role in the development of girls and some of their behavior is inconsistent with the assumption that she should be “nice” (Simmons, 2002).

This study will also examine the literature on social cognitions, especially the social information-processing model. This is critical in terms of understanding the aggressor’s perceptions prior to decisions to engage in behavior identified as relational aggression.

Research Questions

The Grand Tour Questions:

1. What social cognitions and thought processes do pre-adolescent girls articulate with regard to friendships and relational aggression?
2. What role do emotions play in friendships and relational aggression among 5th through 7th graders? Is jealousy acknowledged as one of these emotions?
3. What do relationally aggressive girls believe they gain from their aggression behavior? What developmental or self-advancing functions might this behavior serve?

4. Do defense mechanisms play a role in the way girls think about or relate to their friends or other peers?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the general themes to emerge in the interviews of girls' who have either been relational aggressive, victims of such aggression, or witness to this aggression?

2. What are the antecedent events or thoughts that lead to relationally aggressive acts?

3. What contextual, cultural, or intervening conditions influence this phenomenon?

4. What strategies or outcomes result from this behavior?

5. What are the consequences of these strategies?

Delimitations

This study will be confined to fifth and sixth grade girls, ages 10 to 12. Study will be limited to girls who are attending public school in western Montana. Participants will be limited to those who voluntarily agree and whose parents give permission to participate.

Limitations

Girls living in rural Montana may behave (and think) differently than those living in more urban or metropolitan areas. The cultural norms of the town in which the research is conducted may influence the way participants think about friendship or aggression.

Assumptions

The infliction of psychological or emotional harm is an aggressive act.

This aggression is intentional and with purpose.

Girls who engage in this type of behavior are aware that they do it.

Victims of relational aggression will be able to articulate how the experience has impacted their lives.

Definition 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 citing Harre'
& Lamb, 1983).

Defense mechanisms. "Unconscious means by which ego wards off and
controls impulses, affects, and instincts" (Freud, 1936
as cited in Gothelf et al, 1995)

Empathy. "To suffer with." A reality inside a person that resonates with the
anguish inside another human being, identifies with it (O'Malley,
1999, p. 23).

Jealousy. "With adults, jealousy is commonly conceptualized as a negative
cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reaction triggered by a valued
partner's actual or anticipated interest in or relationship with
another person who is regarded as an interloper" (Parker, Low,
Walker, & Gamm, 2005, p. 235).

Envy. “Painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another joined with a desire to possess the same advantage” (Webster).

Indirect Aggression. A style of aggression which allows the perpetrator to avoid confronting her target. (Simmons, 2002, p. 21)

or

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, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen, 1992 p. 118).

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

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

or

“The manipulation of group acceptance through alienation, ostracism, or character defamation (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989, p. 323).

Social cognitions. The way in which one thinks about his/her social interactions and social environment.

Social information processing. How children think about particular social encounters. (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Significance of the Study

Several authors have identified the need for more research in the area of relational aggression (Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002; Delveaux & Daniels, 2000; Leff, Kupersmidt, & Power, 2003; Underwood, 2003). It is a relatively new area of scientific inquiry and there is much work to be done in understanding this particular style of aggression. Also significant is the focus on girls. This literature review will highlight the fact that girls are a very under-studied population. The literature reveals that girls who engage in relational aggression are at risk for social maladjustment and emotional distress (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003) and there is overwhelming anecdotal evidence for harm to victims (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002).

Unique to this study will be the attempt at understanding the intersection between defense mechanisms, disruption of social cognition, and the role of emotion in relational aggression. Much of the research done to date has been quantitative. A Grounded Theory study will be a helpful addition to the growing body of work in this area and will allow a synthesis of these different areas in trying to understand more about the phenomenon.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

To understand more about the personalities and motivations of girls who are relationally aggressive it is important to consider several related topics. The literature for this study was accessed throughout the process of the entire research project. This included the initial investigation about the phenomenon, the formulation of the research questions, the data collection process, and data analysis. This follows the recommendations of Grounded Theory procedure presented by Creswell (1998) and Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Glaser, one of the co-founders of Grounded Theory methodology states strongly that all theory developed should be *emergent* rather than *forced* (Glaser, 1992). Literature was used in a manner that allowed this emergence, and was constantly compared to the raw data being collected.

This section begins with a discussion of aggression and relational aggression. Much of what is understood about aggression in children is because of the work done using the Social Information Processing Model (Dodge & Crick, 1990). The use of this model and the understanding it has brought to this area will be discussed, and the application to relational aggression explored.

Conscious and unconscious processes motivate all people. Given this assumption, it is quite possible that defense mechanisms play a significant role in the motivations of girls who relate aggressively. Of course, it is important to understand

the socialization and development of girls and how this impacts their relationships, as well as their ability to communicate and resolve conflicts.

Last, the role of the school and the environment in which girls coexist will be examined. This project will take place in the school environment and consequently, the findings may have particular relevance for school personnel charged with facilitating the growth and development of young girls.

Aggression and Relational Aggression

Aggression has been widely studied for a number of decades and continues to receive a good deal of attention from researchers. Many assumptions were made in some of the early research on aggression, which have not proven to be true. The most obvious is that males were assumed to be more aggressive than females. This was due to the fact that males exhibit far more physical and overt aggression than females. This type of aggression is easy to measure through observational methods and since females did not regularly engage in physical aggression, it was assumed they were “naturally” less aggressive. Crick identifies that one of most serious limitations in the research on childhood aggression is the “exclusive focus on forms of aggression that are typical of boys’ peer groups but relatively rare in girls’ peer groups” (Crick, 1996, p. 2317).

It is now understood that females are also aggressive, but use different means to inflict harm on their targets. “While men indeed were more ready to inflict physical pain on others, women were not less aggressive if the readiness to inflict mental pain was considered” (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, Kaukiainen, 1992, p. 118). 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, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

This historically limited focus presents new challenges and opportunities for researchers today. Differences in the forms of aggression such as relational and overt, (Crick & Grotpeter, 1998) are being studied and parallels are being drawn between the predictors of social adjustment in girls and boys who engage in different forms of aggression.

One of the challenges presented is to determine which of the assumptions about aggression should be applied to the more gender-specific relational forms. For example, in her analysis of aggression, Hadley states, “threats to the self, one’s group, or territory are known triggers of aggression in human beings and other species. One recognized function of aggression is as a means to assert identity, including the shift from defense to offense if the threat of losing face or position becomes apparent” (Hadley, 2003, p. 376). This might be true of human beings in general, but to date this has not been empirically evaluated for pre-adolescent girls in particular.

Research on aggression has become so fine-tuned that many subtypes of aggression have been proposed or identified including antisocial vs. prosocial; targeted vs. targetless; reactive, vs. proactive; rational vs. manipulative, etc. (Underwood, 2003). One of the problems in the new studies of aggression has been lack of clarity about exactly which behaviors are being identified as aggressive. It is important, for the purposes of this study, to precisely define relational aggression.

Relational aggression appears to be a primarily gender specific style of relating to peer groups. It is characterized by subtle, covert, even sneaky methods of inflicting

emotional harm on others, or as the name suggests, using relationships to cause damage to one's social standing or self esteem. For purposes of this research, aggression between girls will be studied. It will include indirect, social, and relational criteria, all of which are discussed below. This study will use the name "relational aggression," a name coined by Nicki Crick and Jennifer Grotpeter in 1995.

In 1988, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, and Peltonen did 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. Significantly, in this study, it became obvious that indirect aggression could be considered a separate and distinct form of aggression. Another significant finding of this study combined with a 1992 study by Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen was that the "studies suggest that the usage of indirect methods is dependent on maturation and on the existence of a social network that facilitates the usage of such means of inflicting pain on one's enemy" (p. 126). They also found in this same study that the structure of boys and girls' groups did not differ significantly until age 11 at which point the girls' structure was defined by frequent "best friends" or "pairs" which enabled them to engage in the use of a social network to achieve manipulation (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen, 1992). This highlights the fact that this age group is particularly prone to an indirect or relationally aggressive style of relating. In fact, researchers report that "indirect aggressive strategies were not yet fully developed among 8-year old girls, but they were already prominent among the

11-year old girls” (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992, p. 117). These same researchers found that all the aggressive behavior they were measuring, indirect and direct, seemed to peak at age 11 (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen, 1992).

Somewhat consistent with this, Simmons claims that bullying peaks between the ages of ten and fourteen (Simmons, 2002, p. 4).

In 1989, Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, and colleagues proposed the term “social aggression” to describe behaviors they defined as “the manipulation of group acceptance through alienation, ostracism, or character defamation” (p. 323). These behaviors might include such things as gossiping maliciously about others, leaving them out of social events or not letting them sit at the same lunch table. Underwood adopts this term, social aggression, for her book title because she said it is a more inclusive term than either “indirect” or “relational” (Underwood, 2003).

Crick and Grotpeter developed a peer nomination form for a 1995 study that included similar items to both the indirect aggression described by Lagerspetz and colleagues as well as the social aggression described by Cairns et al. Underwood presents these in the form of a comparison table in her book, Social Aggression Among Girls. (See Appendix A). Simmons refers to relational aggression, indirect aggression, and social aggression collectively as “alternative aggressions” (Simmons, 2002, p.21).

Nicki Crick of the University of Minnesota is a pioneer in research on relational aggression. In 1996 she found the first evidence that children do, in fact, view behaviors considered “relationally aggressive” as “aggressive,” meaning they perceive that there is an *intent* to harm. This same study revealed that relational aggression and verbal insults were the most frequently cited *harmful* behaviors for girls (Crick, Bigbee

& Howes, 1996). Girls value relationships with others; therefore aggression directed at harming those relationships is especially damaging and hurtful.

Another significant study conducted by Crick focused on the stability of relational aggression over time. A number of studies had been conducted on overtly aggressive behavior in children and it was found that these behavior problems do generally persist over time for individual children (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989). Crick found “the first evidence that relational aggression is relatively stable over time and that it is predictive of future social maladjustment.” She says further, “without intervention, relationally aggressive children are likely to remain aggressive over time” (Crick, 1996, p. 2325, 2326). Girls who use this style of relating are “repeat offenders” and that it is likely a *persistent* style of relating to peers. This finding provides motivation for discovering more about the aggressors and using that information to guide their behavior in a direction that will decrease their risk potential.

Dellasega and Nixon seem also to incorporate indirect, social, and relational constructs when they talk about “Girl Bullying.” In their book, entitled, Girl Wars: 12 Strategies that End Female Bullying, they say, “The research on RA (Relational Aggression) has shown that:

- Relationally aggressive behavior is evident in all age groups from preschool through adulthood.
- For students in grades three through six, relational aggression is a stronger predictor of future social maladjustment than overt physical aggression.

- Girls are more likely to use RA *within* their own friendship circles, in comparison to boys, who tend to aggress *outside* their friendship circles.
- Girls who are relationally aggressive are also less likely to show empathy for others.
- Girls are more likely to approve of and use relational aggression; boys are more likely to approve of and use physical aggression.
- Relationally aggressive girls are more likely to believe that aggressive behavior is acceptable and even normal. For example, girls with high RA tendencies are also likely to believe that it is generally okay to spread rumors about someone else.
- Relational aggression is connected to peer rejection, decreased acts of prosocial behavior, and antisocial and borderline personality features in young adults.
- Relational aggression may be as strong a risk factor for future delinquency, crime, and substance abuse as physical aggression.
- Both victims and initiators of RA have a higher incidence of serious mental health problems such as depression, loneliness, alienation, emotional distress, and isolation.
- At the college level, prior experience with RA has been associated with bulimic symptoms.
- Older adolescents with a well-formed identity (young women who are goal-directed) are less likely to be relationally aggressive.

- Older adolescents with a well-developed moral identity (young women who know their values and act consistently with them) are less likely to be relationally aggressive.
- Studies show that RA is linked to physical violence.
- According to a recent national survey, over half of young people who have been rejected or ignored have also been hit, shoved, kicked, or tripped at least once in the past month, compared to one-quarter of young people who have not been victims of RA.
- The Families and Work Institute report also highlights that adolescents want to see changes in their *culture* more than in their parents or schools. They report feeling peer and social pressure to follow and conform as a way to protect themselves. (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003, pp. 9-11).

These findings are consistent with other literature reviewed. In sum, research has shown that there are “significant links between aggression and social-psychological maladjustment e.g. they were more rejected and reported significantly higher levels of loneliness, depression and isolation” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995); “Relationally aggressive children were found to be more internalizing (teacher reports) *as well as* more externalizing than their peers” (Crick, 1997, p. 616); and relational aggression is associated with maladaptive friendship patterns between girls (Crick, 1996; Crick & Nelson, 2002).

Victims of relational aggression are also at risk. Crick and Bigbee (1998) found “that the victims of relational aggression experience significant social-psychological adjustment problems.” They say further, “these findings are important because they

demonstrate the significance of relational victimization for increasing our knowledge of social contributors to children's mental health problems, particularly for girls" (Crick & Bigbee, 1998, p. 345).

Underwood observes that much of the research on aggression to date has ignored the role of emotions, "as if aggression is somehow separate from affective experience." She also states that the "early research on aggression on girls has followed this precedent" (Underwood, 2003, p. 6). Her book, Social Aggression Among Girls is her answer to this void in the research. Again, her reflection on this fact is a statement about the relevance of this project. She states, "Emotions are almost certainly involved in some forms of social aggression – anger, but also jealousy, shame, and embarrassment" (p. 249). In part, this study is attempting to address the issue of emotional involvement in social aggression. It focuses on questions like, what part does jealousy or other unpleasant emotion play in relational aggression? Are the girls conscious of these feelings or do they unconsciously project their hostility onto their victim(s)?

Social Cognitions

Researchers have been looking at aggression in children for decades and have developed theories in cognitive and social psychology, conflict resolution strategies, decision-making, and emotional regulation. A helpful overview of some of these theories is given in Dodge and Crick's 1990 study. This history was for the purpose of understanding the social information-processing theory, which says, "competent performance in specific social situations could be understood as a function of skillful processing of social cues" (Dodge & Crick, 1990, p. 12). They explain further that this

model supposes that a “deficit in any of these processes will increase the probability of deviant social behavior in a particular situation, including aggressive behavior” (p. 13). Drawing on cognitive, social psychological literature, and social learning theory, Dodge and colleagues developed five processing steps, which encompass this model.

The first step of processing is to encode relevant information from the broad array of cues in any environmental stimulus, through selective attention and focus on a subset of cues. Second, once the cues are encoded, they are mentally represented in long-term memory and given meaning, which for social situations often involves interpretations of another’s intention and attributions about the causes of the stimulus. Skillful processing involves making an accurate interpretation, often called social cue reading or intention cue detection. Third, the individual accesses one or more possible behavioral responses from long-term memory, through processes of associative networks and other access rules. The fourth step of processing is a response decision and the final step is enactment. During this step the decision is transformed into verbal and motor behaviors (Dodge & Crick, 1990, pp. 13-14).

This model was reformulated in 1994 by Crick and Dodge within the framework of a model of human performance and social exchange, but the basic processing steps remained the same. The change they made was from a linear model to a more circular one, where there is the acknowledgment of continual and constant access from a “Data Base” including memory store, acquired rules, social schemas, and social knowledge (Crick & Dodge, 1994, p. 76). It is clear that as deeper understanding is sought in the

area of childhood aggression, theorists and researchers have integrated many different models to achieve a more comprehensive look at the problem. Obviously, there is an understanding that a person's temperament, emotional status, development, and psychological makeup all contribute to a child's ability to be successful in challenging social situations.

The Social Information Processing Model is discussed here for several reasons. First, it is a helpful way to understand children's cognitions as they relate to social situations and integrates "developmental psychology, clinical psychology, cognitive science, and other related fields" (Crick and Dodge, 1994, p. 75). Second, Nicki Crick has not only been involved in the development of the Social Information Processing Model, she has been a pioneer in the area of Relational Aggression and has used the SIP model to understand it. Third, the model has been used to predict the success of children's social skill levels. Correlational studies have shown that if children are able to successfully negotiate the above-mentioned five steps, they are less likely to behave aggressively (Dodge & Crick, 1990). This has been measured and understood some as it relates to physical aggression, but still needs attention as it relates to relational aggression. Crick, Grotpeter, and Bigbee say, "only two studies (Crick 1995; Crick & Werner, 1999) have been conducted on relational aggression and social information processing, in sharp contrast to the hundreds of existing studies on physical aggression and social information processing" (Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002, p.1134).

The inclusion of the social information processing model in preparation to begin developing a theory is an important decision for several reasons. Girls sometimes do make choices to behave in a relationally aggressive manner. This is supported

anecdotally (Simmons, 2002, 2004; Wiseman, 2002) and seems relatively obvious when one considers the complexity of the “plots” hatched against victims (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). If aggressive children demonstrate deficiencies at all cognitive steps (Crick & Dodge, 1994) and we make the same assumption of girls who demonstrate relational aggression, then it is important to understand not only that this happens, but also how and why this happens.

Understanding more about the cognitive processes of preadolescents will help analyze the data gathered through this research and in theory development.

As stated above, the role of defense mechanisms in relational aggression will be explored as well. The social information processing model explains quite well the steps which might be disrupted when a child makes a decision leading to aggression. The model does not explain why this might happen and it may be that defense mechanisms play a significant role in disrupting the cognitive processes of aggressors.

An observation made in the literature is that the girls who are relationally aggressive are socially “sophisticated” (Simmons, 2002) What exactly does this mean? Is it that they are successful at achieving their goal, which is to hurt another girl while maintaining the image that they are “nice” to everyone else? Simmons says, “Covert aggression isn’t just about not getting caught; half of it is looking like you’d never mistreat someone else in the first place” (p.23). Some cognitive sophistication is required to manipulate situations in order to gain while hurting another person. It seems that this may be one way relational aggression is distinguished from overt forms of aggression as understood by the SIP model. It seems possible that relationally aggressive youth are quite sophisticated in their cognitive processes and negotiate the

steps quite handily to achieve their individual goals. Underwood says that there is some research that suggests that “children who endorse social aggression as a strategy in conflict situations may be pursuing particular types of social goals” (Underwood, 2003, p. 125). In fact, Delveaux and Daniels reported that “relationally aggressive strategies were more highly correlated with the desire to avoid trouble and maintain relationships with the peer group than were physically aggressive strategies” (Delveaux & Daniels, 2003, p. 672). It does seem that these goals are being met. This form of aggression is associated with higher levels of peer status, which is often a goal for girls who relate in this manner. Prinstein and Cillessen (2003) found that aggression among peers is associated with peer-perceived popularity, but low likeability.

Step two of the SIP model has to do with discerning another’s intent and making attributions to that person about perceived intent. It has been discovered that aggressors do infer hostile intent to peers (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Again, more research is needed to explore how misattribution of hostility is linked to relational aggression. It is much more difficult to measure this, as there is no overt signal of aggression and it always happens within a social structure. It is difficult for researchers to set up a design that would allow for measurement of provocation and therefore intent attribution.

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that victims of RA often perceive that acts of aggression come “out of the blue” and for no apparent reason (Simmons, 2002). Therefore, if the aggressor does attribute hostile intent, such attribution may be unfounded. This again is foundation for the hypothesis that they are not reacting to hostile intent, but something else. A unique concern for relational aggression could be that the aggressors are not reacting to a threat or even a perceived threat, but something

within themselves. A jealousy which, remains unspoken and invalidated within oneself and manifests in covert relational sabotage.

Simmons provides an illustrative example of this. She describes a real life situation in which “Erin’s” friends completely turned on her. She was very popular, pretty, successful and resented for it. One day she made a fatal mistake of kissing a boy one of her friends liked. Her mistake became permission for the group of friends to unleash their feelings on her in an array of different ways. Simmons says,

“Erin’s story illustrates with terrible clarity the consequences of girls’ repression of their true feelings. Over three long years, each of Erin’s friends buried everyday bursts of jealousy, anger, competition, and betrayal deep inside her. The point at which their anger finally broke the surface of their silence is extremely significant. Of all the incidents that upset the girls, the only one that incited them into response had two important features: it was an event they could experience and act upon together, and it was a socially acceptable reason for female anger” (Simmons, 2002, p. 100). Simmons suggests that jealousy is not a socially acceptable reason for distress, let alone for anger and retaliation.

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological processes that serve to protect one from emotions that are too painful to deal with at a conscious level. Developmental psychologists have also recognized that, “defense mechanisms, like other cognitive operations, are part of normal development, serving the dual function of protecting the child from excessive anxiety and maintaining self-esteem” (Cramer &

Brilliant, 2001, p. 297-298). Children tend to use less complex defenses when younger, but develop and “grow into” more complex defenses, at which point the less complex ones decline in use. The use of defense mechanisms in childhood falls on a developmental continuum (Cramer, 1987).

In a study measuring the use of denial, projection, and identification, Cramer found that the least complex defenses were used earlier in life and the more complex defenses used later. Denial, the most primitive of the defenses was used more often by the youngest (preschool) subject group. Identification, the most sophisticated defense studied, was more frequently used in the oldest (late adolescent) group studied. Most relevant for this study was the finding that projection, considered to be more complex than denial, but less so than identification, was used most often in the preadolescent and early adolescent groups (Cramer, 1987).

In a later study, Cramer and Brilliant (2001) found that there is an increase in the ability to understand the defenses as the children got older. “The findings of children’s defense use and defense understanding show that there is a parallel chronological development between the use of denial and the understanding of denial, and between the use of projection and the understanding of projection” (Cramer & Brilliant, 2001, p.300).

Knowing this, Cramer and Brilliant wanted to measure the use of defense mechanisms once children understood them. They hypothesized that once a defense was understood, it would be used less frequently and the child would move on to using a more complex, and once again unconscious, defense. Research supported this hypothesis that, “use of a defense precedes its understanding; once it is understood, it is

used less often and is superseded by a more complex defense that is not yet understood” (Cramer & Brilliant, 2001, p. 317).

When given the opportunity to talk about what is going on, and the covert becomes overt, girls tend to decrease their levels of relational aggression (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). The reason for this is not clear, but it could be that talking about the aggression serves to help them become more aware of their use of projection, therefore causing them to use it less. Cramer and Brilliant (2001) also write, “peer reactions play an important role in the declining use of understood defenses. Previous research has shown that once children understand the functioning of a particular defense, they then evaluate other children who use that defense in a more negative light” (p. 317).

Levit studied the differences between boys’ and girls’ use of defense mechanisms in adolescence. He found that males use externalizing defenses (ie. projection and aggression-outward defenses) more than females do. Females use turning against self, an internalizing defense more often than males (Levit, 1991). No studies were found to measure defense use between aggressive vs. non-aggressive female adolescents.

Jealousy

Underwood identifies that jealousy is a “strong negative emotion” related to social aggression (p. 118). There is little research to date studying the role of jealousy in relationships between children. Almost all studies have focused on jealousy between

adults when there is a romantic connection involved (Underwood, citing White & Mullen, 1989). Anderson says,

Envy and jealousy were seen to be biopsychosocial response patterns of the mental functions of perception, cognition, affect, and intention keyed to two basic conditions of human existence, having (in jealousy) and not having (in envy) advantages deemed requirements of life. . . Both the threat of loss of advantage connoted by the word jealousy and the recognition of disadvantage connoted by the word envy pose a threat to the sense of self (Anderson, 2002, p. 455).

Girls may be jealous of many different things (i.e. appearance, attention from the opposite sex, competence in the classroom, or popularity among the same peer group). This may feel threatening to a girl, but she would be very unlikely to admit that she is jealous. Admitting jealousy is admitting that there is something that the other girl wants that you cannot or do not have. Admitting it would be acknowledging something very painful and possibly unacceptable to the conscious mind. Wiseman (2002) says, “There are few things popular girls hate more than being accused of jealousy” (p. 133). Girls are more likely to couch it in some other way, “She thinks she’s all that,” or “She’s so stuck up.” Again, this is a form of projection. The victim may in fact have a very low self-esteem, but the *aggressor* accuses her of being vain. The aggressor might think she has reason to be (i.e., she’s beautiful) which means the aggressor has noticed a quality she admires and quite possibly envies.

Socialization and Development of Girls

This section of literature review will focus on both the socialization and development of girls. These two topics are so closely intertwined that it is nearly impossible to talk about one without the other. Human beings develop psychologically, emotionally, and educationally in large part because of how they are socialized to do so.

Girls are unique. Fifth and sixth grade girls are positively puzzling. For some, they remain an absolute mystery. Part of what characterizes this age group is that they hardly understand themselves and are not very inclined to make it easy for others to understand them either. Caught between childhood and adolescence, they struggle for identity and acceptance.

This pre-pubescent and early adolescent phase is fraught with challenges of every kind. Their bodies are in the midst of tremendous hormonal and physical changes that can feel scary, exciting, and depressing all at once. During these years, the differences they see between themselves and those of the opposite sex become staggering. Suddenly boys who were once playmates and friends are creatures from another planet. They are enormously self-conscious. "Girls at this (adolescent) age are naturally egocentric. To their preoccupied way of thinking, everyone else is observing and reacting to them, which means even the slightest social gaffe on their part will take on enormous significance" (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003, p. 15).

Pre-adolescent and adolescent girls are a severely understudied group in psychological research (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Pipher, 1994; Underwood, 2003). They have been rarely observed, therefore little understood.

“Until recently adolescent girls haven’t been studied by academics, and they have long baffled therapists. Because they are secretive with adults and full of contradictions, they are difficult to study. So much is happening internally that’s not communicated on the surface” (Piper, 1994, p. 21)

Something is going wrong in the way girls are socialized today. This is signaled by rising rates of many types of self-destructive behaviors girls engage in. These include eating disorders, drug and alcohol use, self-mutilation (i.e. cutting), and suicide (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Pipher, 1994; Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002).

Calling them “saplings in the storm,” Mary Pipher writes about the developmental struggle of girls who she describes as “crashing” in adolescence (Pipher, 1994). She says, “Wholeness is shattered by the chaos of adolescence. Girls become fragmented, their selves split into mysterious contradictions. They are sensitive and tenderhearted, mean and competitive, superficial and idealistic (p. 20). Pipher writes about the cultural impact on girls and the destructive nature of the messages given them through the media.

Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) agree that the culture plays a huge role in the development of girls. They state, “Women’s psychological development within patriarchal societies and male-voiced cultures is inherently traumatic” (p. 216). They go on to describe the shift that girls go through in adolescence as dissociation from oneself in order to conform to a social expectation of fitting the female role expected by our society.

Girls reaching adolescence adopted survival strategies for spanning what often seemed like two incommensurate relational realities.

Girls enacted this disconnection through various forms of dissociation: separating themselves or their psyches from their bodies so as not to know what they were feeling, dissociating their voice from their feelings and thoughts so that others would not know what they were experiencing, taking themselves out of relationship so that they could better approximate what others want and desire, or look more like some ideal image of what a woman or what a person should be. Open conflict and free speaking gave way to more covert forms of responding to hurt feelings or disagreements within relationships, so that some girls came to ignore or not know signs of emotional or physical abuse. And relationships correspondingly suffered (Brown & Gilligan, pp. 217-18).

The “dissociation” described here is of definite interest and relevance to this study. It seems the relationships that have possibly suffered the most are those *between* girls. Girls have become their own worst enemies. They retreat into silence and paranoia in their relationships with each other, all the while hungering desperately for a sense of belonging and validation within their peer group. The process Brown and Gilligan (1992) describe is one that would definitely create a separation not only from oneself but also from other girls. Is it possible that the projection of hostility onto other girls is actually an expression of self-hatred or denial of one’s own value or potential? By attacking “within the ranks,” girls minimize their own power as a collective group. They use one of their greatest strengths, relational sophistication and caring, as a weapon against the group they naturally belong to within society.

According to Brown and Gilligan's work, unconscious processes significantly influence young girls' behavior. The study of uses of defense mechanisms, in combination with social cognitions is a timely and much needed area of focus in order to further understand not only relational aggression but also female adolescent development.

Underwood explores what is known as the "Two Cultures Theory" as a way of understanding the differences in the manifestation of aggression between genders. She quotes Maccoby (1998, p. 78) and says, "The basic tenet of Two Cultures Theory is that "the distinctive play styles of the two sexes manifest themselves in distinctive cultures that develop within boys' and girls' groups as the children grow older" (Underwood, 2003, p. 37). She goes on to say that the "Two Cultures Theory posits that girls' social encounters *emphasize relationships* rather than structured games or activities" (p. 38). She reports that studies with elementary school children reveal for girls: social dominance hierarchies are less clearly defined than for boys' groups (Charlesworth & Dzur, 1987 as cited in Underwood, 2003); girls are more likely to take turns and to refer to what another has said than are boys; girls are more likely to try to avoid conflicts by cooperating with others' wishes – when conflicts do occur, girls are more likely than boys to express anger covertly, compromise, and try to clarify the other person's desires (Miller, Danaher, & Forbes, 1986, as cited in Underwood, 2003); girls say they generally prefer not to yell but to assert their goals more politely (Crick & Ladd, 1990). This theory "posits that girls' friendships are more intense and intimate than are those of boys" (Underwood, 2003, p. 39).

Linda Perlstein, in her book, Not much just chillin': the hidden lives of middle schoolers, (2003) makes many of the same observations about pre-adolescent and early adolescent girls. Girls who were once brimming over with information and soliciting advice from parents are suddenly secretive and withdrawn. Perlstein also reports an incident in which a principal writes home to parents that it is, “disturbing the way some girls are flattered by the inappropriate attention boys give them” (p.51). The incident the principal was writing home about was a rumored rape that took place in the school bathroom. The comment by the principal is a testimony to the bias in the culture that girls are up against in general. It is also reflective of the way adults see girls and of the compromising nature in which girls relate to boys. Overall, the middle school culture Perlstein describes is chaotic, even frightening.

Perlstein (2003) says things like, “the preteen mind is weak on logic, very selective on memory” (p. 57); “by preadolescence the brain has become quite adept at emotion, but the parts devoted to organizational skills – as well as reasoning and judgment – mature more slowly” (p.69); “boys and girls going through puberty swing madly from energetic to exhausted, and never get enough sleep to sate them” (p. 67). It seems that at the very time they need their “wits about them” the most is when they are least equipped to handle what comes their way.

There is a good deal of discussion in the literature about how girls have been socialized to “be nice” and is cited as part of the reason for a more covert style of aggression (Simmons, 2002; Underwood, 2003). Underwood devotes her entire first chapter to this subject, entitled, “Girls Anger and Aggression: The Bind between Feeling Angry and Being Nice” (Underwood, 2003). Brown and Gilligan (1992)

address this too, and it is fundamental to what they describe as girls “losing their voice.” At some point girls decide that being what everyone expects is more important than being honest. Simmons sees it this way, “what she struggled with was how to negotiate her anger and still maximize her intimacy with the friend she loved most” (Simmons, 2002, p. 101). She goes on to say, “In discord between girls, gestures of conflict often contradict speech, confounding their intended targetsAt the cusp of their most tumultuous years of development girls cling tightly to one another to know, . . . ‘that we’re not crazy.’ Yet it is their close peer relationships, and the rules against truth telling, that often trigger these feelings” (p. 101-02).

Relational aggression seems to peak at the same time Brown and Gilligan (1992) say girls begin to dissociate from themselves in order to conform to something the world says they should be. Girls fight against other girls for precisely the things Brown Gilligan says are “heroic” measures (i.e., being confident, succeeding, etc.).

Girls are often relational, crave intimacy and need friendship. When in close relationships, they are at their best. They feel secure, they have a sense of belonging, and even identity that comes with associating with a certain group. They have been socialized to be “nice” but also to compete with one another. For whatever reason, girls especially feel that if another girl is smart, pretty, or successful, she is a threat. This assumption leads them to behave in ways that sabotage that which is important to their feelings of well-being. If understanding about this phenomenon could be gained, girls may be able to find strength in cheering one another on rather than weakening their collective strength by behaving aggressively.

The Role of the School Environment

The role of the school in the socialization and development of girls is central to understanding more about the phenomenon of relational aggression. Most young girls spend the largest percentage of their day in a school. Girls refer to their experiences with relational aggression and the context is nearly always school. “In fifth grade, this happened. . .” “They put a note on my locker. . .” “In the lunchroom. . .” “The hallway between classes was a torture chamber. . .”

An important goal in researching aggression in children is to aid in the development of effective intervention strategies. Studying relationally aggressive girls without considering the role of the school is like studying dolphins without knowing anything about the ocean. School is the context in which most relational aggression occurs. It is a cultural phenomenon, often facilitated and supported by the environment at school. The severity of the problem varies, depending on the awareness and attitudes of the adults charged with the care of the students at any given school. “Schools are more than a backdrop to girlfighting,” asserts Brown (2003, p. 209). “They can contribute in very real though often subtle ways to girls’ growing sense of invisibility and to the fighting and betrayals girls experience in their relationships with other girls” (Brown, 2003, p. 209).

Simmons says, “schools lack consistent public strategies for dealing with alternative aggressions” (Simmons, 2002, p. 35). Some schools minimize the problem and therefore do not deal with it in as proactive a manner as they should. Anti-bullying campaigns have become rampant in an effort to manage peer-to-peer conflict. While this is very beneficial, these programs need to become more inclusive of girls and

relational aggression. Emotional and psychological damage resulting from relational aggression can be as detrimental to children. Children who seek ways to inflict harm on others need help in developing more effective coping strategies. The fact that relational aggression is a systemic and cultural issue is even more reason for intervention strategies to be developed for the school environment.

Summary

The literature, used early in this study in order to begin to understand the phenomenon of relational aggression, suggests many possible avenues of further exploration. Jealousy is a prominent contextual theme throughout the literature and this study will continue to explore the role it, as well as other strong emotions, might play in relational aggression and friendship between preadolescent girls. The possibility of defense mechanisms being used by those who engage in relational aggression is an unstudied area and will be considered as well. Socialization of girls may play a significant role in the motivations and social strategies they choose. All of this literature will be taken into account during the data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Research Design

One of the most comprehensive works to date on the subject of relational or social aggression among girls is by Marion Underwood (2003). Her work is discussed extensively in Chapter Two. In her conclusion, titled “Top 10 Hopes for Future Research on Social Aggression,” she states emphatically that, “It is no longer accurate to say that research on social aggression is in its infancy. It is time to build theory” (Underwood, 2003, p. 248). She also says, “Understanding the role of emotions in social aggression may be helpful in illuminating its developmental origins and outcomes,” and “We will need to use more diverse methods” (p.249). Most of the empirical research in this area used quantitative methods (ie. Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukianen, 1992; Crick, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In addition, several books have been written utilizing case studies and observational and anecdotal evidence on the subject (Simmons, 2002, 2004; Wiseman, 2002).

A qualitative study of girls’ perceptions of relational aggression is clearly in order and will provide information to help fill research gaps identified by Underwood (2003). The grounded theory tradition will allow for the development of a theory regarding the phenomenon of relational aggression. As Creswell states, “the primary outcome of this study is a theory with specific components: a central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, conditions and context, and consequences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 58) The components of the theory generated through a qualitative study will complement the existing quantitative research and case study material currently

dominating the literature and may deepen our understanding of relational aggression in girls.

Creswell (1994) identifies several advantages of using interviews for data collection. One is that it is “useful when informants cannot be directly observed” (p. 150). This is clearly the case when studying preadolescent girls in their social environment. Much communication takes place in ways that are not observable by any third party, let alone a researcher. The second advantage of interviewing methods is, “Informants can provide historical information” (p. 150). This is especially relevant to this topic as well. Girls have a history with each other that would not be apparent without hearing it directly from them. Finally, Creswell states that interviews, “allow the researcher ‘control’ over the line of questioning” (p.150). This control will be helpful in allowing the researcher to utilize the knowledge base that currently exists in order to understand this phenomenon. For example, integrating the social information processing model into a line of questioning would allow a researcher to more thoroughly understand a participants’ cognitive process.

Aside from the very practical reasons given by Creswell for using interviews to gather information, the fact is girls themselves are the most capable of lending insight and understanding about this phenomenon. Historically, girls have been left out of the research on aggression and have been marginalized in other ways by society. A research design that empowers girls to tell their own story about relational aggression and their experiences with friends in their own words seems especially fitting.

Participants and Setting

Study participants included girls in 5th through 7th grades, ages 10 to 13, who agreed to participate and whose parents provided written permission. Voluntary participants were treated in accordance with the ethical principles of the American Counseling Association and the American Psychological Association. Further, approval to study this population and was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Montana prior to beginning the research.

Research with children requires a considerable amount of care and sensitivity. Consequently, this project was conducted with an eye toward the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, trust, and fidelity, which are familiar to this researcher. "Most researchers recognize the importance of doing research that promotes well-being, prevents harm, is consistent with a just distribution of benefits and burdens, and advances human knowledge" (Sales & Folkman, 2001). The research conducted here was compatible with all of these goals.

The research was conducted in Montana elementary and middle schools. The first step in gaining access to the students was to contact the superintendent of the district to determine his openness to the project. A copy of the research proposal was made available to him. He deferred the final decisions to the school principals within his district and a meeting was set up with them as well as their school counselors to present the project and determine a timeline. Inclusion of the school counselors also addressed the need for ethical handling of the students and ensured the subjects would have accessible help after the project if needed. This group of six (one principal and one counselor from each of three schools) was very receptive to the concept as well as

the proposed protocol. A timeline was agreed upon and a letter from the administrative team of the district was mailed to the University IRB signifying their support of the project.

Next, packages inclusive of a cover letter, parental permission form, child assent forms, and self-addressed stamped envelopes were mailed to parents of all girls, grades 5 through 7, in the district. (See Appendices B, C, and D) The sealed envelopes were given to the schools, who in turn put on address labels and mailed from there. This procedure insured that the school district observed all the privacy laws required of them. A sample of the contents of the mailing was given to each principal. Permission forms were coded with the name of the school at the bottom so that the subjects would be identified by school when returned. Of the 145 permission forms sent, 32 were returned signifying that permission was granted. Once potential subjects were identified, the schools were contacted with a list of names and dates scheduled for the interviews to take place. The principals and counselors made arrangements for participants to be released from class during a time that would not be disruptive or cause them to miss exams or important work. 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 their parents had given permission for them to participate in the project, they had the opportunity to refuse participation.

All participants contacted opted to be interviewed. Three of the 32 potential participants were not interviewed due to the following reasons: (a) one permission form was not received until after the response deadline, (b) one participant was absent on the

scheduled interview date due to a family tragedy, (c) one participant had her response miscoded due to human error.

Research Questions

The following questions resulted from the emergent themes in the literature and served as a guide for further inquiry. These questions were not directly asked to participants but were a part of the analysis process.

1. What social cognitions and thought processes do pre-adolescent girls articulate with regard to friendships and relational aggression?
2. What role do emotions play in friendships and relational aggression among 5th-7th grade girls? Is jealousy acknowledged as one of these emotions?
3. What do relationally aggressive girls believe that they gain from their aggressive behaviors? What developmental or self-advancing functions might this behavior serve?
4. Do defense mechanisms play a role in the way girls think about or relate to their friends or other peers?

Interview Question Protocol

Interviews took place in the school buildings, in private rooms designated by the principals. Access to a copy machine was provided to give subjects copies of signed assent forms immediately. All interviews were conducted between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., excluding lunch hour.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher. Introductions were made and an explanation of the study was given to each participant prior to formally beginning the interview. Each participant was reminded that the interview was voluntary and they had the option to stop the interview if at any time they felt uncomfortable. All but four of the interviews were video taped. Three parental permission slips were returned allowing audio only. One subject requested audio only.

Interview Questions

Interview questions were intentionally open ended, in keeping with grounded theory methodology. They were developed with the intention of eliciting information about the experience of friendship and relational aggression. After a period of a few minutes asking about the subject's interests and "ice-breaking," the girls were presented with this hypothetical friendship scenario:

How would you feel in this situation? A new girl moves to town (lets call her Jessica) and is assigned to your classroom. She is pretty and wears nice clothes. She doesn't talk much to anyone the first week of school but then becomes friends with one of your best friends (say her name is Ashley). They start sitting together at lunch and hanging out together at recess. You find out that Jessica and Ashley's dads work at the same place and that they've been going to each other's houses after school and on weekends. The new girl is also good in school and after about a month you notice that she is chosen a lot by others in the class for group projects.

Please note that if the subject's name happened to be either Jessica or Ashley, or if it was known that they had a friend by that name, one or both of the names were changed.

Anecdotal evidence presented in the literature suggests the possibility that emotions, particularly jealousy play a vital role in the experience of relational aggression (Simmons, 2002, 2004; Wiseman, 2002). The hypothetical scenario presented to the participants was designed to investigate this further. It is also one that could very likely to happen in real life. Certain material was deliberately left out to discern what the subjects "assumed" or projected onto the situation. Please note in the scenario that no reason is given why the new girl does not talk much to people the first week. Also, note that it states, "one of your best friends," rather than your "best friend." This is central to the procedure. This scenario could be a potentially threatening situation if a girl is prone to feeling possessive of friends or might be jealous of someone who is well liked by others, smart, or pretty. Questions designed in such a way as to allow the subjects to formulate a social strategy in response to the situation. Again, the inductive nature of this methodology is to develop a theory inclusive of contextual conditions, strategies, and consequences (Creswell, 1998). The scenario, as well as the subsequent questions, were used to help gain data to help in theory development. After reading the scenario to a participant, four standard follow-up questions were asked.

1. What do you think about Jessica?
2. How do you feel about her spending time with Ashley?
3. If you were really in this situation, what would you do about it?

4. Has anything like this ever happened to you?

If a girl identified an experience like this, we explored a “real life” example and asked about: “Contextual and intervening conditions,” “Strategies,” and “Consequences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 103). Modified, age appropriate language was used. For example:

What are the things that led up to this happening with your friend?

What did you do about it?

How did that work out for you?

To further understand about their relational aggression experiences, participants were asked about their school culture, their experiences within their groups of friends, and if they thought girls were ever “mean.” They were also asked what they thought made a “good” friend and their ideas about friendship in general. At the end of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to add anything else that they had thought about. They were asked a question such as, “Is there anything else you can think of to tell me about this topic of friendship?” Or “Is there anything else you would like to say to help me understand more about the challenges of friendship at your age?”

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected and analyzed according to Creswell’s (1998) model of grounded theory research offered in Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions supplemented with the techniques suggested in Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin (1998). There are recent controversies regarding pure grounded

theory methodology vs. an integration of grounded theory and qualitative data analysis (Glaser & Holt, 2004). Careful consideration will be given to Glaser's concerns while following the step-by-step procedure outlined by Creswell. Glaser is insistent on the themes and categories being explicitly "emergent" rather than forced or pre-conceived. This was accomplished by using open ended questions and viewing the literature as "data," while seeking to understand this phenomenon.

The researcher did the interviewing, transcribed all interviews from audiotape, and then reviewed the transcriptions while watching the video. Coding and memoing were done at this stage, adding insight and comments about nonverbal communication observable on the videotapes. This frequent interaction with the data allowed the researcher to become intimately acquainted with the material and provided the opportunity for constant comparison, as these activities were done concurrently during the data collection process. The 7th grade girls were intentionally interviewed last, in order to maximize the opportunity for probing and thickening the data. Copies of all of the transcriptions were given to the dissertation Chairperson, John Sommers-Flanagan for his review. The other four committee members were given the opportunity to review transcriptions as well. One other committee member, Cathy Anne Jennie opted to receive copies of interviews for her review.

The first step in the analysis process was open coding. In this process, transcriptions of interviews were reviewed, looking for emerging themes or categories. The constant comparative approach was utilized, gathering data while simultaneously analyzing and looking for themes. This process continued until saturation occurred (Creswell, 1998, p. 150-151). It was apparent on the last day of interviews that no new

themes were emerging. Sub-categories, referred to as “properties” (p. 151) were gleaned from the broader themes and then “dimensionalized” and “presented on a continuum” (p. 151).

Once the categories emerged, the analysis advanced to the axial coding phase. This process consisted of looking at the interrelationship between the categories. “Causal conditions that influence the central phenomenon, the strategies for addressing the phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions that shape the strategies, and the consequences of undertaking the strategies” were all examined (Creswell, 1998, p. 151).

Next was the selective coding phase. Selective coding is defined as, “the process of integrating and refining categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). At this point, a theory was developed and is offered in Chapter Four. As identified by Strauss and Corbin, “Developing a theory is a complex activity. Theorizing is work that entails not only conceiving or intuiting ideas (concepts) but also formulating them into a logical, systematic, and explanatory scheme” (p. 21). Strauss and Corbin set forth very specific criteria for choosing a central category that were observed in this study (p. 147). These are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1
Criteria for Choosing a Central Category

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1. | It must be central; that is, all other major categories can be related to it. |
| 2. | It must appear frequently in the data. This means that within all or almost all cases, there are indicators pointing to that concept. |
| 3. | The explanation that evolves by relating the categories is logical and consistent. There is no forcing of data. |
| 4. | The name of phrase used to describe the central category should be sufficiently abstract that it can be used to do research in other substantive areas, leading to the development of a more general theory. |
| 5. | As the concept is refined analytically through integration with other concepts, the theory grows in depth and explanatory power. |
| 6. | The concept is able to explain variation as well as the main point made by the data; that is, when conditions vary, the explanation still holds, although the way in which a phenomenon is expressed might look somewhat different. One also should be able to explain contradictory or alternative cases in terms of that central idea. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 147) |

The final step offered by Creswell is to put forth a set of “theoretical propositions” (p. 150). In this phase, possibilities were considered for different conceptualizations of the study.

Role of the Researcher

Relational aggression between girls is a common and long-standing problem. It is unlikely that there are many women who have not observed girls “being mean” to other girls. As a woman, this is true of me as well, and has an impact on my role as a

researcher of this topic. I have been exposed to this phenomenon at many different levels and have looked at it from many different angles.

My interest in this topic began as a therapist working in private practice and working with adult women who had difficulty in relationships with women peers. Often this was a result of unresolved wounds from childhood as they were victims of what is now commonly called relational aggression. These women simply didn't trust other women. This experience taught me that this phenomenon can have a long-standing and debilitating impact on women's relationships.

Currently, I am exposed to situations involving my sixth grade, twelve-year-old daughter and her friends. As Rachel navigates the muddy waters of preadolescence, a common topic discussed at home is friendship and whatever recent "drama" is occurring at school. This drama usually includes "who is now best friends with who," "who is mad at who" and "who got caught writing bad things about other girls on the bathroom wall." As early as kindergarten she was victim to other girls' social strategies which hurt, including an incident where one friend untruthfully told another that Rachel had been saying mean things about her, in order to sabotage Rachel's friendship with her.

I have also looked at this phenomenon from a retrospective point of view, remembering times where I engaged in relational aggression myself. One stark memory involves a group of us who were subject to a "leader" who targeted one person in the group about once a month to be ostracized. We surrounded a girl whose "turn" it was on the playground and sang a horrible song that I had helped make up. "Chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug, she's fat Shelley, chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug, she's fat Shelley, chug-a-lug,

chug-a-lug, she's fat Shelley, chug-a-lug, chug-a-lug, lug, lug." We laughed even as the tears streamed down her face. Each of us had our turns being the victim and it didn't stop until the girl I would follow even at the cost of my conscience, moved away.

These experiences have given me a deep curiosity about the causal conditions, experiences, and motivations of those who are perpetrators, followers, observers, and even victims of this style of relating. While this experience can provide insight, it was also a potential bias as I gathered and analyzed the data.

I believe the skill I have developed as a therapist helped with this a great deal. More than thirteen years experience as a therapist working in private practice, schools, and agencies has helped me to develop the ability to be objective, even when the material might be personal at times. My training in delving into the psychological processes of human beings has caused me to wonder about the deeper, even unconscious motivations of pre-adolescent girls as they struggle to make sense of their relationships. As I have interacted with the literature as "data," certain themes emerged which reflected a very real possibility that defense mechanisms and emotions play a significant role in girls' interactions with each other.

This project was approached with two more admitted biases. One is that this phenomenon is not just simply, "girls being girls." I do not believe that the infliction of pain either intentionally or unintentionally is to be overlooked or ignored, hoping that "they will grow out of it." My work in schools has taught me that often, if left unchecked, relationally aggressive behavior can escalate to huge proportions, and as mentioned earlier, have long-lasting effects on emotional and psychological well-being. This behavior is not only harmful to victims, but to the perpetrators as well. Lyn Mikel

Brown writes, “This work (her book) is meant to undermine the persistent undercurrent of belief in girls’ and women’s “natural” pettiness, cattiness, and irrational meanness when it comes to their relationships and the notion that girlfighting is a “natural” developmental stage” (Brown, 2003, p. 9) I have listened to girls who say they want change. They want it to be different but often do not know how to make it happen. This awareness has influenced me a great deal.

The second overt bias I bring as researcher is the belief that children need help developing social strategies that work, especially when they are sharing the same environment for long periods of time. Schools are fertile ground for aggression of any kind to occur if left unchecked. “Schools are more than a backdrop to girlfighting. They can contribute in very real though often subtle ways to girls’ growing sense of invisibility and to the fighting and betrayals girls experience in their relationships with other girls” (Brown, 2003, p. 209). This project was approached with a hope of gaining information that might be useful to educators committed to providing safe and empowering environments for all students.

Finally, the interview method chosen for the data collection in this project capitalized on the experience I have as a therapist with years of experience working with children. It allowed me to engage face-to-face with subjects who I was certain would be able to provide new understanding about their experiences with friends. They were all enthusiastic participants, helpful and sincere in their desire to help me understand their perspectives.

In sum, the qualities and characteristics needed for doing grounded theory research are ones which are also needed for the practice of psychotherapy and

counseling. While a novice in the area of research, the years of work experience have prepared me well for the task of adding to what is currently understood about preadolescent girls.

Table 2

Characteristics of a Grounded Theorist

1. The ability to step back and critically analyze situations
2. The ability to recognize the tendency toward bias
3. The ability to think abstractly
4. The ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism
5. Sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents
6. A sense of absorption and devotion to the work process

Source: Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Sage Publications, Inc.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Contextual Findings

Participants of this study were enrolled in public school in a Class “A” district in Montana. The community is considered by those that live there to be declining economically. This is due to the fact that the primary industry, which had been the mainstay of the town, is now closed. School administrators report declining enrollment and a good deal of transition in their student body. The reality of students moving in and out was identified by several participants and is an important part of the data.

The individual school reputations are also significant to the context of the interviews. All girls, grades 5 through 7 were invited to participate in the project. There are two schools, grades 4 through 6 in the district and one middle school, grades 7 and 8. There was a perceived status difference between the two grade schools and this is reflected in the interview data.

The principal of one grade school said that his school was full of the “toughest kids in town” and has a percentage of over 65% who qualify for free and reduced lunch. He forewarned me that the response rate to my letter not be very good because “many of the parents wouldn’t even open a letter from the school.” His prediction was correct and the response rate from the other grade school was over twice the response from his.

The second grade school has far fewer discipline problems and more economically advantaged students. There were even stark differences in the school buildings themselves. The first school was located in the oldest part of town and in obvious need of repair. The halls were dark and the administrative offices cramped.

The latter school was located in a park-like environment, surrounded by an enormous playground. The building had a newer, more cheerful façade.

The fact that sixth graders from only two different schools, labeled by many as the “haves” and the “have-nots” feed into one Middle School or Jr. High is a significant cultural reality to be factored into the data analysis, especially the 7th grade data set. The student body of the entire district is almost exclusively Caucasian, only two ethnically diverse students were interviewed.

A recent decision on the part of the District School Board further complicates the above situation and added to the unique climate of the schools where the research took place. Due to declining enrollment and the financial constraints of the district a decision was made just prior to data collection that the second, newer school is to be closed at the end of this school year. In Fall, 2005, the Middle School will be expanded to include grades 6 through 8 and all 4th and 5th graders will attend the school located near the Middle School in the older part of town. Students were aware of the impending transition when the interviews took place.

The size of the town and schools made a difference in the quality of data collected. One of the challenges in understanding the phenomenon of relational aggression is that often only one side of the story is told. This study was unique in that there were three separate participant groups. Within each school were girls who knew each other quite well and offered different perspectives of the same situation. Frequently, participants specifically referred to girls I was going to interview or had already interviewed. This provided rich data and an exciting opportunity to analyze the information presented from several points of view.

Participants

The participants were brought one at a time to a private room within the school building for interviews. Introductions were made and a thorough review of the child assent was completed. The child assent included a reminder that even though their parents had given permission, the final decision was up to them. All participants were not only willing, but enthusiastic in their desire to participate, revealing this by smiling, nodding, and acting impatient with the assent review process. They were ready to talk. Please note that although the girls and their words are quite real, the names used in this section are fictitious in order to protect their identities.

After the initial phase of the interview, they were asked to tell me a little bit about themselves. The purpose of this question was two-fold. One, I wanted the participants to be comfortable talking to me and this was a good way to put them at ease. Second, it was significant in terms of telling me how they define themselves. The information they presented initially said a lot about what was most important to them and how they wanted to be known. Some hesitated, wondering exactly what I wanted to know, in which case I offered a second prompt along the lines of, "I'd just like to get to know you a little bit – what do you like to do for fun, for example?" This strategy of beginning with an open-ended question is also consistent with Grounded Theory Methodology.

Next, the girls were presented with the scenario developed to elicit reactions that might help understand the role of defense mechanisms and emotions, particularly jealousy, in friendships. The initial data collected through literature was the catalyst for

further exploration of this phenomenon and provided the guidance for the hypothetical scenario and questions utilized for the interviews with participants.

Consider this passage in Odd Girl Out by Rachel Simmons:

“Small wonder that singer Ani DiFranco is telling her legions of young female friends that everyone secretly hates the prettiest girl in the room. Or, she might have added, the most popular, the smartest, the thinnest, the sexiest, or the best dressed. because, girl power or not, most girls know deep down that standing out can get you in big trouble. In *USA Today*, a Virginia high school teacher warned of a dangerous trip wire for girls at school. Although a new student is usually ignored, he wrote, “as soon as she becomes a threat, especially if guys like her, she’ll get ripped apart” (Simmons, 2002, p. 106).

There are scores of examples of ways in which girls are mean to one another but the antecedent events are not clear. The above passage suggests that it is nothing more than a girl being successful in some way, therefore provoking an inevitable response in those who may perceive her as a threat. This theme is common in the anecdotal evidence presented in the literature and suggests that jealousy plays a vital role in the motivations of aggressors and that they are reacting to a perceived threat. It is worth noting here that the quotes used are those of girls who have had the experience of relational aggression. In trying to understand more about this phenomenon, the participants and voices presented in literature are invaluable. It is important to listen

carefully to what they say and allow their words to guide the development or emergence of the theory, rather than imposing a theoretical position onto their experience.

There were several prominent themes emerging in the literature early in the review. One was the prevalence of themes of jealousy and aggressors' reactions to a perceived threat. Another theme quite prevalent in the literature, is that relational aggression seems to come out of the blue as far as the victim is concerned.

“By fifth period, Stephanie was reeling. She didn't understand what had happened or why, only that she had no control over it. No friends. She slouched, sobbing and gasping, on the linty rug by her locker. . . .What was going on?. . . .Had Marissa not been joking when she'd called her a copycat for buying the same Gap pants? Maybe she'd been trying too hard. . . .” (Simmons, 2002, p. 108).

There also seems to be a lack of awareness on the aggressors' part about the impact of their behavior.

“I had no clue that I was being looked at as the bully. She was the one who took my best friends. She was the one who drove me to it. Why is it my fault that I don't want to be her friend? Why do I need to explain that to anyone? She always accused me of spreading rumors. Sure I was, but she was doing it just as much” (Simmons, 2004 p. 34).

The lack of insight or understanding, paired with the defensive posture and rationalizing bullying behavior created a desire in me to explore the possibility of

defense mechanism use in girls who engage in this type of aggression. Another likely defense mechanism seemed to be projection as well. As reviewed in chapter two, this is the most commonly used defense mechanism in the preadolescent age group and it also allows aggressive girls to justify their behavior by projecting onto their target a malicious intent. They can say, "she deserved it," which requires both a projection and a subsequent rationalization.

"I got elected to be the freshman representative to our dance team even though I wasn't the most popular girl in my class. One day totally out of the blue, a girl who was jealous of this yelled at me from across the hall at school, "Hey, Sarah, come here!" So I go over there and she says she heard that I wanted her boyfriend. I said, "I don't even know who your boyfriend is." One day she said, "I heard you are trashing me, that's what Linda said." "Well, let's go get Linda and talk to her about it," I responded. "NO!" she yelled. "I want to settle this right here and right now!" (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003, pp. 67-68.)

This example reflects a situation in which the aggressor is looking for an "excuse" to take out her anger at another girl. The reasons she gives had no merit and the true reason is not revealed by her. The victim speculates it is motivated by jealousy. The literature also strongly suggests that girls resort to relational aggression in order to maintain the appearance that they are "nice" (Simmons, 2002). This assertion doesn't account for why the girls are angry or motivated to aggress in the first place. The means that they choose to inflict harm is different than the physical methods more often

used by boys, but little is understood about their motivations. There are also many reported incidents of girls being physically violent or verbally aggressive in ways that contradict the popular notion that girls are usually mean in ways that look “nice.”

Literature as Data

The importance of literature in the development of a theory cannot be overstated. The inclusion of literature in this section is purposeful and consistent with grounded theory methodology. There is a wealth of readily available contemporary information about this topic. While these experiences and voices were not directly heard in my data collection process, they are of significant value to understanding the phenomenon of relational aggression and moving toward development of theory.

Glaser and Strauss state,

“Every book, every magazine article, represents at least one person who is equivalent to the anthropologist’s informant or the sociologists’ interviewee. In those publications, people converse, announce positions, argue with a range of eloquence, and describe events or scenes in ways entirely comparable to what is seen and heard during field work. The researcher needs only to discover the voices in the library to release them for his analytic use” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 163).

Interview questions were developed and interviews themselves were conducted with the themes collected through literature in mind. This allowed for what Strauss and Corbin recommend for the basic operations of Grounded Theory.

“Two operations are absolutely essential for the development of theory using our method of analysis. The first is *asking questions*. In our methodology, the main questions are directed at advancing our understanding of the theoretical issues. The second operation is *making comparisons*” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 p.73).

All of the data collected through the interviews was constantly compared to literature and new literature accessed throughout the process. These findings are inclusive of the literature accessed in order to more fully understand the phenomenon. Each interview was compared to the literature and the other interviews as the data collection progressed.

Open coding began in order to identify the central concepts in the literature as well as the interview data. These Concepts, also known as Categories, were delineated into Properties and the subsequently dimensionalized, according to the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Open Coding

The open coding process yielded the following General Categories: (a) Social Status; (b) Girlfighting; (c) Social Strategies; and (d) Need for Belonging. The central category is Need for Belonging and will be discussed last, just prior to the presentation of the Axial Coding results. The verbal content of the interviews was analyzed not only for information about the participants’ ability to process social cues, but also with an eye toward defense mechanism use. Again, this integration is extremely important for understanding why girls behave the way they do, for “defense mechanisms, like other

cognitive operations, are a part of normal development, serving the dual function of protecting the child from excessive anxiety and maintaining self-esteem” (Cramer & Brilliant, 2001, p.297-298).

Social Status

The first category is Social Status, which includes seven properties described below. Much of the data obtained was organized around a category wherein the participants expressed a preoccupation with social status. The properties associated with social status show that that participants are conscious of it at many different levels. Below, they talk about who is popular, their clothes, their looks, their abilities in sports or other activities, and who is liked by the boys.

Popularity was a topic mentioned in several of the interviews. The groups referred to as “the populars” by many participants is a focus of many different, often conflicting opinions. Sara, a 5th grade subject with a sweet demeanor, thick glasses and slight speech impediment had strong opinions about “the populars.” She grinned widely when telling me her dad “keeps trying to convince her that she’s popular,” and her wistful response, “No, I’m not; no, I’m not.”

When asked what qualities she thought were needed in order to be in the popular group she responded. “I think that you *shouldn't have to be cute*. I think you should just be nice to your friends.” She seemed confused about the exclusive nature of the populars as a “group.” Clearly it was a desired status as indicated by her conversations with her father, but she wasn’t quite willing to conclude that her exclusion from this group was because she wasn’t cute enough or ultimately good enough.

Being popular seems to be synonymous with having social status or power. Again, Sarah, in response to a question about what she sees that is different in the popular girls, says:

“They have nice clothes and stuff and I mean, I’m not saying that I don’t, but. . . . They get to go to all the basketball games and they get asked out by boys easily. Like all the boys are like, “will you go out with me, will you go out with me?” Like, I don’t have any boyfriends at all but. . . I bet it would be nice to have one. They get to have like big parties and dances at their houses and they have like, cute beanie hats and stuff.”

This statement by her effectively summarizes the subcategories of Social Status and reflects the synonymous relationship between popularity and social status. In other words, when girls say that someone is popular, they mean she is part of an exclusive, elite group of girls who seem to have “more.” It does not appear to mean, as the true definitions of popularity suggests, that a girl is well liked by everyone. This is a very important distinction. Overall, it seems that the girls who were reported to be most “popular” were often the most disliked. This is consistent with Prinstein and Cillessen’s finding that aggression among peers is associated with peer-perceived popularity but low likeability (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2001).

Several participants mentioned that girls who are most “popular” are the ones who are the most “mean.” When asked what motivates a girl to be mean, a 7th grader, suggested that their popular status had a lot to do with it. When asking for clarification, “Popular kids are more mean?” she responded, “Yea. The popular girls, actually.

Seven of them. Like Patty Johnson.” Her voice dropped to a whisper as she continued, “I don’t want to get in trouble, but Patty Johnson, she’s really mean to people.” Patty Johnson was identified by several participants as having the quality of being both quite popular and quite disliked.

The fact that there are two feeder schools into one middle school impacted the girls’ perceptions of who is popular. The girls identified as belonging to the popular group all came from the newer school. This was acknowledged by the girls in their interviews. When asked, “Is there anything else you can think of to help me understand more about friends and girls in 7th grade?” Ivy responded, “Like some of the other girls, like we’re Emerson girls (Emerson a fictitious name of school). My group that I hang out with, every one of us came from Emerson. And um, the Wilson girls were scared of us. I don’t know why but at the beginning of the year they were scared of my group.”

The characteristics that seem to set the “popular” girls apart have to do with the sub-categories of social status listed in Table 2 below. The first listed is popularity/power. While popularity is not to be confused with likeability, there is an aspect of popularity that has to do with power, control and the degree to which a girl is perceived to be secure within the popular group.

Table 3
Social Status Properties and Dimensional Range

Category	Properties	Dimensional Range
<i>Social Status</i>	Popularity/Power	“Queen Bee” “Geek” Odd Girl Out
	Appearance	Pretty/Great Clothes Unattractive
	Sports	Traveling Teams Non-athletic
	Talents	Identified Talents Unidentified Talents
	Boys	“In with boys” “Out with boys”
	Economic Situation	Wealthy Poor
	Parents	Invested & Involved Uninvolved

Popularity/Power.

There were several identified groups within these schools including the populars, the geeks, the preps, and the smarts. Also identified by some participants were the “retarded kids” and the “handicapped” who all hang around together in a group.

Stephanie, a 5th grader who has friends in both the popular group and geek group said this, “And so when I go out and hang with the populars, then she’ll get all mad at me like, “Oh, I see you don’t want to hang around with me just because I’m a geek.” And I’m like, “No, Dana, I’m a geek, too. I just hang around with them sometimes. And she’s like, “whatever,” and she gets mad at me for that.”

Girls who do not fit within the popular group are not always as quick to identify themselves as a “geek.” When asked about the groups and where they fit, especially after they have given indications that they are not accepted within the popular group, they hesitate as if unwilling to consider how to categorize themselves. After talking at length about the popular girls and what makes them popular, Jessica said, “And we don’t have any like geeks in our school or anything. A lot of us are really smart, so . . . there’s not anything like that.” She says the popular group is the ones who are mean and that her group, “the nice group” is big. “We have one huge table. We have one of the two huge tables in the lunchroom because our group is so big.” The size of the group does seem to have significance for these girls and they are very aware of who belongs in what group.

While social status and the word popularity can be used synonymously, popularity also suggests the degree to which others seek a girl out. Within the popular group, there are some who seem to have more power, control, are seen by others as the leader or “Queen Bee.” This position is highly sought after and the girl in it is often the object of envy as well as emulation. Within one of the 5th grade participant groups there was a “Queen Bee,” a girl who clearly emulated her, a “Wannabe” (Wiseman, 2002) and a girl, Briana, who was within the group and had very strong negative opinions of the Queen.

“Like, there’s this girl, Katie and everybody’s always like, they get mad if they can’t sit by her at lunch and if they can’t, they’ll like push people so they can stand by her. And they like give her all the attention. It’s always like, Katie, Katie, Katie. And then she tells

everybody that she hates all the attention but we, people can tell that she just wants more attention because of the way she's telling us and stuff." She goes on to say later in the interview, "I just don't know how to explain her, she's just so mean." And when I responded, "but she's in your group of friends," she said, "Yea. She's like the head group. Everybody calls her our "leader." Because she acts like it. She tells us what to do, she bosses, she does pretty much boss us around and just, she's just so bossy to everybody."

The Queen herself, Katie, when interviewed identified that she struggles with the demands of popularity. "Like everybody wants to sit by me at lunch and so like I'll tell somebody that they can sit by me. I'll tell two people that they can sit by me because they can sit on each side and then the other person will say that I promised them to sit by 'em and it gets pretty hectic, but. . . . they don't get mad at me or anything."

The other end of the spectrum is what is termed, for purposes of dimensionalizing, "Odd Girl Out," adopted from Rachel Simmons (2002). This is the girl who is not only not a part of the social elite, but has difficulty finding a place to belong, period. This may be due to several different factors including deliberate exclusion, being new, never fitting in or finding her place within her peer group. Several participants talked about different situations where they'd been deliberately excluded. Callie, a 6th grader said, "They just wouldn't talk to me. I'd go up to them and then they'd just walk away."

Some participants had had the experience of being new and recalled the pain of not having a place within the social structure of the school. Hope, a 5th grader, recalled the pain of moving recently. "On the first day I was sitting in a dress like this and my mom left and I started crying. . . I was too new. And I wasn't used to it. And she took me away from my best friend ever."

Alaina, a 7th grader talked about the struggle for years of not having friends she could trust or who would accept her the way she is. She relayed a story from 4th grade. "Yea, like her and my other friend would gang up on me and like say, "that we think you're weird and you're strange and we don't want to be your friend anymore unless you change yourself."

She went on to say later, "It's hard to make friends, cause you want to feel accepted."

At this point she choked back tears and I asked, "And you don't feel you are?" "No," was her heart-wrenching response.

In the middle of these two dimensions are girls who are within the popular group or in another group, even in two different groups, but have a place to belong. Some are content with where they are and some actively seek to move "up the social ladder," so to speak. As mentioned above, there was a girl, Alisha, within one of the 5th grade groups who was clearly a "Wannabe." She recalled to me how her friendships had changed and who she has been friends with since preschool.

She ended with, ". . . and then last year, I was, I started playing with Katie (the Queen Bee) and Catherine (one of Katie's identified best friends) and everybody else

like that.” She clearly saw a social progression, ending with that “arrival” in the group that is considered the most popular.

Interestingly, Alisha identifies Katie as one of her best friends and is not mentioned in Katie’s interview at all. Alisha’s mannerisms and manner of speech seemed to mimic that of Katie. Girls in the middle, between the most popular and those on the outside of the group, also function at times as “Messengers.” This will be discussed further in the section on Social Strategy.

Appearance.

The next property within social status is appearance. Girls are very conscious of the clothes they wear, makeup and hairstyle. The seventh grade girl, Patty, referred to by other participants as both a “bully” and popular, was reported to also have the nicest clothes in school and seemed determined to remind people of that fact.

Cassie reported, “Like I remember Patty would say stuff about her Wal Mart clothes and stuff, cause Patty has real nice clothes. Like Abercrombie. Like, it’s all about the clothes for her.” Sandra agrees that the girls in her school place a lot of importance on appearance. She said, “Like girls usually judge people before they get to know them. And they usually, like if they don’t think this person looks, like if they don’t like their clothes or something they won’t be their friend. . . ever.”

Girls talk about who is pretty and who is not. Patty, mentioned above, is friends with another girl who she literally calls, “The Queen Bee.” Speculating about how Ivy achieved this status, she says, “She just became, like she used to have glasses and now she got contacts and I don’t know, people just like her more now. . . she’s more prettier now.”

Some girls do not seem as concerned about looking good or elevating their status by trying to fit in through changes in their appearance. This may be because they can not compete at other levels either and so they don't try. Sharon, another 7th grader, came to the interview dressed in clothes far too big for her slight, underdeveloped frame. Her hygiene, at least on that day, was poor, as her hair needed washing and she looked generally unkempt. She seemed completely unaware that her magnificent smile overshadowed everything else about her appearance. It was surprising to find out that when I complimented her on her smile, it was the first time that she had heard it. I assumed that she had been told that a lot and when I commented on that she said, "Never." She talked at length about rejection of friends and not fitting in. Appearance seemed to be the last thing on her mind.

It is also worth noting that as the saying goes, "Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder." Girls are very competitive when it comes to looks and are constantly looking at others, comparing, measuring. When it comes to preadolescent girls looking at themselves, there is no harsher critic. Girls never seem satisfied with the way they look and believe that most of their friends are far more attractive. However, appearance alone does not seem to carry the heaviest weight when it comes to social status.

This seemed a bit confusing, possibly frustrating, to 7th grader Jessica. "I've never really said this before but our school is really, really different from others. When you see on TV, the popular girls and stuff are like the most fashionable and stuff. Here, it's the sportiest girls and it's really weird here cause it's like the exact opposite of what you see on TV." Jessica was dressed to the nine's in a silky gold colored blazer and

brand new jeans, dangly earrings and artfully applied makeup. Clearly there is more to social status than appearance, which is a good transition to talking about sports.

Sports.

In response to my initial question, many participants talked about the sports they were in in. The town in which the research was done is a very sports-minded town with a lot of attention given to the various sports teams. In the year this research was done, both girls' and boys' high school basketball teams were going to state tournaments and it was the focus of a lot of talk.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh grade participants all talked about traveling basketball teams. The fifth graders said that they had a team and the sixth graders as well, sponsored by a well-known vendor in town. I was surprised to learn that many of the 7th grade girls I interviewed had been on a traveling team since 3rd grade. This level of involvement in basketball is a huge commitment of time and money. The parents pay for uniforms, travel, and tournament fees. The girls reported to me that they practice every single day after school for an hour or two and then travel nearly every weekend. The season extends throughout most of the school year and they even have a few weekend tournaments during the summer. They travel within the state for the most part, but also to Spokane, and reported that they would be traveling to Las Vegas in the near future. The traveling teams are exclusive, invitation only, groups of athletes. Traveling teams are growing in popularity, especially in rural towns. A parent at a tournament I attended recently said about his sixth grade son's involvement. "I just had to get him on this team because he never would have the chance to play in high school otherwise. I want him to have the choice."

These traveling teams play a significant role in the social status of these young girls, especially within a town that places such a high value on the success of their high school athletic teams. They become the “watched,” the “hopefuls,” and the “darlings” of the community. A sixth grader reports, “Her dad and her sisters and her mom are all big in town.” “What do you mean by ‘big’?” I asked. “Like, everybody talks about them wherever you go. They’re all saying, like in basketball, that that girls’ a really good player and stuff. So that’s all they talk about is them.”

Those who are not on the teams feel that they are on the periphery.

Tanna, a bright, articulate, spunky 6th grader reported, “There’s this team in basketball and they all hang out together at recess. And if you’re not on the team, you’re not cool enough to hang out with them. That’s the same group that gossips about people. So, this week and last week they’re all inviting friends over, the whole sixth grade, over to their houses for lunch. And me and a couple of my friends got left out and it was because we weren’t on the team.”

Those who are on the teams have an automatic “in.” When talking about the popular 6th grade group, Julie, hesitant and soft-spoken -and wearing an oversized sweatshirt sporting the name of her team - said this, “Now, it’s just kinda, you feel better about being around ‘em. A lot of people before that, they felt like they couldn’t say stuff, otherwise they’d get mad at ‘em. And when I first moved here, that was kinda me. Cause all I wanted was friends. I didn’t care, I just wanted friends. So I didn’t want to say things that people were gonna get mad at me for. Then in fourth grade it didn’t really matter cause I had some really good friends and then everybody was my friend and stuff. Especially this year.”

Talents.

Several girls mentioned other talents that they have when telling me about themselves. While this does seem to factor into the formula for social status somewhat, it doesn't carry the same weight that sports do, at least within this participant group. Fewer girls mentioned them and for those that mentioned talents like playing an instrument or dancing in addition to sports, the sports carried greater emphasis in the interview. Part of the difference in the premium placed on sports, especially basketball, is that sports involve more opportunities for group involvement versus independent practice and performance. There is also, in the case of this community, far more public exposure.

Katie had more to say about talents than most. She said that there had been a girl at their school who used to be the most popular. She had since moved away and it was clear that Katie now has that status, as reported by other participants. When talking about Angela, and how she'd noticed that she got so much attention, she said that everyone seemed to like her better and that she thought it was because she was a "really good singer." She believed that doing things well had a lot to do with popularity. Incidentally, Katie is now taking voice lessons.

Boys.

"Boys" is the next property identified within the Social Status category. The presence of boys creates all kinds of uncertain dynamics within this age group. Girls who are liked by boys, either as friends or as potential romantic connections, rack up some serious status points. The girl in 5th grade who was identified as the "leader" talked about her close friend who is a boy. She sees him as part of her inner circle. "I

have one friend who's a boy that I always hang out with." And later, "We had a sleep over at my house with all twelve of us. Yea, it was really fun. Except Conner didn't come cause he's a boy and it was a sleepover."

The 7th grade "Queen Bee" also has a close male connection, as identified by her friend Penny when talking about why she thinks Ivy has so much power. "Like she has a cousin in our boys so like she always talks to him and so like when somebody's in a fight she'll tell him and he'll tell all them and they'll, everybody like hates you, so it's kinda."

Several participants mentioned having friends who are boys and playing in mixed groups of boys and girls. Many talked about taking refuge with the boys when things got complicated with their girlfriends. Sixth grade Jouslin said this when asked how she handles it when there is fighting within her peer group, "I usually go play football with the boys or play tag. Or hang out with boys when everybody's . . . crazy."

Boys were the focus of many participants' interests and clearly impact the area of social status as well as other categories. Boys are the focus of much competition, are one of the top reasons these girls say they fight with each other, and they also function as a place to belong for many. This will be discussed further within the other category sections of these findings.

Economic Situation.

Money and economic status factor significantly into overall social standing. In fact, it is difficult to separate popularity, appearance, and sports from the issue of money. Take, for example, the situation with the traveling teams. There are some girls who would not even have a hope of being on a traveling team because of the financial

constraints of her family. It wouldn't matter if she was a gifted ball player. She would not have the opportunity to participate at that level without financial backing.

Unfortunately, the abilities of these girls are defined by whether or not they are on the high profile traveling teams.

Appearance is altered dramatically by available finances as well. The right clothes, a good haircut as well expensive highlighting or perms, and all of the extras like makeup and jewelry make a dramatic difference to these girls. One 7th grade participant interviewed seemed particularly sensitive to the issue of economic status. In the introductory phase of the interview she said this, "Well, I'm not that rich, but I'm not poor. So, I'm like in the middle of those two. A lot of people are in this town. . . .like some people make a big deal out of it and stuff and most of like the richer people are in the popular group." Other participants mentioned the houses that their friends lived in or how shopping together can be difficult if they or their friends don't have any money to spend.

Parents.

Parental involvement and investment make a clear difference in the social status of girls in this age group. Girls in the "populars" have parents who are involved, highly visible, and known to the girls' themselves, as reported by other participants. When 7th grade Jessica was asked what it takes to be popular, she answered, "Basically if they're known in town. All the popular kids, their parents know each other and they went to school together – here. And everybody knows them. And they're all working in town and they get the best jobs and stuff. So, basically, that's what makes them popular. Patty Johnson, she's one of the "so-called" popular girls and she's not very

nice. But her dad is Buck Johnson and he used to (public position) and so everybody knew him, which means Patty. . . Not a lot of people like Patty but they have to put up with her since her Dad is also. . . and everything.”

Briana, the fifth grader quite distressed over the popularity of Katie, was asked why she thought people were drawn to her. She said, “I don’t know why they all pay attention to her. Maybe because her dad’s (high profile position). He’s good at basketball and so she’s good at basketball. I’m not sure, I don’t know. I mean, I just want to go to the future and see if they’re still all over her. Or like if her dad wasn’t, like just like a dad that didn’t work or anything, I want to see if they still did it. I don’t know, there’s a bunch of things why and I’m not sure. I’ve been trying to figure that out for a loooong time.”

Parents are at times very aware of social status themselves and want to make sure that their children fit in. A 7th grade participant reported this about her friend’s mother, “She’s jealous of . . . kids. Like she just wants her daughter to be better than everybody else. Not just in sports. Like in anything. She’s really competitive.” This mother invests time and money making sure that her daughter has the best advantage at achieving social status.

At the other end of the spectrum for parental influence toward social status is the uninvolved parent. There seems to be a correlation between girls who don’t seem to fit in and parents who are not active participants in the social scene. Take Alaina, for example, who was mentioned above as feeling like she doesn’t fit in. Her mother, due to a serious illness, is homebound and struggling financially. Her biological dad, an alcoholic, lives out of the state. It is worth noting, however that Alaina identifies her

mother as being her “best friend” because she is “her confider.” She trusts her mom and talks to her about what is going on in her life. This mom is doing what is important for her daughter even if she isn’t able to “compete” for social status.

These girls are getting early lessons in politics. It seems that who you are and who you know has a dramatic influence on whether or not you have a place within the social structure. Within this community as reported by these participants, the more involved and “important” your parents are, the greater chance you have of being in the popular group and having social status.

Achievement of social status is a complicated and confusing process for young girls. Every participant I talked to was aware of the social structure within her school and had an idea of where she fit, even if she was unwilling to label herself as a geek or leader within her group.

Girlfighting

The term “Girlfighting” as a title for this category was adopted from Lyn Mikel Brown’s recent book of the same title (2003). Participants in this study brought up over and over again the “fights” that they were having with their friends. It is important to distinguish here the difference between girls fighting and engaging in relational aggression. It is normal, natural, and inevitable for girls to have disagreements. The way in which they handle those disagreements is what becomes complicated at times.

Relational aggression appears to be a style of relating that is a *social strategy*. This is different from fighting. It is not always based on a disagreement and the people participating don’t necessarily have to be friends or have a relationship to engage in relational aggression. However, at times, relational aggression will occur as a result of

unresolved disputes between friends. Girls talk at length about fighting with their friends over “stupid stuff.” This was a separate and distinct topic from talking about girls “being mean.” Being mean, or engaging in relational aggression is one of the social strategies used to combat someone a girl is mad at or who she perceives as a threat. This distinction was a result of the open coding process as I analyzed what was going on between the girls. Relational aggression will be discussed further when the category of Social Strategies is addressed.

As mentioned, these girls brought up over and over again the fights they had with their friends. They nearly always qualified their descriptions of the fighting with words like, “silly,” “stupid,” and “dumb.” The sheer frequency with which they mentioned the subject was worth taking a very close look at. The coding process resulted in properties and dimensions set forth in Table 4.

Table 4
Girlfighting Properties and Dimensional Range

Category	Properties	Dimensional Range	
<i>Girlfighting</i>	Reasons	Trivial	Betrayal
	Competition	Healthy	Destructive
	Jealousy	Tempered	Unchecked
	Reconciliation	Forgiveness	Death Of Friendship

Reasons.

There are several reasons the participants gave for getting in fights and they ranged from trivial to ultimate betrayal. Often, when asked to tell me about their friends, one of the first things they said was that they get in a lot of fights. We talked about reasons for the fighting and because they so often qualified the reasons for fighting with “stupid” or “dumb,” I explored what might be legitimate reasons for getting mad.

Several participants talked about fighting over what activity they wanted to do when they were together. Seventh grader, Sandra, says she and her friends, “disagree on a lot of stuff. Like types of music. Like one time we were going to listen to music and one person didn’t like it. So we got in this really dumb fight.” When asked how they usually work it out, she said, “Like, they’ll be mad for like five minutes or something like that and then they won’t be mad anymore and then we’ll just not listen to music or we’ll pick something that everyone likes then.”

Briana talked about girls fighting over what to do as well. “Yea, like if five people want to play one thing and three people want to play another, like those, like they’ll get mad cuz we’ll be like, “well, we want to play this” they’ll be like, “fine,” and they walk away.” She also identified the roll of the “Queen Bee” in these decisions, “Like we wanna play basketball but then she wants to play this and some other people do, like three people want to play one thing and like the rest, everybody else wants to play another, but we have to play what she wants to play or she gets mad.”

Interestingly, the things that the girls saw as trivial were often not trivial at all. They often fought about superficial things that were only representative of deeper

issues. Usually they had to do with competition or underlying jealousy, also properties within this category. Brenda said she and her “old” best friend used to fight all the time. “We used to fight about. . .like we would do tricks on the swings and I used to show people and she didn’t like that and we got in a fight about that. We got in fights about stupid stuff.”

When talking about the frequent, “dumb” fights she and her group of friends get into, Katie had this to say. “Well, one of my friends, they liked the same boy and so like, when one wore a cute shirt to school the other one got jealous of her and said she was showing off in front of him, so they got in a big fight.”

Often the trivialization of the fighting was a defense mechanism, or rationalization of doing something that was hurtful. The first thing Jouslin said in response to, “Tell me about your friends here at school,” was “They’re really. . .they get in fights a lot.” She talked about fighting about spreading rumors (relational aggression), which she classified as a “big fight.” And then she talked about one of the “weirdest” fights she had. “One of my other friends got a new hairdo and it was all curly, she got a perm and it kinda reminded me of those powdered wigs they used to wear. And I said, “That reminds me of a powdered wig,” And she got mad at me for about two weeks. And didn’t talk to me about it at all.” Jouslin was clearly lacking tact in this situation. She had hurt someone’s feelings but lacked the insight to see that an apology was in order. She classified it as “weird,” and didn’t think it was a legitimate reason for her friend to be mad.

The far end of the continuum for reasons why girls fight is betrayal. Many participants gave painful examples of how their friends had lied to them, talked behind

their backs, even abandoned the friendship for other friends. Sharon, now in 7th grade, told of a situation where her “best friend since 5th grade,” developed new friends and actively started avoiding her, to the point of literally hiding from her when Sharon went over to play with them. Sharon talked about how she went from place to place all over town looking for them for more than four hours one evening, naïve to the fact that they were hiding. She talked of how her friend, Anna, “kinda started acting really different since she’s been hanging out with the other person.” Things escalated into physical violence between Sharon and Anna’s new group of friends. “I was just walking back from band and one of her friends was walking with her and they started calling me bad names and I got upset and I went and punched one of ‘em. But that was only because I got really mad, they kept, they kept pushing it, and they just shouldn’t have been pushing it. They were trying to do something to make me mad.”

This situation reveals the potential of escalation when an initial betrayal cuts so deep and is never resolved. Sharon felt powerless and out of control and the provocation continued. When asked at the end of the interview if there was anything else she’d like to say about friendship, she was profound.

“Friendships are something that you can hold on to if you know how to keep it together, know how to treat each other, not just reject each other or hiding from each other. Instead of, well like what she did to me and so, well, what I’m trying to say is keep your friendships and know that if it’s a good friend they’ll be there for you. If they’re not, then they’ll just, they’ll just go off with somebody else and. . . *be somebody else.*”

Competition.

The dimensional range for this property is from healthy to destructive. Healthy competition occurs when girls engage in activities which encourage girls to be better, smarter, and stronger. Several 7th grade participants talked about competing in a recent science fair and how good it felt to do well. In response to my first question, Ivy said, “Yesterday was the science fair and I got picked to go on to Tech.” She clearly felt happy about it and was glad to be able to tell me.

Beth, a sixth grader said this with a big smile and a chuckle at the end of her sentence, “Our traveling team’s really good. We have fun and we work hard and. . .we win. It’s fun.” Clearly competition is a very good thing for these girls’ self-esteem.

The participants seemed able to distinguish between healthy and destructive competition. Rebecca talks about the competition within their traveling team. “When we (referring to herself and Patty) play, we help each other out and stuff, you know? And those two, (referring to Patty and Ivy) are just like competitive and stuff when they’re out on the floor. And so the mom’s stopped coming because they hated watching. So it was real bad at one point. They got in a fight, like Patty scratched her on the nose going for the ball so it was bleeding. And they got into. . .it was bad, real bad. . .and *really* bad.

Lyn Mikel Brown writes about competition turned ugly in her book as well.

“As girls come to know and name the signs of female perfection – popularity and beauty, as well as academic or athletic excellence – fighting and competition are intensified. “Our class is like, sometimes people get mad at people that are too popular and stuff, and then we like get in fights

and stuff,” eleven-year-old Rebecca explains. “Just people were popular, and some people didn’t like it, so everybody got in a fight, and I don’t know, they were acting all snobbish and stuff. . .whispering together and stuff like that.” Melanie agrees: “See if some people are really smart, or they’re really good athletes and stuff people will, some times they don’t like them as much. . . I hate it when this girl does this, because she always has this grin, or she thinks like, well I’m the best writer or something and she might always get A’s or something like that” (Brown, 2003, p. 92).

This passage is a tremendous testimony to the fact that girls can be very threatened when other girls are successful. Participants in my study reflected on this as well. Stephanie, a 5th grader, paid a big price for winning a recent spelling bee. “I won it cause I’m a really good speller. And then my friend, Bonnie, was like, ‘Oh, it figures, you’re always the one that gets picked,’ and stuff. And so that’s what she got mad at me for yesterday.” Several subjects talked about feeling as if it was hard to be themselves sometimes as if standing out or doing really well might jeopardize their friendships.

Jealousy.

Jealousy emerged as a theme early on in this research. Originally it may have been a category all on it’s own, or even the central category to this exploration of friendship and relational aggression. However, on closer analysis, it seems that the most fitting place within this scheme is within Girlfighting.

Jealousy seems to be one of the prime motivations for fighting. Discovered in this data, however is that jealousy can be either tempered or unchecked and is often somewhere in between.

One of the most surprising things in this research was in how the participants reacted to the presented stimulus. The hypothetical scenario presented them was fraught with potentially jealousy-provoking material. The very first participant, when asked what she thought about the new girl said, "Jealous." Many participants said they would feel jealous of the new girl. However, on closer examination, what they were feeling jealous of was not the girl's looks, clothes, or intelligence. They reacted to the fact that she was spending time with their friend. There was a possessive theme that came out in their reactions and most did not seem bothered by the fact that she was "all that."

There was one clear exception to this that is worth noting. The 5th grade Queen Bee did react in a way that was more focused on the new girl's attributes than on the threat of losing her friend. She saw the new girl as competition immediately. "She seems nice. Maybe a little too nice. (laugh). She seems smart and pretty and I don't know, just fun to hang around with." I prompted, "So think you'd like her?" Katie said, "Yea. I think I would *if she got to know me* a little better." Note that she didn't say if Katie got to know the new girl better, she, in true egocentric fashion, turned it around. She'll like the new girl if the new girl likes her and isn't a threat to her position.

The dimensions from "Tempered" to "Unchecked" were discovered through very intense examination of what their reactions were to this scenario. It was

discovered that one of the primary cognitions that tempers the feeling of jealous is thoughts of what it would be like to be in the new girls shoes. Girls in this participant group were very capable of empathy.

In response to the questions, “What do you think about Jessica (the new girl)?” or “How do you feel about her spending time with Ashley?” I heard these responses which reflect an ability to put themselves in her position:

“She’s just probably trying to make friends cause she’s new.”

“She just wants to make a new friend and stuff cause she’s new.”

“Everybody has to have a friend.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind because it’s hard being the new girl. Cause sometimes you don’t make friends that quick. Yea, and I wouldn’t mind if my friend hung out with her most of the time because it would be good because she could introduce her to me and we could all become friends.”

Many of the girls were uncomfortable, even angry that the new girl had come in and was “stealing” their friend, but it was tempered with empathy.

“Well, I think it’s kinda good but in a way I might get mad because she’s (her friend) not really spending time with me. I would like to go and spend time with both of them and get to know her and see if I could be her friend. She can easily make friends because she’s nice and. . .she’s probably in a situation that’s hard because she doesn’t have that many friends cause she just moved here and stuff.”

“Well, I’d probably be a little jealous because when a new person comes then she’s getting picked for everything but

I'd probably try to be nice to her too, because you'd want to make her feel as comfortable as possible cause it's a new place. but I'd probably still be a little jealous if she was hanging out with my best friend."

The opposite end of the dimensional range is unchecked jealousy. This was clearly reflected in the data as well. The focus of the jealousy was still that their friend was spending time with the new girl, but it was not tempered with empathy or other cognitions that might help them to check their emotions.

One example of such a response was by a 5th grade participant, Ally. Ally was wearing her winter coat inside even though they'd been in from recess for quite some time. She had difficulty making eye contact throughout the interview. When asked what she thought about the new girl, she replied, "Mmm. . .she takes away friends." And then in reply to my prompt, "okay, anything else?" She said, "That she's kind of leaving other people out." The interview continued, "Okay, and how do you feel about her spending time with Ashley?" "Makes me sad." "Makes you sad? Okay, can you say more about that?" "Yeah, she's. . .making me unhappy."

Julie, a sixth grader was straightforward in her response as well. I asked, "So, what do you think about Jessica, the new girl?" She replied, "Um, she seems pretty nice but she seems like she's taking my friends away." "And how do you feel about her spending time with Ashley?" Julie simply said. "Jealous." The interview continued, "Okay, so if you were really in this situation, what do you think you would do about it?" "I'd probably get mad at my friend," was her response.

This data reflects three very important things. One is that jealousy has a possessive quality to it. This is opposed to envy, which would mean that a girl wants what another girl has, such as looks or clothes. When presented with a situation that could easily cause a reaction to another girls' attributes and strengths, they most often react to the threat of losing their friend instead. This could potentially be very significant in terms of understanding the culture of pre-adolescent girls. When girls react to another girl for having talents, academic ability, or other strengths as is often apparent, it may be that they feel threatened in their sense of belonging or social position.

Second, the girls that had the strongest emotional reactions also attributed a hostile intent to the new girl. "She takes away friends," as if she were actively pursuing this end. This was different than what many participants said, as they recognized that the friend also had a choice in the matter and it was a mutual decision.

Third, girls did show an ability to temper their strong emotional reactions through empathy. They have the ability to put themselves in another's shoes, which is hopeful in terms of developing programs and interventions aimed at helping them with conflict resolution and potentially lessening the problem of relational aggression.

Reconciliation.

The final sub-category or property within Girlfighting is Reconciliation. The dimensional range observed in the data is from Forgiveness to the Death or End of Friendship. The former refers to situations in which girls are able to resolve conflict and truly come to a point of understanding, healing, and forgiveness. The latter refers to a complete inability or unwillingness to reconcile, therefore resulting in the end of

the friendship. There were also all kinds of situations in the middle of this range. Girls who have been holding onto resentment from long ago fights, situations that never get fully resolved, or situations that have never been brought to the forefront to discuss and resolve the hurt.

Kathy, a sixth grade participant, was in the middle of a fight with one of her friends the day of her interview. She said, "Yea, we're not talking to each other. She's (Jennifer) mad at me because when we were in the fight (referencing a fight on the playground where Kathy was excluded from the game). When asked what she thought she would do about it, she replied, "We usually, we talk to each other, or one of us will come over to each other's house and we'll talk it out there. But it, we usually don't talk it out at school."

Kathy had been in this situation before with her friend and had successfully resolved it. In fact, on the day of the interview, when this was fresh, she did not seem particularly upset but was rather matter-of-fact about the whole thing and confident it would be resolved.

In the middle of this continuum were a wide variety of situations too numerous to write about in detail. The sum of it was that the girls talk about the frequent fighting and then cannot often articulate how things get resolved or if they get resolved. They just seem to choose to forget and hope for the best. One situation brought up by multiple participants was the drama which took place at a recent birthday party. The birthday girl herself, Catherine, reported, "And then, like, at my birthday party, some of my friends didn't get along. They were fighting and locked themselves in the bathroom and was crying." When asked what happened next, she said she tried talking to them,

which didn't work at all. Then her mom went in and tried to help resolve the situation and that seemed marginally successful. What seemed to do the trick was that "the disco ball came out," at the bowling alley, providing a distraction, and enough of a reason for the girls to come out of the bathroom and join the party. This was also the same story given by Sara, a guest at the party. "Everyone was getting mad at each other. A whole bunch of my friends were just crying and getting mad because they were saying stuff that someone else didn't say and it was just confusing. . . Everyone was crying and yelling at each other and locking themselves in the bathroom at the bowling alley. And it was, I mean it was supposed to be a fun birthday party and everyone was just making a disaster of it the first hour that we got there." When I asked what happened after they were crying she said, "My friend's mom went in and talked to 'em and when they, when we were doing the disco ball, when the disco ball came out, we all made up and stuff and we all became friends again."

There are also reported incidents of a girl never knowing why her friends were mad in the first place. A soft-spoken, pretty girl in 6th grade had this to say. "It was like in third grade, I can still remember it. My friends got mad at me for something. I can't remember why and then I asked everybody, a lot of my other friends if I could play with them and they would say, "no." And so. . . I was really sad. They made me feel really bad. Like I wasn't good enough for them. And then, um, the next day we got back together." As the interview progressed, it was clear that she never did know why her friends were mad at her. They didn't give a reason and there was no opportunity for a process of understanding or of forgiveness. Also significant is the fact that this incident took place three years ago in this young girl's life and it still brought

tears to her eyes. She had not had the opportunity for closure or understanding and it still hurt.

Several participants reported their fights as if they were so common that it was just understood that if a little time lapsed or someone said sorry, even if they didn't understand why they were apologizing, it was good enough. Ivy, when asked if she and her group of friends ever fought said, "Yes, but we usually get over it in a day. Nothing like long term." When asked how they are able to work it out she said, "We just forgive each other, like we, like say me and Patty are fighting or whatever and we'll just act like nothing happened the next day." Interestingly, Patty had said that she actively avoids conflict with Ivy in order to avoid her anger and will purposely avoid issues in order to "get along."

Some girls seem to carry some aggression into the reconciliation process. Julie, a member of the traveling team, told of an on-going fight with her "old best friend," who is not a member of her team. "She apologized a lot and I just told her, "Well, you're going to have to show it, cause I don't really know if you're just saying that to make me feel better."

Sometimes things are never resolved and the painful residue is obvious. Alaina, the 7th grader mentioned above whose friends attacked her saying she was "weird and strange and she better change" said this about their reconciliation. "We made up, I guess. My mom saw me reading her e-mails and I was crying and stuff and she called my friend's mom. And made Jo apologize to me and stuff. Yea. . .we're still friends now but it's kind of uncomfortable sometimes. Like, if I say one thing I'll be like, "Oh, did I? Is she going to get mad at me for saying that?" When asked if the two of them

ever talked about the hurtful incident she replied, “I kinda wanted to avoid it so I didn’t bring it up and I think she kinda felt the same way, so. . .” It was clear in the rest of the interview that Alaina doesn’t trust Jo or feel like she is a true friend.

Meagen, a spunky 6th grader had a lot to say in response to being asked, “What else would you like me to know about friendships, especially between girls?” She replied, “A lot of times they have cat fights. Like where they sit there and they just slap each other. And they yell at each other. Then they, like yell at each other and sometimes they just stop being friends forever. I’ve seen that around here a lot.”

One seventh grade girl, Rebecca, cried throughout her entire interview as she related stories of fighting and bullying within her peer group. Smart, pretty, and athletic, Rebecca was surprised at the force of her own emotion about the topic which caused her to cry to the point of losing her breath. She reminisced about how she had played with the boys up until the 5th grade. “When we were little, I used to hang out with all the boys. I didn’t have any girl friends. I just, they were all boys. I played football every day with the boys. Yea. . .you know (pause). . the boys don’t even fight.”

Social Strategies

The properties of social strategies identified through the open coding process were Verbal Communication, Group Manipulation, and Adult Involvement. It is difficult to talk about social strategies without first jumping ahead and saying a word or two about the final and *central* category. It is important to understand what the social goals are before talking about social strategies, and the ultimate goal that seems to have emerged through this research is that of *The Need to Belong*. Of course there are other social goals as well, and the literature reviewed reveals that girls want to maintain a

certain image, be accepted by adults, and are socialized to fit a certain mold. However, the data collected for this project revealed that the strongest motivation for this age group of girls is peer acceptance and “fitting in.” Ultimately, it seems to be about them finding their “place” and having a sense of self within that place.

The Social Strategy category is one that clearly reveals the methods and means that girls use to employ relational aggression. Verbal communication, group manipulation, and adult involvement all play a vital role in this phenomenon, which is central to this research.

Without exception, when asked, “Do you ever think that girls can be mean?” these participants replied with a resounding “Yes!” There was never a moment’s hesitation and many qualified their yes answer with, “A lot,” or “all the time,” or even laughed as if to say, “Well, of course!” When asked to say more or give examples they replied with examples of the properties identified in this category.

Table 5
Social Strategies Properties and Dimensional Range

Category	Properties	Dimensional Range	
<i>Social Strategies</i>	Verbal Communication	Aggressive	Passive/ Avoidant
	Group Manipulation	Active Betrayal	Go Along/ Get Along
	Adult Involvement	Successful	Unsuccessful

Verbal Communication.

The range of verbal communication used by girls this age group is from aggressive, as is revealed in the above report of “cat fighting,” to a passive or avoidant style of communication.

Alaina also talked about cat fighting in her interview:

“Okay, like one girl will be in a fight with another girl and they’ll be like cat fighting in the middle of class. And it will be right before the bell rings so that we’ll have to be there and I’ll be like, “You guys, it’s no big deal, just shut up.” And they look at me like, “Now we’re going to gang up on you and beat you up too.” And I’ve gotten in some cat fights with some girls on the playground and stuff in grade school.”

When asked to clarify what she meant by “cat fights,” she responded, “Like when we yell at each other like really bad.” She continued, with a smile, “And it will be just, *the guys call it cat fights* cause it’s two girls fighting.”

Verbal aggression as a social strategy seems to accomplish several social goals while compromising others. For instance, the fact that Alaina says that the “guys call it cat fights” is very significant. It seems apparent that having boys’ attention is a part of having social status, as is previously reported in this chapter. Lyn Mikel Brown identifies the media’s influence on this issue.

“The view of girlfighting as trivial is all too familiar. Girlfighting still gets our attention when it takes extreme forms, as it so often does in the media. . . . Because fighting among girls or their adult women counterparts is considered at once shocking, shameful, and funny, it’s laced with eroticism and becomes the fodder of sitcoms, talk shows, and soap operas. . . . As one

high school girl explains, “guys who see two girls fighting and think they’re getting passionate and maybe the girls might start kissing and maybe the guys can get in on it.” “Guys invented the concept of jello-wrestling,” another young woman agrees, “so that they could watch girls fight” (Brown, 2003, p. 17).

It is uncertain whether or not boys really do enjoy seeing girls fight, but Alaina seems to think they do. She smiled as she talked about fighting in front of the boys and getting into “cat fights” on the playground. The verbal catfighting could be a strategy for getting attention from boys and others. This resonated with a quote in Brown by fifteen-year-old Bahtya about why there is so much fighting in her school:

It’s the popular thing to do. TV, media, newspapers, it’s like they teach girls you’re supposed to fight. . . . Like, I mean, you watch TV, you watch MTV, you watch anything, and there’s always a fight going on between the popular girls at school. A lot of it is, I mean, you get into a fight and the whole school knows about it. Therefore your popularity goes up. You become more widely known. You’re the girl that’s in the fight with the other girl. It’s like the attention, whether it’s positive or negative. It’s a constant competition or race for attention (Brown, 2003 p. 18).

Several participants, when asked to give examples of girls being mean gave examples of verbal aggression. Kayla talked about girls “saying rude comments about people, like “Look at her, her hair is so ugly,” and stuff. And it hurts their feelings so bad.” The examples of verbal aggression they gave were varied and

they talked of “yelling” at each other, calling people “diseased,” or saying they had “jerk germs.”

These participants told me that the “popular” girls are more prone to verbal aggression, or use it more often. When asked why they thought that was, they said it was to “put others down” because “they think they are better than other people.” Wendy, a 5th grader said, “They’re all in a group and they act like they’re all that and that’s why they’re popular. If people want to play with them, they just call ‘em bad names and say, “No, you aren’t allowed.”

This is consistent with a quote from another young woman, now twenty, recalling her younger years and the aggression that characterized her sixth grade year. She confesses:

“On the surface, I assumed everyone loved me by the time I reached sixth grade. I was no longer the quiet one, the follower; I had become the leader who was being mimicked by twelve insecure followers. . . . As a group we were a magnificent force whose wrath was feared by our unpopular peers. We cut down others because we didn’t know how else to ensure that we wouldn’t be the ones teased relentlessly. We were selective about who we hung out with so others would feel privileged if we accepted them. As a leader, I encouraged my friends to find fault in others. I didn’t see any other way for us to maintain an image of perfection unless others were imperfect. . . . After two years of practice at being just the right amount of nasty, I had everyone convinced my life was perfect” (Brown, 2003 p. 12).

Interestingly, some of the girls in this study admitted that they were mean. They seemed sheepish and apologetic when they said it but could give very specific examples of things that they had said. However, they also said that they “didn’t mean to” or they were “just joking” and that the people they were mean to knew they were joking. Patty was one who admitted being mean, but said she mostly just jokes around. She talked about something she did to Denise, the one who Rebecca said was “bullied every day” by Patty.

Patty said, “Yea. Sometimes like I’m, we’re just joking around and they know I’m joking. Like, “Denise, you’re weird.” I always say, tell her she’s weird. But like I made a little brochure when she was at my house and stuff of her. And it was kind of, it was funny but - she knew it was funny but it was kinda mean like, I was saying like, “I love cheese,” cause she likes cheese a lot . Being weird and stuff, like I was saying it on her little brochure. It said, “Denise Parks, the weird girl.” But she didn’t care cause she knew, like I was joking.” Patty is minimizing, even though on a certain level, she knows she’s being mean and perhaps even intends to be mean.

Rebecca, a 7th grader told of a “huge fight” that was a “real big deal” with her group of friends when they were in 6th grade. She said there was a lot of “name calling” and it was such a disruption that the school personnel intervened by having a meeting with the girls who were involved and it lasted an entire day. During the mediation process she said girls were very mean, making accusations and yelling at each other. She visibly cringed and cried at the memory. It was clearly a distressing experience for her for many reasons and she seemed appalled at the things the girls said to one another. She said the intensity of the verbal aggression was directed at “copying.” When asked

to clarify it became apparent that girls had been fighting over who had which shoes first, which haircut, even which pencils. Again, it seemed that the underlying reasons were deeper than the superficial things they were fighting about. In this case, as was discussed with Rebecca, they were fighting for their territory in order to feel they were original.

It seems that this verbal aggression contradicts a prominent theme in the literature which is that girls are socialized to be “nice” (Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2002). The dynamic these participants describe involves good deal of open conflict, which is anything but hidden from the adults in their lives. However, there were several participants who revealed a different style of relating which was consistent with the literature. This is classified as passive or avoidant on the dimensional range.

It seems, after listening to these subjects, that the social strategy for actively avoiding verbal aggression or taking a passive stance could be to avoid conflict or possibly appear “nice” as the literature suggests. Rebecca talked a lot about a close friend of hers who was continuously “bullied” by another girl in their close circle of friends and a member of their team. About her friend she says, “Denise wouldn’t say anything cause she’s not like that. She’s, she’s real nice.” I asked her how she handled it when her friend was getting picked on. She had difficulty talking through her tears as she said, “I don’t know. I like that other girl, but . . . I don’t really do anything cause I’m friends with both of them. Yea. I just don’t like it when the other girl picks on her a lot. And Denise gets hurt. And the other girl doesn’t know. . . Well, she does, but Denise doesn’t show any emotion. She’s real nice.” In this case it seems that the

strategy of avoiding anything that might even be considered “verbal aggression,” to get along or appear nice has very negative consequences.

Another participant reported avoiding conflict with the leader of her group to avoid the wrath of the girl she perceives as having a lot of power. “Yea, like Ivy, she gets mad a lot at everybody. If you just say something she’ll just get mad. So we, we all just kind of ignore her. She’s nice sometimes but she just, she gets mad easy.” She continued later in her interview, “Like Ivy, she’s mean. She like lies, she lies and like when she’s mad at you the whole world’s mad at you. And you don’t want her to be mad at you cause she tells everybody then everybody is mad at you. So everybody tries to be nice to her cause she’s like the Queen Bee.”

This avoidant style might serve as a protection for girls afraid to stand up for themselves or the consequences they would suffer if they tried. It might also be that they have been taught to be “nice” and do not understand how to be assertive while also holding to the value they have been taught.

Group Manipulation.

Group manipulation seems to be a clear social strategy and is ultimately what relational aggression is all about. Relational aggression is defined by the use of friendship and others within the peer group to inflict emotional hurt onto victims. It isn’t clear in the literature whether or not this is always intentional and there were conflicting reports from the participants in this study about whether or not they thought girls are mean “on purpose.”

There were multiple reports of group manipulation in this interview data, ranging from girls actively betraying one another to a more subtle type of manipulation,

which is “go along to get along.” Please note that while verbal communication is used in group manipulation, the properties are distinctly different. Group manipulation involves more covert activities which characterize relational aggression while verbal aggression is overt. The goal of the strategies appears to be different as well.

Active betrayal in friendship involves such things lying, talking behind someone’s back, or exclusion. These examples of group manipulation were all reported by the participants of this study. Jill, sporting a big smile during most of her interview, looked serious as she talked of an incident that involved an active plan of manipulation. “Well, uh, there’s kind of a group like popular group. Well, me and my two other friends, we’re kinda in it. We usually don’t hang out with them or anything but there’s three of us kinda and kinda not. And they’re real good friends cause I had a party once and none of the other group came but they came.” It was obvious to her that they had made the decision as a group not to attend her party.

Group manipulation can even extend to teachers or other adults.

“Riva, now in eleventh grade, remembers back to fifth grade when “there were three girls that really hated me, and there was a leader of those girls that was just evil. . .” Riva discovered later that the three girls who hated her – “preppies” with good-girl reputations – had placed blame on her and then persuaded other girls to agree with them. She was suspended for five days, labeled a “liar,” and “grounded for a long time” (Brown, 2003, p.90).

An interesting aspect to group manipulation was discovered through these interviews. It has to do with the role of the “middle girl” or “messengers.”

Several of the 5th and 6th grade participants talked about this in their interviews.

Sara reported,

“There’s a conflict that goes on like every week between me, my friend Janet, and my friend Susie because me and Janet were in a fight and Susie was our messenger. And so we’d say something and she’d go and tell Janet a different thing that we didn’t say. And then she’d come back and say something Janet didn’t say. So then we had to miss P.E. and go to the conflict managers cause Janet told and said that we, that Susie came up and told her that we, we could rip her guts out when we did not say that. And then we didn’t say, er, Janet didn’t say she hated us and Susie told us that and then we all got mad at Susie.”

Alisha, the participant who seemed to mimic the leader of her group, talked in detail about the fighting in her group. I asked if she was ever involved in the fighting. She replied, “Um, no, we actually, me and Robin usually just follow people around and listen to what they’re saying and stuff like that and try to help out with the situations. . . . Sometimes we try and like work it out, like say, “She wants to be friends with you so do you want to be friends with her?” and stuff like that.” When asked if that role had ever gotten her into trouble, she said, “No, just um, sometimes when it’s like a really bad fight we’ll just kinda follow people around and listen to what they’re saying and like if one person says like something about the other person we’ll just kinda forget about it, not tell the other person, cause it might make it a bigger fight. She said that her involvement had helped two of her friends “make up” and that that was important

because she didn't like all of the fighting. Significantly, the two friends happened to be the leader of the group and one of her two best friends.

Some of the manipulation described in the interviews revealed a desperation that is felt at times by girls this age. The first example was by 5th grade Briana, who was the participant so distressed by all of the attention given to Katie, the leader of her group. She said, "And if I'm at a birthday party, everybody gets mad at me cause I get a headache and I'll be like, "I don't want to play cause I have a headache," and everybody will be like, "Gol, you always get headaches." Cause I had to get CAT scans on my head cause I got bad headaches, but it's just like my, what do you call that, like my nerves. And if I get like, if I run around too much I get headaches and stuff. So, they'd be like, "God, Briana, you always get headaches and you're always ruining the birthday party."

She also said later in her interview that someone is always left out at birthday parties. "It's usually the same person but sometimes they'll like, it would be a different person like sometimes, but it's mostly one person. And it's mostly me. . ."

Rebecca reported feeling caught in the middle between two loyalties. She watched her closest friend be bullied by another and didn't feel like anything could be done. It came out in the interview that Patty felt excluded when Rebecca invited Denise and another friend on a weekend trip. Rebecca said that Patty threatened during practice, "I'm gonna starve myself so I can die." She reportedly wrote "I'm stupid," and "I hate myself" on her book. Rebecca, when asked if she felt responsible for Patty's reaction, said, "Yea, I mean, what if she did? It's kinda. . .why would she say that?" And later in the interview, "Because I hang out with Denise more than her and

she's say stuff like, "I go home after school and bawl." And it's not our fault, you know, it's not our fault that she does that, it's just. . . ." The level of emotion Rebecca portrayed during the entire interview revealed the degree to which her friend impacted her by statements of this sort.

Occasionally, girls will go along to get along. Often, this is a strategy to avoid painful consequences that they have experienced in the past. "Oh, I learned not to mess with her," was the attitude. It does seem that within this participant group, girls were either actively involved in group decisions and activities or they took on an observer or peripheral role. This was revealed through an analysis of the language the participants used. If they told stories in which they were the central figure, or they told things in the first person, they seemed to be more involved. Girls who were followers often talked about others, relating stories that happened between other people. These girls either didn't feel comfortable sharing personal information or their attention was more centered on other people.

Adult Involvement.

Participants reported adult involvement at several levels. They talked about parent and counselor intervention. It was both solicited and unsolicited. It was also perceived as successful and unsuccessful. This was the range identified through the coding process.

Adult involvement in these participants' experiences came up frequently in the interview material. Several talked about seeking a counselor's help when having conflict with their friends or with other children at school. Some reported that it was helpful to talk to an adult about it. They also mentioned parents' intervention, as in the

example above with the “disco ball” bowling party. The “big deal” that occurred during their 6th grade year was referred to by several 7th grade participants. Ultimately, it sounds like this was resolved with the assistance of adult intervention.

The literature suggests that a prime motivation for “covert” relational aggression is to keep it under the adult “radar.” Girls want to appear nice while doing mean things (Simmons, 2002). With this in mind, I asked Callie, after she had talked about the differences in the way boys and girls fight, “Do you think that part of the reason they spread rumors instead of getting in fights is because they don’t want the adults to know?” She said, “Yea, usually the person who gets mad won’t tell an adult. I always used to tell my mom (referring to being excluded and mistreated by other girls) and so then she’d know, but some kids won’t tell the teachers. But when the teachers do get involved, they’ll talk but then usually it’s just the same thing – they’ll just keep doing it. But a lot of girls won’t tell the teachers cause then they’re afraid that – if they’re a follower – the person in charge, or the girl in charge will get more mad at them.” She said it stops for a little while but ultimately, “Adults don’t help.” She goes on to say that while bullied in second grade, her teacher did nothing because she “favored” the girl who was bullying that she was the “teacher’s pet.” She also talked about a fairly successful year in which the teacher got involved by making sure the teachers in the school were aware of what was happening so that they could keep an eye on the situation.

Sharon sought the help of a counselor in her situation with the friend she felt had betrayed her. “And so I just ignored her and went to the counselor about it.” I asked, “Did that help?” And she replied, “Well, not really. It kind of started, it kind of started

a bigger fight. Because Anna, she just wanted to get this over with. She obviously didn't want to be my friend anymore. So, when I went to the counselor and the counselor called her up to the office, she just didn't look at me at all. She just wanted to get out of there and she didn't really want to talk to me. And when the counselor told us to apologize to each other I apologized. I didn't even know what I was apologizing for, I just apologized. She apologized, but I could tell she didn't mean it, cause she wasn't looking at me, she just wanted to get out of there."

There were also incidents of parents getting involved which had damaging effects. Rebecca said, "I remember one year when Patty's mom called me up and chewed me out. Cause I went to lunch with Denise and Kristen and not with Patty. . . I just remember her calling up and she's like, "Is your mom there?" And I said, "No." And so she said, "Well, then, I'll just tell you," and she just started yelling. She said, "You really hurt my daughter." Cause I went to lunch with Denise and Kristen. And I remember calling my mom and bawling on the cell phone."

The participants in this study often talked about adult involvement and the way they access them or avoid them as a part of their overall social strategy. It is clear that adults play a significant role for girls in these age groups, as reported by these participants.

Need for Belonging

The need for belonging among these participants was obvious in each interview. The open coding process revealed that it is the most dominant theme among these participants. The participants mentioned "fitting in" and "wanting to be included" with a frequency beyond any other category. They also became most emotional when

talking about being excluded or missing a friend who had moved away, which all relate to properties identified here. Within this category, the following properties were identified: (a) Friendship; (b) Attachment; and (c) Sense of Security. These properties and the relative Dimensional Ranges are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6
Need for Belonging Properties and Dimensional Range

Category	Properties	Dimensional Range	
<i>Need for Belonging</i>	Friendship	Best Friends	Rejected
	Attachment	Longevity	New Girl
	Sense of Security	Loyalty	Fear of Exclusion

Friendship.

Without exception, every participant said that friendship is important to her. They talked at length about the things they do with their friends and how their relationships with other girls are central in their lives. Many girls talked about having a “best friend.” This seemed to give them a sense of belonging like no other. I spoke with a sixth grader at a local school recently who said, “I like having a lot of friends, but I miss having one best friend. Because when I did, I knew where I belonged, you know?”

Fifth grader, Michelle, had a quiet confidence in her interview as she talked about friendship. She’s had the same “best friend” since first grade. She said, “And my

best friend, she loves math and loves reading too. We have a lot in common and all.” Her friendship with this girl seems to be a shelter in a storm, as she described the fighting in her circle of friends. She said that most of her friends don’t get along but she never had a fear of being left out and seemed to stay out of the arguments due to the fact that she and her best friend always have each other to rely on.

When asked if she had one good friend, Beth replied, “Yea, her name is Cassie. She’s like my best friend. I was staying at her house this weekend and we have a lot of fun. Her mom’s like my mom, kind of. She takes care of me all the time. She’s really nice.” Beth talks about this friendship as being “like sisters,” sharing a lot of time together and being in her house often.

Friendships, especially when they are “paired” or exclusive “best friends,” seem similar in ways to a romantic relationship. These participants talked about “breaking up” when a friendship ended. One sixth grader said, “when I lost her it was never the same.”

Rebecca talked about watching her closest friend work on a group project with others. “It was real tough. It was kind of hard for me seeing Denise with those guys, you know? And it was hard for Denise seeing me with Patty.” This exclusive, possessive quality which some friendships take on is worth noting and is definitely an emerging theme in the data and literature.

Katie, the Queen Bee of her group, talked about the difficulty in labeling friends as a best friend. “No, I don’t have a best friend. Because then it hurts the other people’s feelings. Like if I told somebody that they were my best friend, then they’d probably get mad because Theresa’s told some people, er, told me that I was her best

friend and some other people got mad. So I've learned not to have a first best friend." Her sense of belonging seemed to be related to her position within the group and her maintaining that requires diplomacy. She wasn't willing to risk it, even though she admitted, "I really don't have like a 'best friend,' but I have like a friend that's nice to me the most." She went on to say that she is the person she does the most with and who she would trust with a secret.

The pairing up of girls within groups is common and girls are very aware of who belongs with who, even when it's very complicated:

"Kit's best friends with Gloria. Well, not best friends. She's best friends with Shannon, Gloria, and me. Me and Gloria are best friends. And Kit and Shannon. Shannon doesn't think Kit's her best friend, but Kit thinks Shannon's her best friend. See, Shannon isn't like totally best friends with Kit, but Kit's totally best friends with Shannon, or one of her best friends" (Brown, 2003, p. 78).

This quote from one of Brown's participants very closely resembled the interview data from some of my participants. The 7th grade participant group included several girls who are on the same traveling team and within the same close group of friends. They also had a sense of who was best friends with whom and where the group of seven was split, however the perceptions of several girls differed significantly. It was very uncertain where Patty belonged. It seemed clear that she wanted to be with certain girls and perceived herself as a part of their inner circle, but wasn't from their point of view. This may be the reason for her distress and her bullying behavior. She

doesn't fit into the "rejected" end of this dimensional range, because her position within this group of girls is "guaranteed," due to adult influence.

Rebecca, talked about how stressful it was have Patty make fun of her for things like hugging other girls and she was very emotional as she talked about how hard it was to see Denise get bullied by her. She had mentioned that Patty's mom had called her up to "chew her out" for not inviting her to lunch one day and I said, "It sounds like you're under a lot of pressure to stay friends with her. She responded, "Yea," and looking me straight in the eye to make her point, said, "And her Dad's the coach."

The participants also talked about how important it is to "fit in." When they say this, it seems they are saying they want to belong with a friend or a group of friends. Sharon, though rejected by Anna, found solace in another friendship. "She's my best friend, one of my best friends now. She's always been there for me. Ever since 5th grade when she moved here. Her and most of my other friends, they've tried to stick up for me during this Anna threatening me thing. And that's helped me. . ." It seems that as long as these girls have friendship somewhere, they feel okay, even if it's not with the friends they've had in the past or with the popular group.

Ten-year-old Victoria writes:

"Some girls that were unpopular like me made a club. Ever since then I know that when I'm sad or depressed I can count on those three girls. Before that I didn't know what was going to happen. Like my puppy just got ran over. I called Danni and she really comforted me. The next day two others girls called me. The callers were from the other members of the

Leftovers. I liked the way it felt to feel wanted. Though we are leftovers in the school cafeteria, I know I'm liked. That feels *great*. Sincerely, A Leftover" (Brown, 2003, p. 70).

There are times when a girl loses her "place" in a group, which can also mean the end of her friendships with the girls associated with that group. Many of these participants have experienced being left out and outcast from their group of friends and those examples have been given earlier in this chapter. A young woman named Sarah recalls the pain of her eighth grade year. She had been the leader of the group and manipulated her followers by encouraging them to be mean to others. Things changed dramatically for her.

"(They) came back for me with a vengeance. They were still a powerful force and were able to convince the entire school to hate me. There were notes on my desk when I got to class that read 'Die Bitch!' and I couldn't get so much as a look from any guys. They ruined me, devastated me to the point of missing nineteen days of school in eighth grade and I felt I deserved every minute of it" (Brown, 2003, p. 13).

Attachment.

One of the most frequently mentioned descriptions of friendship by these participants was how long they had known their friends. Nearly always, when describing their friends, they talk about their history together. This seems to "cement" the relationship in some way. They say things like, "we've been together since we were babies," "I've known her since forever," or "we've been friends since pre-school."

“Jouslin, when talking about one of the friends she’s had since she was a baby, said, “It doesn’t matter if we yell at each other. We usually forget about it later.” She didn’t say this about all of her friends, but seemed to feel more secure in a friendship she’d had for a long time. Sometimes, when the participants had friends they had known for a long period of time, they specified that it was because their parents were also friends. This may also contribute to the sense of security they experience in these relationships.

I asked Briana why she thought people were drawn to Katie, the leader of their group. She said, “I don’t know. They always go, the same excuse every time is, ‘Cause we’ve been friends since kindergarten or we’ve been friends since babies.” She identified that having history together is a reason for attachment and loyalty. It seemed annoying to her that it was a fact that she couldn’t change.

The contextual findings revealed the fact that this school district is losing students at a steady rate due to declining economics of the town. This fact was revealed in the interviews with the girls who attend school there. Several fifth-grade participants in the had recently been to a going away party for a friend who had been in school with them since kindergarten. It was very distressing to them and created a reason for more conflict, as they argued about who was crying at the party and who wasn’t. They identified the loss of several friends who had been there for a long time.

Jessica, a 6th grader, knows that two of her best friends will be moving within a few months. “When they move I’m going to be so depressed, I won’t even want to go to school the day they move or anything. I’ll probably be crying on the day just because they are my really, really good friends and I don’t want to lose them but I have to. And

I mean, I'm still going to stay in touch with them, but next time that I'm probably going to see Marissa is when maybe I'm in high school or out of high school, and that sucks."

There were two participants who remembered what it was like to be the new girl. The most difficult part about being new is not knowing who their friends were going to be, where they might fit within the current social structure, and whether or not they would find acceptance or belonging.

The girls who had not had the experience of being new were capable of putting themselves in her shoes. As is mentioned above, the feelings of jealousy they had were tempered by empathy. They said being new would be "scary" and "hard" and they recognized that the most difficult thing would be not having any friends.

Sense of Security.

The sense of security, or lack thereof, that girls had about themselves and their place within their friendship groups was a prominent finding in the data. The dimensional range for this property is from Loyalty to Fear of Exclusion.

The number one quality cited by participants when they were asked, "What makes a good friend?"- was *loyalty*. When asked what that means, they said loyalty refers to a sense that a friend is faithful, that she will stick by her friends, not lie to her, talk behind her back, or betray her in any way. Megan, when describing her best friend, said, "She's true, and she's nice and she's loyal. She just tells the truth and she doesn't lie behind my back and she doesn't talk behind my back."

They also mentioned that they want to know that a friend will stick by them and not "ditch them" for another friend. Several girls mentioned occasions when they saw

good friendships change when their friends started hanging out with someone new. They feel betrayed when a friend decides to move on and “become someone else.”

Their responses to the hypothetical scenario revealed a consistent desire to be included. They admitted jealousy of the new girl spending time with their friend, but said it would be okay with it *as long as they were included*.

Megan said, “I’d probably feel hurt if they didn’t include me and I’d want to be friends with both of them.” Tanna said something similar, “I would ask them if they would all like want to come to my house so we could all spend time together. So we could all be friends, not just two people. Yea. And not leave anybody out.” Wendy said, “So, I would want to play with them. And I think that they should invite me in with them so I can have fun with them too.”

Several girls mentioned that nobody should be “left out.” This fear of exclusion is mentioned over and over again by these participants. Lyn Mikel Brown found the same thing in her participants.

“Such fears cannot be overstated. Everywhere in their interviews nine-and-ten-year-old girls talk about the experience of being left out and alone and they allude to the ways they adjust their behavior to avoid this most horrible of outcomes” (Brown, 2003, p. 69).

The fear of exclusion is a powerful and consistent theme throughout the data collected for this study. When girls describe incidents of relational aggression, it seems the *very worst* thing that can happen is to be left alone. When describing specific ways girls can be mean, Megan said, “Like, they can tease people about their clothes or they

can bully ‘em or they can just plain out flat leave ‘em to be by themselves.” She clearly emphasized the latter half of her sentence as if being alone was much worse than being teased or bullied.

Callie also experienced the pain of exclusion and loneliness. “When I was younger, there’d be one girl who was kind of like the leader and everyone else would follow her and I always wanted to play with them and then like she’d be mad at me and she’d get everyone else to be mad at me so I’d be left alone.” For Callie, the ultimate suffering was being alone. She talked about wandering around the playground by herself having no one to play with and feeling like she couldn’t even speak with anyone.

This section on open coding began with a quote from 5th grade Sara as she talked about popularity. It seems fitting that this section be concluded with her thoughts as well, as it reveals the connections within this category, as well as between all of the categories identified through the open coding process. Her comments reflected a very passionate stance on the issue of inclusion. When asked why she didn’t think she was popular, she responded,

“I don’t know . . . I just, well, when I was in *third grade* I’d *hang out with them a lot* but you know, *some of ‘em can be mean to me*. They can be really nice but I think the populars, they just hang out in a big group and *usually I don’t hang out in big groups*. Sometimes they just stand around and stuff and I want to go play but I don’t think I’m popular because I never hang out with them that much. Sometimes they’ll come up to me and be like, ‘Come play

with us' and stuff like that but I'm not friends with all the populars so that's how I don't think I'm popular, *cause I'm not friends with all of them.*"

This subject aroused *indignation* within her as she went on to say loudly,

"And you shouldn't have to be friends with all of 'em and there *shouldn't be any popular group* because *everyone's different* in, in their own ways and stuff. I don't think there should be any popular groups. If you want to play with just one of the populars, they think that all of them have to come play and, they just, like *don't want to be separated*. She also said later in the interview, "they don't exclude anybody if you try and play with them or anything *but* sometimes *you get yelled at* for just like, coming and *not asking* to play with them. *Sometimes I've thought about starting my own group, but then it really doesn't happen*, so I don't think there should be any popular group, like I said."

It is apparent in her communication that her exclusion from this group of girls is painful enough that she uses the defense mechanisms of denial and rationalization to explain their contradictory messages. The fact is, while she does have friends in this group, and a significant history with some, she doesn't feel she belongs and this dramatically impacts her sense of security.

Axial Coding

"The purpose of axial coding is to begin the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding. In axial coding, categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena.

Although axial coding differs in purpose from open coding, these are not necessarily sequential analytic steps; no more than labeling is distinct from open coding. Axial coding does require that the analyst have some categories, but often a sense of how categories relate begins to emerge during open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124).

As is identified in this statement above, relationships between the categories may become apparent during the Open Coding phase of analysis. This was, in fact, the case with this study. Prominent themes emerged early on and it was during the open coding that the central theme emerged. The categories of Social Status, Girlfighting, and Social Strategy and the properties associated with them all rotate around the central category of *The Need for Belonging*. This became apparent as the data were being analyzed at the conceptual level and looking beyond what the text literally said.

“Although the text provides clues about how categories relate, the actual linking takes place not descriptively but rather at the conceptual level” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.125).

This section focuses on linking the above categories around the central category of *The Need for Belonging*. The primary indicators of the centrality of this category were (a) the frequency with which it is mentioned overtly; (b) the level of emotion and intensity of nonverbal communication when this issue was touched upon during the interviews; and (c) the implication of it’s significance when participants were talking about material that, while “categorically” different, pointed back to this need for inclusion or belonging. This identification was accomplished by asking “what is really

going on here?” and comparing and contrasting all of the data collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The participants in this study mentioned over and over again a desire to “fit in.” This desire might, on the surface, look like an attempt to achieve social status. The clothes they wear, the sports they are in, or the relationships they have with boys all seem part of a “recipe” for status. The next question to ask is “why is status important?” For these participants and other data gathered through literature, it seems that status has to do with belonging to a select or popular group. Belonging to this group means to many of these girls that they are “good enough.” If they don’t fit in, it seems to mean that they are “flawed” in some way. This is a painful realization and is a very real threat to young girls’ self-esteem. The use of defense mechanisms was apparent in many of these participants, rationalizing why they weren’t a part, in order to avoid looking the possibility of not being acceptable.

Interview data revealed that it is most often the high status group of girls who are “mean.” The data collected here and the literature suggest that the “Queen Bees” can be very relationally aggressive. The 7th grade Queen Bee in my participant group had been a victim of relational aggression in her 6th grade year. The literature gives many examples of girls who had been victims who go on to become leaders and aggressors within their high status groups. The rejection and exclusion and painful aftermath they experienced may in fact fuel a desire to never allow it to happen again. They achieve this using the same weapons and means they had experienced as victims. Their need for belonging is so strong that they resort to drastic measures to insure they are not excluded again. They work hard to maintain their “Queen” status because that is

their identity within their group and their sense of belonging to the group is dependent on that identity.

Girls fight consistently and regularly according to these participant reports. They admit that it happens all the time but also say over and over that it is for “stupid” reasons. They seem to recognize that what they are fighting over doesn’t make sense. This may be because they are really fighting over much deeper things, like power, acceptance, and inclusion. Much of their fighting seems to be about posturing for position, all the while looking for insurance that they will be accepted and included. Their attempts at reconciliation reflect a desire to just quickly smooth things over in order to have things get back to “normal,” rather than really looking at the deeper reasons why they were fighting in the first place.

In order for girls to have a *sense* of belonging, they must have a *place* to belong. Many of the girls’ social strategies have to do with keeping the group together, functioning as a whole. It makes sense, that with a strong need for belonging, that the group itself becomes important. Several participants engaged in roles and activities which served the function of maintaining “groupness.” These roles were “Queen,” (or as 5th grade Stephanie called the one at their school, “The Queen of Everything”), “Middle Girl,” and obvious “Followers.” It is also worth noting that there is no “group” if *everyone* is included, which is why they actively work to “exclude.”

This may be why girls who are not in the popular group seem to engage in relational aggression less often. They still “fight” but their fighting is less strategic and doesn’t fit the same criteria as relational aggression. They are not intent on excluding anyone and have no incentive to do so. Interestingly, none of the social groups

identified in this study, other than the “popular” group in schools seem to have a leader or a “Queen Bee.” Their need for belonging is either satisfied within their own groups or they are directed toward becoming popular and the function of a Queen Bee is not necessary.

Selective Coding

The selective coding phase is a “process of integrating and refining the theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.143).

“If theory building is indeed the goal of a research project, then findings should be presented as a set of interrelated concepts, not just a listing of themes. Relational statements, like concepts, are abstracted from the data. . . an analyst reduces data from many cases into concepts and sets of relational statements that can be used to explain, in a general sense what is going on” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 145).

This section will focus on the results of the selective coding process. The continual examination of the interview data, both from a micro and macro perspective and the subsequent analysis resulted in the following conceptualization of the central theme: *The Need for Belonging a Prime Motivation in Relational Strategies for Preadolescent Girls.*

One of the challenges in developing a central theme out of data that comes from multiple participants is that there are no two people alike. Each comes to the interview with different experiences, perspectives and personalities. It is impossible to generalize and paint a picture that would represent every girl completely. And yet, there is a significant amount of common ground that existed for this participant group.

Every girl interviewed was different and yet all had had the experience of having *friendships* with other girls. All had experienced or observed girls “being mean,” or behavior that would be qualified as *relational aggression*. Many identified feelings of *jealousy* in reaction to a hypothetical situation and *wanting to be included*. Girls talked of their deep *attachment* to life-long friends and of *grieving the loss of friends* who had moved away. They talked of past hurts where they had experienced *rejection and exclusion* from their peers and they felt utterly *alone*. They spoke of the *fear* that it would happen again and *being careful* of what they said and did to insure that it didn’t. They seem *confused* much of the time about the motivations of other girls and their behavior and yet were quite *capable of empathy and compassion*. They *don’t like the fighting*, backbiting, name-calling, and hurtful behavior that characterizes many relationships between girls. They are *hurt* by it but rarely have a sense that they can do anything about it. They feel *powerless*. The need for belonging drives them in ways they aren’t fully conscious of and they actively use defense mechanisms like *denial, minimization, projection, and rationalization* to protect themselves from painful emotions. Most of their social strategies are directed at achieving a *sense of belonging*, either with a group or with individual friends. Most of their *aggressive* tendencies seem aimed at maintaining position or a *perception of power and control*. Some are completely *unaware* that they are being perceived as mean, others rationalize their behavior or *minimize the impact* it has on others. They talked of a *sense of “safety” and “security”* that comes when they know that they have *one “true,” “loyal,” and “good” friend*. In many ways all of these girls want the same thing. They want to know that they are *accepted*, and have *faithful friends*, and ultimately *that they belong*.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

The goal of this research was to understand more about friendship and the role of jealousy in relational aggression in pre-adolescent girls. Grounded Theory methodology proved to be an excellent choice as it allowed me, the researcher, to become deeply immersed in the interview process, data analysis, and writing. The process provided an in-depth exploration resulting in a deeper understanding and subsequent development of a grounded theory. It is possible that the voices of the girls heard in a small town in Montana may provide a foundation and new insights to others formulating hypotheses and attempting to understand more about this area.

The findings of this research shed light on the experiences of friendship in preadolescent girls and the role of jealousy in relational aggression, however the theory developed through this investigation is untested. Whenever something is seen more clearly with the introduction of a light source or by concentrating on it more fully, it can seem more complicated than ever. A quote cited in Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.55) says it beautifully:

“At the beginning of my journey, I was naïve. I didn’t yet know that the answers vanish as one continues to travel, that there is only further complexity, that there are still more interrelationships and more questions.” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 7)

The results of this research do in fact produce more questions and reveal the fact that while there might be some “collective” experiences for the preadolescent female,

they are also individuals with very unique thoughts and perspectives. This is reflected clearly in the interview material. Each participant interviewed was as different from the other girls as she was the same. Girls in this age group tend to talk, dress, and behave similarly but each had an originality that made me curious to know even more about them and their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Interview method allowed for a thorough exploration of the unique experiences of each girl while at the same time focusing specifically on certain material.

The interview data were examined with an eye toward the thought processes and social cognitions of the girls as they related their experiences of friendship. The use of defense mechanisms was also observed carefully and analyzed. This research looked closely at some of the dynamics that lead to feelings of anger, distress, or reasons why a girl might lash out, either overtly or by covert means associated with relational aggression. It also examined the reactions of girls who have been on the receiving end of aggressive behavior and those who have observed this phenomenon. The role of jealousy was examined specifically and was a prominent theme in the data.

Conclusions

The theory developed in this study is that girls are motivated primarily by a *need for belonging*. This need drives many of the social strategies they employ and is also the internal cause of much of the fighting that occurs within friendships. The destructive competition and jealousies are the result of girls jockeying for position within their peer groups and the social status they possess has a direct bearing on their self-esteem. They have little insight into their own behavior and are often confused and

hurt by the behavior of other girls. Their need for loyal friendships is intense and makes a significant difference in their overall sense of well-being.

Social Status, Girlfighting, and Social Strategies were all identified as prominent themes in the data. The Need for Belonging was related to all of these themes and their properties and was a central finding. This finding is consistent with Adlerian theoretical perspectives and warrants further discussion. One of the five 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). Adler also theorized that all behavior is purposive. The data collected here suggests that relational aggression is a social strategy that results in peer perceived popularity and power. It is with purpose and is often successful. Unfortunately, it also creates problems for the aggressor and victims.

Dreikurs and Cassell assert, “if a child misbehaves, she is not dealing with a personal maladjustment but rather with a cultural predicament” (1972, p. 9). Again, it seems that relational aggression is a reaction to a cultural predicament for preadolescent girls. They have difficulty achieving a sense of belonging and often resort to methods which exclude others in order to feel they have a place for themselves.

Grounded theory methodology requires a researcher to access literature throughout the process of analysis in an effort to understand more thoroughly the phenomenon being studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As fate would have it, a significant finding related to this research was published only two months prior to this writing. The article identified that “Little attention has been focused on the important question of whether individual young adolescents display stable differences in their

tendencies to react with jealousy to their friends' activities with others" (Parker, Low, Walker & Gamm, 2005, p. 236). This was a significant gap in the research identified in chapter two of this dissertation as well. The recently published study made use of a newly created instrument, The Friendship Jealousy Questionnaire. The study had several significant findings directly related to this project. One is that, "*girls in general* reported higher levels of jealousy surrounding their friends" (p. 239). A second is that "young adolescents of both sexes with lower self-worth reported greater vulnerability to jealousy surrounding friends" (p. 239). The study says further:

"It is likely that chronically poor self-esteem contributes to habitual jealousy, because individuals with negative self-appraisals place less trust in their friends' commitment to them and interpret even the most pedestrian activities that friends do with others as fulfilling their expectations of friendship betrayal and defection" (p. 239-40).

The link between self-worth and jealousy is an interesting one, and relates closely to the observations made in this study. The girls who were most overtly jealous of girls in their peer groups were also ones who engaged in more defense mechanism use, as observed in the interview data. Parker and his associates also said, "Structural modeling revealed that young adolescents' reputation for friendship jealousy was linked to behaving aggressively and to broader peer adjustment difficulties" and further, "Both self- and peer-reported jealousy contributed to loneliness" (Parker, Low, Walker, & Gamm, 2005, p. 235).

These findings are consistent with what was observed in this participant group. Loneliness signifies a longing for relationship, possibly a need for belonging. This is

worth further exploration and is identified in the Implications for Future Research section of this chapter.

The links between self-worth or self-esteem and the need for belonging are obvious when one considers Abraham Maslow's theory. His hierarchy of needs is based on the notion that "human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs, and that certain lower needs need to be satisfied before higher needs can be satisfied" (Gwynne, 1997, p. 1). Significantly, the need for belonging is a "lower" or more primary need than self esteem. *Love and Belonging Needs* have to do with a desire to belong to groups. Humans need to "feel loved" and "be accepted by others." This need must be met before the next step on the ladder, *Esteem Needs*. These needs are met through the attention and recognition that comes from others.

Maslow's theory is very relevant to the data collected and analyzed for this study. Several girls in the study clearly were striving for a place to belong and felt "outside" the popular group. These girls were not as concerned with looks, attention, or other things as the "popular girls" were. It is possible that a "popular" girl, secure in her sense of belonging, and having that need met, is able to move up in the hierarchy of needs to the level of seeking their esteem needs. Gwynne says about the Esteem level, "Wanting admiration has to do with the need for power" (p. 3). This may, in fact, offer a partial explanation for why popular girls are perceived as more "mean." They may be verbally aggressive or put down others in attempt to gain esteem, or as Gwynne asserts, power. This suggests, as this research has implied, that girls' esteem needs are met in and through and *after* their belonging needs are met.

Implications for Future Research

One of the most obvious benefits of qualitative methodologies is that many ideas for future research are generated as a result. This study prompted many such ideas, too numerous to mention, but the top seven will be discussed here.

1. The most obvious suggestion for future research would be to test the theory that pre-adolescent girls are motivated primarily by a need to belong. Development of an instrument which could measure the degree to which girls feel they “fit in,” in addition to their sense of security within their peer group would be necessary. This might be paired with a method designed to measure their level of self-reported as well as peer-reported aggressive behavior, or a more inclusive instrument designed to look at overall social strategies. It would be interesting to see if the girls who report a greater degree of security relate differently to their peers than girls who do not.
2. Defense mechanisms likely play a role in the behavior of young girls. The interview data collected here suggests a prevalent use of defense mechanisms, especially in those who engage in relational aggression. Minimization and rationalization of their behavior was common. Identification as a defense mechanism was also seen in one participant who clearly mimicked the “Queen Bee” of her group.

The study of defense use is an emerging and exciting area of research and may be helpful in understanding children’s behavior. To date there have not been any studies which look at the use of defense mechanisms in girls who use relational aggression as a social strategy. A look at denial, projection, minimization, identification, and rationalization would be particularly helpful, as these were all identified at one point or another within this participant group.

The relationship between self-worth and defense mechanism use would also be worth exploring. The recent study by Parker and associates (2005) correlates self-worth to friendship jealousy. It would be interesting to see if the defense mechanisms are linked as well. The benefit to studying defense mechanism use is that, as discussed in chapter two, defenses decline in use once they are understood (Cramer & Brilliant, 2001).

3. It has been suggested in this research that “popular” girls are more “mean” than other girls. A study which compares “groups” of students and their aggressive behavior would be a helpful addition to understanding the social dynamics of this age group. Is it simply that these girls are just perceived as “more mean” because of their elevated social status or do they, in fact, engage in more verbal and relational aggression? It would be interesting to see if a function of their aggression is to maintain social status, as Maslow’s theory suggests. Parker et al, (2005) speculate, “A potentially important final issue is whether, along with low self-esteem, some forms of high self-esteem may also leave one vulnerable to jealousy. Baumeiser (1998), in particular, suggested that individuals with inflated self-esteem may be especially vulnerable to social threats” (p. 240). This speculation is particularly interesting in light of the observations made in this study of “Queen Bees,” and would be worth further investigation.

4. Research addressing the role of the family in a girls’ sense of belonging and sense of self-worth would be extremely helpful. Girls relate aggressively for many different reasons, some of which have to do with family stress and dysfunction. It would be helpful to see if there is a correlation between family stress, a girls’ sense of belonging, and relational aggression. Again, Maslow’s theory would be very relevant to this as one

considered the level to which girls' safety and physiological needs are met. An exploration of Attachment Theory would also provide insight into this and has been used extensively to understand childhood aggression (Mills & Rubin, 1998).

5. This study had some examples of mothers who were very involved, even intrusive, "competitive," and "aggressive." The mothers who were like this happened to have daughters in this study who were perceived by their peers to be very aggressive as well. It would be particularly interesting to look at the personalities of mothers of girls who are relationally aggressive. This would be helpful in understanding if this behavior is learned or whether or not having a mother who is aggressive impacts the degree to which a girl might feel secure or have a solid sense of belonging. Again, Attachment Theory would be very relevant here.

6. Research on the perceptions of boys related to "Girlfighting" would be very helpful. As indicated in this research, there is a pervasive notion that boys find girl fighting "entertaining" and "funny" (Brown, 2003). It would be quite interesting to see what they really think and may dispel some myths, which perpetuate aggression among girls. Evolutionary psychology would may be relevant to this examination and look at the differences between boys and girls.

7. A survey of school counselor perceptions and intervention strategies for dealing with relational aggression would give an idea of current practices. Successful intervention strategies could become models for others and provide motivation for those unaware or ill equipped to deal with the problem. There has been an increasing awareness of this phenomenon, but as Brown says, "We have all seen, tragically, how teachers and administrators can contribute to school violence by looking the other way when boys

bully and tease one another. Girls' forms of violence and aggression are even more likely to go unnoticed and unnamed" (Brown, 2003, p. 214).

It is likely that a survey of this type would reveal that there are few schools that are actively addressing this issue. "There is little training for teachers and school administrators to spot and understand these near invisible cycles of popularity and isolation among girls" (Brown, 2003, p. 215). It is clear that more needs to be done in this important area, which brings me to recommendations for intervention programs.

Recommendations for Intervention Programs

This research was conducted in schools with the hope of generating ideas that might assist schools in program development aimed at lessening the epidemic of relational aggression among girls. The findings of this study and the resulting theory have been used to brainstorm possibilities for intervention programs that might assist schools in this area.

1. Competition is a healthy, natural part of life and should be encouraged among our youth today. Unfortunately, girls today compete over many things and in a way that does not promote or facilitate potential in other girls. Competition should help those engaged in the activity to become better than they are, challenging them to grow in their abilities and strengthen their character simply by trying.

Athletic programs, which are inclusive and give every one equal chance for participation, are good and healthy. Science fairs and music festivals, essay contests and 4-H fairs, Girl Scout cookie sales contests and talent shows are all great ways for youth to develop and explore their potential.

Often, competition and success involves risk for girls. The literature as well as this interview data reflected the fact that many times girls pay a very big price for being successful, for winning, or for even competing in the first place. Some, in an attempt to “fit in” will “dumb down” or purposely not excel if they feel that doing so will jeopardize their sense of security within their peer group. This is a tragedy! The result is that our society loses out on all that girls might offer. Programs designed to teach girls that this is a prevalent dynamic would lend insight that might empower them to be different. If girls celebrated girls, encouraged one another, and learned to be proud of one another’s achievements, many more would reach their potential.

2. Sociologists have recognized for decades that social status has a tremendous impact on school society. “The students who attended this school did not regard each other as equals. Within days of being in the school, it was evident to us that certain groups had more status than did others, especially in the seventh and eight grades. The higher-status groups were generally the larger ones, and their members were often the topic of conversation by others in the school” (Eder, 2003, p.31). This observation by Donna Eder held true for the schools where the research took place as well

This research looked beyond the appearance of social status in order to understand its function. In other words, what does achievement of social status mean to a pre-adolescent girl? The answer seemed to be security, identity, and a place to belong. The higher status groups are just that, “groups.” Part of having status is belonging to an elite group of people, being accepted by them. “Popular” girls aren’t popular unless they belong to a group. Unfortunately, the exclusion that can naturally result in the segregation of status groups in a school can be particularly harmful to some

students. Students will naturally be drawn to others who are like them or have similar interests, however much can be done to promote an understanding that diversity is a great thing. Programs aimed at building *tolerance, empathy, and unity* would be very helpful in guiding students toward being inclusive and more accepting of others. The Virtues Project (Popov, 2000) is one character education program that promotes these character traits and has been used successfully to address some of these problems.

3. Girls fight for all kinds of reasons and many times even the girls call them “stupid.” They lack the insight to see that they often are fighting over issues that are far deeper than the superficial content of the arguments. One participant, Briana, was constantly complaining of another girl, Katie, and criticizing her. She even told stories, which clearly revealed that she was trying to undermine this Katie’s other friendships. On the surface, she made it sound like it was because Katie deserved it and was “just mean,” and yet, as the story unfolded, it became clear that her anger was really about Katie becoming friends with Briana’s old best friend and “stealing her.” Often the fighting has to do with feeling left out, not getting invited somewhere, insulting the way someone looks, or some other event that suggests exclusion, causing their sense of security to feel threatened.

School counselors should be trained to help girls understand the function of their jealousy and to look beyond their own rationale for their anger. The example given above is one that is likely common to school counselors who should be prepared for this type of situation and understand some of the underlying dynamics associated with relational aggression and fighting between girls. Taking things at face value when presented with this issue may only complicate the matter. Girls have become

sophisticated in “packaging” the content of a fight to avoid others finding fault in their behavior or motivations. Counselors need to rise to the level of this sophistication and develop effective intervention strategies.

4. One of the things that became very apparent in this study is that girls lack conflict resolution skills. They often don’t talk to each other about what hurts their feelings and they are quick to make apologies that may not even be sincere. They tend to be very reactive and make quick assumptions about others’ motives. They place a high premium on friendship but don’t often have the skills to negotiate disagreements in ways that will help maintain or enhance their relationships.

The data clearly revealed that girls *do not like* the fighting that so frequently characterizes their relationships. They call it stupid, it makes them uncomfortable, and they want it to stop. They recognize that boys relate to each other differently and some were very obvious in their expressions of wishing it were more like that for girls. The fact that boys don’t relate in the same way sheds light for these girls that it *could* be different.

Conflict mediation is also a must-have skill for school counseling personnel. The data in this study revealed one situation in which the girls made “forced” apologies as suggested by the counselor. The result was a situation that not only didn’t get resolved, but also escalated to the point of physical violence.

The complexities of this issue demand further exploration and attention. The implications for future research and potential intervention strategies are suggestions which may further assist the efforts of those concerned with female development. I echo the sentiment of Lyn Mikel Brown, who said her work is “an attempt to get closer

to the truth as Adrienne Rich defines it; truth not as any one thing, but an increasing complexity” (Brown, 2003, p.9). This dissertation was started with the hope that the work involved would facilitate a deeper understanding of the experiences of preadolescent girls. The theory developed has given me an appreciation not only for the insight gained, but a faith in the process of discovery.

Appendix A

Peer Items Used to Assess Indirect and Relational Aggression

Indirect aggression (Lagerspetz et al., 1988)	Relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995)
When angry. . . .	
*Tells untruth behind back.	*Tells mean lies or rumors about a person to make other kids not like the person (omitted in analyses because also loaded on overt aggression factor).
*Starts being somebody else's friend in revenge.	
*Says to others, "Let's not be with him/her."	*Tells friends they will stop liking them unless friends do what they say.
*Tries to put the other to his/her side.	
*Acts as if didn't know.	*When mad at a person, gets even by keeping the person from being in their group of friends.
*Sulks.	
*Abuses.	*When mad at a person, ignores them or stops talking to them.
*Argues.	
*Takes revenge in play (omitted because also loaded on direct factor).	
*Calls name (omitted in analyses because also loaded on direct factor).	

SOURCE: Underwood, Marion K., (2003). *Social Aggression Among Girls*, New York, New York: The Guilford Press. P.27



The University of Montana

Appendix B

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January 20, 2005

Dear Parent:

Greetings from the University of Montana! This is a request for your child to be allowed to participate in a study conducted by me, a doctoral student in Missoula. My program of study is in Counselor Education and I am particularly interested in working with school counselors and staff to help students achieve their potential. My research is on the subject of pre-adolescent girls and their relationships with each other. This topic has received a lot of public attention in recent months, but there has been very little research done in this area.

The Principal of your school, _____, has agreed to allow me to do this research on school grounds during school hours. It would be done in a way as to allow the minimum amount of disruption to your child's classroom time. All girls in grades 5 through 7 are being asked to participate.

Enclosed are some forms for your review. The first is a Parental Permission Form, which outlines the procedures of the study and other relevant information you'll want to have. In the permission form, I state clearly that it is important for me to have your permission as well as the assent of your child. If you agree to allow your child to participate, I would sit down with your child to explain the nature of the study to see if they want to be interviewed. They have the right to decline if they are not interested. I have enclosed a child assent form for your review. ***If you agree to allow your child to participate, please sign the permission slip and return in the self addressed stamped envelope enclosed by Friday, January 28th.*** I have included two copies of this form. One is for you to keep for reference. The copy of the child assent form is for you to keep also. If your child agrees to be in the study, she will be asked to sign this form.

Please feel free to call me at (406) 491-2206 if you have any questions regarding this request. This research is being conducted under the supervision of my faculty supervisor, Dr. John Sommers-Flanagan. You may also feel free to contact him at any time regarding this project. His number at the University is (406) 243-5820. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Renee M. Schoening, L.C.P.C.

Appendix C

Parental Permission Form

Project Director: Renee' M. Schoening, L.C.P.C.
Dept. of Educational Leadership and Counseling
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812-6356
(406) 491-2206

Faculty Supervisor: John Sommers-Flanagan, Ph.D.
Dept. of Educational Leadership and Counseling
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812-6356
(406) 243-5820

Purpose:

You are being asked to give permission for your child to take part in a research study conducted by a doctoral student at the University of Montana. The subject of the study is relationships between pre-adolescent girls. All of the girls in the 5th, 6th, and 7th grades in your school district are being asked to participate. Girls will be selected randomly from the pool of those who have been given parental permission. Once selection has been made, your child will be contacted to see if they are interested in participating. If so, they will be asked to sign an assent form. A sample has been enclosed for your review.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to allow your child to take part or you may withdraw your child from the study at any time. Your child can decide not to take part or may withdraw from the study at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of privilege for withdrawal from the study.

Procedures:

If you allow and your child agrees to take part in this research project, your child will be asked to participate in a 30 to 45 minute interview. It is possible that a follow-up interview will be needed as well. She will be asked to respond to a hypothetical social situation and asked questions about her current and past peer relationships. The study will take place on school grounds in a room designated by the Principal. The interviews will be scheduled during school hours, however every effort will be made to schedule a time that is not a disruption to their classroom time. For example, utilizing recess time and free time in the classroom.

The interviews will be conducted by the project director, who is an experienced counselor and educator. Each participant will be treated with sensitivity and care. Although it is possible that answering the questions may cause your child to think about situations that make her sad or upset, most girls enjoy talking about girls' friendships in general and their own friendships in particular. Each participant will be told at the beginning of the interview that they may stop the session if they are feeling uncomfortable. With you and your child's permission, the interviews will be either video or audio taped and then transcribed. The transcription will not include any identifying information about you or your child. The tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Your child may be asked to leave the study for any of the following reasons:

- 1) Failure to follow the Project Director's instructions;
- 2) The Project Director thinks it is in the best interest of your child's health and welfare; or
- 3) The study is terminated.

Voluntary Participation

As stated above, participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Permission from you is required in order to ask if your child is willing to participate. Even if you give your approval, they have the right of refusal. If they are interested in being in the study, they will be asked to sign the Child Assent Form and will be given the opportunity to ask questions about the research. You or your child may decide to withdraw your child from the project at any time. The project director and faculty supervisor are the only ones who would be aware of your choice to withdraw. No one will be angry if you decide to do this.

Benefits:

Talking about peer relationships and social strategies is often very beneficial to individual children. Your child's participation in this study will be helpful in furthering the understanding of girls and the way they relate to one another. It is also hoped that this research will help schools guide the interactions between girls of this age group.

Confidentiality:

All records will be kept private and will not be released without your consent except as required by law. Both yours and your child's identity will be kept confidential. When the results of this study are written in a scientific journal or presented in any other public forum, neither yours nor your child's name will be used.

The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Your signed parental permission slip will be stored in a separate locked file cabinet. As mentioned above, the audio videotapes will be erased immediately following the completion of the study.

Risks and Discomforts:

It is very unlikely that your child will experience any risk or discomfort associated with this research. The interviews will be conducted in a familiar setting by an interviewer with over fifteen years experience working with children in the school setting. The school counselors are aware of this study and have agreed to speak with any children in the unlikely event that this process causes them to feel sad or upset.

Compensation for Injury:

Although we do not foresee any risk in taking part in this study, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms:

"In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim of such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims representative or University Legal Counsel."
(Reviewed by University Legal Counsel, July 6, 1993)

Questions:

You may wish to discuss this with others before you agree to allow your child to participate. If you have any questions about the research now or during the study contact the Project Director at the number listed above. You may also contact the Faculty Supervisor. If you have questions regarding your child's rights as a research subject, you may contact the Chair of the IRB, Sheila Hoffland, through the University of Montana Research Office at (406) 243-6670.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to have my child take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form for my reference. I also understand that my child has the right to refuse participation in this study.

I agree to allow the researcher to (please check one):

Audio or Videotape my child as a part of the research process.

Audio only for purposes of research

Printed (Typed) Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian

Date

Approval Expires On 12/12/05

Date Approved by UM IRB 1/19/05

Sheila Hoffland IRB Chair

Appendix D

Child Assent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research project about girls and their friends. A student at the University of Montana is doing this study. It is your choice whether or not you'd like to be in this study. Your parents have agreed to allow you to do so. However, the final choice is up to you. This form has details about the project. There is a place for you to sign if you agree to be take part.

This study is about girls and their friendships. If you decide to be in it, you will be interviewed about your friendships. You will also be asked to give your opinion about a make believe situation between girls and their friends. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers to these questions. We are just interested in your point of view and opinions about this topic. The interview will take between 30 and 45 minutes. It will be done during a time that will not disrupt your class time.

You will be doing one, possibly two interviews. Your talks with the project director will either be audio taped or video taped. This is so that the project director can listen to what you say after your interview is over. You may stop the interview or decide not to be in the study at any time. No one will be upset with you if you change your mind.

You may have questions about this research. If so, please feel free to call the project director (Renee' Schoening at (406) 491-2206). You could also talk to your parent(s) or school counselor.

If you would like to be in this project, please sign below.

By signing below, I am agreeing to be in the University of Montana research project. I understand the details described above. I have been given a copy of this form.

Print Name Here	Sign Here	Date
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I also approve (please check one):

_____ Video and/or audiotape of my interview

_____ Audiotape only of interview

Approval Expires On 12/12/05

Date Approved by UM IRB 1/19/05

Karla Hoffland IRB Chair

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