Understanding Relational and Social Aggression

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"Some girls are like mean but nice. They will be nice to your face, but then they will go say how much they hate 'her' or how annoying she is. But I think it hurts more if you say it behind their back than if you say it to their face because they gotta know the truth."

—R., 14 years old

"I know a lot of girls that like just get spiteful when they get mad. They get real spiteful and deceiving because they got mad at them and then they will regret it like two days later. Most of the time they don't get physical—they do something verbal. They will go around and tell something somebody said, or they will make it up and go around saying things just to get the person mad."

—B., 14 years old

"Stand up for each other. In order to show yourself as a true friend, you can stand up for one of your friends if they are having trouble with somebody. The only way to keep them so that they can trust you more is to stand up for them and let them know you will always be there for them."

—C., 14 years old

"Mostly, girls like to fight. I mean, girls are vicious. I mean boys, they don't really care. Boys—they can get in a fight one day and the next day they are like 'Aw, sorry about yesterday,' and 'Aw, that's all right—who cares.' Girls they just go after each other. They want to rip each other's hair out."

—A., 13 years old

"You don't really purposely want to do that [relational aggression] to someone unless—like you are really mean. But it is really much easier to be nice to people because it comes out easier."

—A., 14 years old
(Middle school participants in a
Goodwill Girls Group, Fall 2007)

Over the last two decades, interest in bullying among school-age children and how these behaviors impact the development of both the victims and perpetrators has increased among educators and researchers. Bullying is typically thought of as aggressive physical or verbal assaults against a "weaker" person so that the bully can gain power over that individual or social status among his or her peers. Olweus (2003), a leading author in bullying research and intervention, defines a bully as an individual who intentionally attempts to inflict physical or psychological harm on another person through proactive, overt aggression. Furthermore, bullies often note the imbalance of strength (i.e., this person will not defend herself) as a rationale to victimize a particular person. However, as multiple researchers (e.g., Feshbach, 1969; Crick, 1996; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996; Archer & Coyne, 2005) have noted, including Olweus, bullying can appear different than its traditional definition when practiced in a covert manner, emphasizing emotional or relational harm rather than threat of or actual physical harm. A covert approach limits detection by overseeing adults or the victim themselves at times and may actually do more harm to the victim if her social connections and reputation with others are of particular importance. Furthermore, indirect forms of aggression also allow the perpetrator to "appear" amiable while secretly orchestrating an attack on another person.

DEFINITIONS OF RELATIONAL AND SOCIAL AGGRESSION

Indirect aggression (similar to relational and social aggression) was first defined by Feshbach in 1969 in order to explain covert aggressive behavior (e.g., spreading rumors, giving someone the silent treatment, or isolating someone from the group) versus overt aggressive behavior (e.g., kicking, hitting, screaming, threatening, name calling in front of victim). Indirect aggression was first examined by a Finnish group (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988) who found that a unique identifying feature

of this form of aggression is that the bully could remain anonymous because of the underground nature of the aggression, allowing the perpetrator to give the appearance of innocence. In turn, perpetrators avoid detection by the victim or adults who may be monitoring them. Indirect aggression is now commonly referred to as relational or social aggression in the literature. Researchers such as Crick and Grotpeter (1995), Crick (1996), Crick and Grotpeter (1996), Crick et al. (1999), and Coyne, Archer, and Eslea (2006) have explored the formal definitions of relational and social aggression as well as how to measure the impact on victims, perpetrators, victim/perpetrators, and bystanders. Additionally, other scholarly articles have explored incidences of relational and social aggression among school-aged children and its impact on school climate (Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006). Several researchers (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Hayward & Fletcher, 2003) have found that girls are more likely to be relationally aggressive than boys; girls rate the use of relational aggression more favorably than boys (Crick & Werner, 1998), and yet girls are more likely to view relational aggression and verbal aggression as more harmful to themselves than boys (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006).

Researchers hold differing opinions in how to define relational and social aggression. A recent article by Archer and Coyne (2005) attempts to clarify if relational aggression and social aggression are the same phenomenon or if the two terms actually describe separate sets of behaviors. *Relational aggression* is commonly defined as behaviors that intend to harm a person's friendships or feelings of belonging in a particular peer group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Specific behaviors may include withdrawing one's friendship out of anger, isolating a person from a peer group, spreading rumors about a person to damage her reputation, and ultimately causing peer rejection. The goal is often to punish a girl or adolescent female for a perceived friendship "violation" that calls into question her loyalty to a friend. A female friend can be deemed disloyal by talking or flirting with a friend's boyfriend, not sticking up for a friend if she is being talked about by someone else, and the appearance of being unkind—such as questioning a friend's decision making, appearance, or behavior. This relational "punishing" for a friendship infraction can feel excruciating because the girl being punished may not understand what she did or who she did it to if enough people in her friendship group are acting angry and isolating her from the group. Indeed a girl may feel that everyone is angry with her, and if the perpetrator has enough social power and influence over other peers, the perpetrator may have gained several allies for the shunning and punishment process. Participating in the punishment, even if they themselves are not angry with the victim, allows the followers to

gain a sense of cohesiveness with others (e.g., "We are angry with her"), which may enhance their social standing and ensure that they are not the immediate targets.

For example, if Joanna was seen talking to Rashida's boyfriend in the hallway before lunch, and it appeared that Joanna was flirting with him, spectators on their way to lunch may then relay this information back to Rashida. If Rashida is quick to respond with anger, she may immediately withdraw from Joanna (e.g., move to a different lunch table), talk to her other friends about Rashida's friendship violation (e.g., telling everyone within earshot that Joanna is after her boyfriend), and garner the support of other girls (e.g., "Joanna may try this with your boyfriend. We can't trust her."), who will now help in punishing Joanna. Because no one has actually communicated with Joanna about why Rashida originally became angry, Joanna, if troubled by this treatment from Rashida and other recruited "help," may feel responsible for investigating what happened and trying to fix the friendship problem. This entire scenario could occur in a very short period of time. Joanna's afternoon may seem ruined as she tries to unravel what occurred to cause the treatment that she is receiving. Furthermore, technology such as instant messaging, texting, or calling using cell phones can easily move the conflict from school to the girls' homes. An absence of messages or calls, if the girl is being cut off from the group, can feel just as painful as messages or calls that are accusatory or angry.

Social aggression has been defined by some to describe those behaviors that seek to harm a person's social status through attacking her social or sexual reputation. This may include demeaning her physical appearance, questioning her decisions—or any other aspect of her—revealing her secrets to others, accusing her of trying to be "better than" others, or simply making up stories to tell about her that will cause her reputation to be in question. If the attacks are vicious enough, they may seem to question her very worth as a human being. Social aggression may include behaviors such as verbal confrontations to embarrass someone, repeatedly putting someone down, making a game of belittling someone, eye-rolling and other negative nonverbal forms of communication, spreading rumors to compromise a girl's place in the social hierarchy (i.e., jeopardizing popularity with slurs about sexual reputation), or socially excluding a girl from a social group or groups. Although this definition sounds similar to relational aggression, one difference is that relational aggression may occur as a result of a specific conflict between individuals who identify as friends; however, social aggression may occur in a larger social circle due to jealousy of peers, perceived female competition for attention or boyfriends, to gain social status or power among peers by lowering someone's standing in the social hierarchy, or for entertainment purposes. In 2005, we conducted

a qualitative study in a high school in which adolescent females were asked to explain why a group of girls would socially ostracize a particular girl. The respondents stated that this behavior may be born of envy or jealousy, competing for social status, need for fun or entertainment, or to deflect the potential or possibility of them receiving negative peer attention (Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005).

Social aggression is illustrated in the following scenario. Brianna is a fifteen-year-old female who is sitting in study hall working on her biology homework. Because she is struggling with the content, she is focused on finishing her homework and preparing for a test later that afternoon. Simultaneously, she is trying to ignore the giggling behind her. She is a sophomore dating a senior basketball player, Marcus, who broke up with Samantha, a popular senior, who sits three rows behind her in study hall. Silently, a girl sitting next to her, leans in close and drops a letter on Brianna's desk. She opens it to find the following:

> Dear B:
>
> Just so you know, no one is impressed with you or your bullshit. We are tired of you acting like you are better than everyone else.
>
> We know the truth—you are a whore, and Marcus will figure that out soon enough.

Forty people had signed the letter. Needless to say, Brianna is stunned by this letter and unsure of what to do next.

Obviously, technology can exacerbate social aggression and allows it to infiltrate a girl's home and family environment, which may include receiving anonymous emails or text messages or receiving mean emails from a friend's email as the result of someone else using the account. On the other hand, this can also occur to signify to a girl that a close confidant has been "turned" by the larger peer group and has joined in the circle of perpetrators. Finally, Web pages or Youtube postings can be created for the sole purpose of publicly disgracing a person being pinpointed by a group. Victims may understandably feel both helpless and humiliated with such exposure.

CYBERBULLYING

Debate continues as to whether the terms *relational aggression* and *social aggression* are broad enough or specific enough to describe all covert and overt behaviors that involve psychological or emotional bullying. What

can be agreed upon is that this type of bullying, although not physically harmful, can wreak havoc with a girl's emotional stability and sense of belonging within her peer group. To complicate the definitions further, cyberbullying must also be considered in this discussion as girls and adolescent females are plugged in to various forms of technology for socializing purposes. *Cyberbullying* is defined as "the use of electronic technology to deliberately harass or intimidate; unlike the schoolyard bully of yesteryear, the cyberbully can hide behind online anonymity and attack around the clock, invading the privacy of a teen's home" (Long, 2008, p. 28). Because of widespread use of technology and the tendency for adolescents to be "plugged in" whenever possible, relational and social aggression can occur from remote locations at all hours, making the feasibility of escaping the torment extremely difficult. Turning off one's computer may seem a difficult choice if an adolescent female's support system is simultaneously "present" where the bullies linger.

In a recent study involving 4,000 middle school students, 18% stated that they had been bullied online in the last two months (CQ Researcher, 2008). Other reports indicate that the percentage is actually closer to one in three students recently being targeted online by students using cyberbullying. Tragically, the impact of cyberbullying can be overwhelming for adolescents. In July of 2008, the state of Missouri passed a law that outlaws cyberbullying (AP, 2008). This law came into existence after a 13-year-old girl, Megan Meier, committed suicide in 2006 after receiving mean, distressing messages online from a teenager named "Josh." Josh was actually an adult woman and mother of a teenage girl with whom Megan had had a rocky friendship. Using the identity of Josh, a supposed sixteen-year-old boy who Megan thought she was developing a relationship with, this mother engaged in relational aggression through a false identity via a MySpace page. If others would have joined in the taunting, this would certainly meet the definition of social aggression via the Internet. In conclusion, it is worth speculating that individuals may be more ruthless online because they are not in the physical presence of their target, the human being who they can see actually see or hear.

Just as cyberbullying can have devastating consequences for victims, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the social and emotional development of perpetrators and victims of relational and social aggression may be hindered. Girls more than males report that relational and social aggression is more damaging to their friendships, and girls are also more likely to report a "shake up" in self-confidence when they are victims of relational aggression (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004). Victims of relational and social aggression are more likely to experience internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety and sadness) and lower overall self-worth. Furthermore,

those who experience multiple forms of aggression (e.g., covert and overt) are more likely to experience maladaptive social and emotional development (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001) and distress (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Perpetrators of relational and social aggression are, over time, more likely to be depressed (Prinstein et al., 2001), anxious (Loukas, Paulos, & Robinson, 2005) lonely (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) and abuse substances (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006).

WHY USE RELATIONAL AND SOCIAL AGGRESSION?

> *"A lot of people are two-faced, and girls are like that. They don't want to cause trouble with that person, but they will go around talking about it because they like don't have the courage to actually stand up for themselves or say it to their face."*
>
> —C., 13 years old
>
> *"I think, like if you are mad at someone, then you go tell your friends about them. You are just letting all of your anger out 'cause you don't want to let your anger out on the person you are mad at . . . I don't know . . . 'cause you don't want them to hate you or be mad at you."*
>
> —J., 14 years old (Both were middle
> school participants in a Goodwill Girls group.)

> **Theoretical Perspectives on**
> **Why Girls May Use Relational or Social Aggression**
>
> ✓ Evolutionary Psychology
> ✓ Systemic (Social and Cultural) Influences
> ✓ Social Learning
> ✓ Developmental

Why are girls relationally and socially aggressive with one another? This complex question cannot be easily answered, as many variables are at play. For example, girls may learn to be bullies because they are unconsciously or consciously competing with one another, have observed significant others (e.g., parent, teacher, aunt, or other significant adults) use these behaviors, or because they have not learned other ways of expressing

anger and hurt that simultaneously get their needs for affiliation and close-ness with others met. Girls may also learn to become relationally and socially aggressive because they do not believe that it is okay to be straight-forward or assertive with one another, as girls and women in American society who demonstrate these tendencies are sometimes negatively labeled by observers. Terms such as "bossy" and "uppity" are rarely applied to males. The following discussion, although not exhaustive, examines rela-tional and social aggression from different theoretical angles, attempting to shed light on why girls or female adolescents may use these behaviors.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

In the book *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman,* Chesler (2001) suggests that there may be two main evolutionary explanations for why females may use bullying. Evolutional psychology explains that throughout our evolution-ary development, women are wired for emotional connections with others. For example, female infants are more likely to study human faces for emo-tions and respond to others based on emotional cues, plus female children are more likely to play collaboratively with others rather than competitively (Brizendine, 2006). Both are examples of how most females thrive on rela-tionships or connections with others. Brizendine (2006) writes that most females "prefer to avoid conflict because discord puts them at odds with their urge to stay connected, to gain approval and nurturance" (p. 21). Close relationships and staying connected to others has served the evolu-tionary purpose of safety as well as maintaining shelter, food, and having assistance with rearing children. In fact, gossip or the act of talking about others, when viewed through the perspective of needing close connections with others, may actually serve the purpose of creating intimacy, friend-ship, and connection with other females. On the other hand, awareness that relationships are important to other females creates a window of opportunity to attack a woman where it hurts the most. Emotional con-nections being valued by others and one's reputation within a social circle may all become part of the arsenal when girls do battle with one another.

Another explanation for relational and social aggression from an evolu-tionary psychology perspective is that once adolescence is reached, females, assuming heterosexuality, often feel the impulse to compete with other females for male attention. Although it may not register consciously, the female brain may be wired to do what it takes to make herself appear more attractive than other females in hopes of capturing the best mate possible (e.g., healthy, able to reproduce and provide for offspring). This serves the evolutionary purpose of assuring insemination by a quality male, thus helping

to ensure the viability of an infant. Rising to the top of a social structure or group of eligible females from an evolutionary perspective may be accomplished through a female's physical appearance, fertility, exemplary nurturing skills, and/or her ability to strategically creating a climate (e.g., gossiping about another female's sexual reputation) where other females are less desirable. This competition for a mate ultimately results in females doing battle with one another in ways that harm another's reputation while not using overt bullying, thus harming their own. The reason the behaviors must be covert is to avoid being inconsistent with a female gender role or the appearance of being nurturing. Appearing kind and amiable while strategically cutting off or shunning a woman from a group allows a female to maneuver socially among the possible mates and among her competition. Chesler (2001) writes, "As most women know, a woman can make life hell, on a moment-by-moment basis, for any other woman she envies, fears, or with whom she must compete for resources" (pp. 36–37).

This phenomenon may be observed when a new female is brought into a social circle. For example, if a female adolescent enters a high school as a new student, other females may feel threatened by her as she may have the potential to disrupt the hierarchy of popularity and social power among her female classmates and compete for someone's boyfriend. This phenomenon is particularly true for females who may lack self-confidence, unfortunately an all too common occurrence during adolescence, or find a core sense of their identity through whom they date. If the new female is deemed competitive by her appearance, social intelligence, talents, capacity to make friends, or ability to garner attention from male classmates, she may become the target of social aggression in hopes of diminishing her social foothold or popularity among her peers. Her reputation may be challenged, and she may endure harsh treatment from other females.

What is difficult about this particular explanation for bullying is that the impetus for behaving in this manner is largely unconscious. Adolescent females may not be able to explain why they dislike a new girl at school or why it seems appropriate to attack her socially. Furthermore, while following a strict line of evolutionary reasoning, openly discussing the idea that an adolescent female has an innate impulse to compete with other females for the best possible mate who stands the greatest chance of impregnating her for propagation of the species and providing for her and her offspring will seem ridiculous in our modern age. However, many girls or adolescent females may be willing to consciously entertain the idea that they compete with one another. One of the best strategies for appearing "great" is to make someone else appear "awful." Fortunately, talking about this sense of competition openly and reviewing the costs (e.g., closeness with other females) can assist young women in making alternative choices.

SYSTEMIC (SOCIAL AND CULTURAL) INFLUENCES

Over the last forty years, the United States has experienced a loosening of gender-role expectations for females. Girls have more options than ever before and are easily able to identify powerful, influential women who have realized achievements of historical significance. However, despite this progress and broadening of career, economic, educational, and athletic opportunities, females still receive mixed messages about how to *be* female and what behaviors are considered feminine. Gender-role socialization or how girls learn to be female at the micro (e.g., family, school) and macro (e.g., media) levels of society may contribute to why females distrust one another, exercise emotional distance with one another, and participate in social and relational aggression.

For example, if girls are supposed to be nice, kind, and able to always exercise self-control to meet societal expectations for acceptable femininity, this will constrict their ability to express anger and frustration. When these normal emotions are restricted, often times out of fear of losing a particular relationship or appearing unkind in front of significant others, girls may have difficulty finding the means to express these emotions constructively or work through problems to healthy resolution. Despite more progressive gender roles in the United States, an assertive woman is still often labeled a "bitch" where a male counterpart, exercising the same behaviors, is labeled "strong" or a "leader." Female children may be told to "play nice" or "talk it out" when a conflict emerges among friends; however, boys may be given the freedom to openly have conflict in a rough and tumble way, demonstrating masculinity while being given an endorsement of "boys being boys." On the other hand, some females who are aggressive with one another may receive attention for the aggression, adding to a "cat fight" mentality, which is entertaining for some and portrays women as enemies. For example in July 2008, Danika Patrick, driver in the Indy Racing League, had a verbal altercation with another female driver. This incident stole the headlines for the Ohio race making who actually won the race inconsequential. National publicity for an argument between two attractive female Indy car drivers highlights interest in female competition and aggression; some consider it almost sexual in nature. Additionally, this type of national coverage may promote this type of behavior because of the attention that may be received. Unfortunately, this behavior reinforces the stereotype of women viewing other women as enemies or individuals with whom to compete.

On the macro level, entertainers such as Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton, and Lindsay Lohan have cashed in during various points of their careers by portraying shallow, superficial women obsessed

with their own looks and sex appeal while downplaying their intelligence, independence, and strength. Despite excellent examples of how females may creatively combat "lookism" (e.g., the television show *Ugly Betty*), girls and adolescent females are still bombarded on a daily basis with media images suggesting what they should aspire to look like in order to be successful or well liked by others. If the societal and cultural focus is on feminine beauty, and appearance is a valuable social commodity, this may encourage girls to compete with each other in the beauty venue. For example, in the popular magazine *OK*, female celebrities are often pitted against one another in a pictorial competition if both are caught wearing the same designer outfit. With their photos side by side, fashion contributors decide who looks best in the outfit by calculating a percentage, and the woman with the highest percentage wins.

Girls and adolescent females can also compete through formal beauty pageants, bikini contests, homecoming or prom courts, on social networking pages on the Internet, or in other social settings. On a very basic level, girls understand the inherent day-to-day contest of who looks the best in school on a particular day or during a specific event. Hours of applying makeup, arranging hair, or assembling an outfit in the morning before school is symbolic of a girl's conscious or unconscious participation in the beauty competition. Being obsessed with their appearance and weight distracts girls, adolescent females, and women from other matters. Feminism suggests that traditional gender-role socialization for girls or acting in certain ways that are consistent with being appropriately female, including the mandate for beauty, helps to support patriarchy or a male-controlled society and institutions. If many females are insecure in their own skin or in how they appear to others, they are more likely to devote a great deal of time and energy to how they appear and less likely to be confident individuals.

In her book, *The Beauty Myth,* Naomi Wolf (2002) contends that competition and conflict among women must be addressed by women themselves for change to occur. Waiting for the media or other institutions to free women from the beauty mandate is hopeful thinking, as there is much to gain economically and socially, if some women remain distracted. Wolf states, "The toughest but most necessary change will come not from men or from the media but from women in the way we see and behave toward other women" (p. 283). Perpetual competition in the beauty venue distances women from one another and adds to an aura of distrust. In this type of climate, girls or adolescent females may view other girls as enemies until they prove themselves otherwise. In a 2005 study with adolescent females, research participants used terms such as "catty, backstabbing, judgmental, jealous, devious, manipulative, dramatic, and defensive"

(Crothers et al., 2005, p. 352) to describe their female peers. This finding begs the question as to what societal or cultural forces help to reinforce this type of thinking among girls. How do girls learn to think this way about one another? In Brown's (2003) book *Girlfighting,* she argues that rather than focusing on the competitive behavior of young women as overly problematic or pathological, more attention should be paid to the cultural forces that reinforce jealousy, mistrust, and competition for males' attention among girls. If girls can be distracted by battling one another, they are less likely to notice or have energy to address the systemic and institutional challenges that still face them.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

According to Bandura (1977), social learning theory postulates that individuals learn to function in a social context based on observing and learning from others. When individuals in the immediate environment are reinforced for their behavior, an observing individual is more likely to emulate that behavior. For example, if an adolescent female observes a peer gossiping about another girl and the one initiating the gossip is popular, has many friends, and gains positive attention for spreading the rumors, this observing female will likely adopt this behavior according to social learning theory. Additionally, individuals who model their behavior after others in the environment are more likely to be accepted by their peers because they are acting in a predictable manner, using the behaviors that others use. Pipher (1994) writes, "girls are at risk of becoming the biggest enforcers and proselytizers for the culture" (p. 68). Practicing social and relational aggression may actually cause some girls to win the favor of others in their peer circles, even if only temporarily. Choosing to *not* play by the rules or social codes of (1) knowing which girl is in power, (2) following the powerful girl and allowing her to make decisions for others, or (3) participating in the shunning or punishing of a particular girl on a particular day, could result in the nonconforming female experiencing "social suicide" (Pipher, 1994, p. 68) or becoming the next victim of bullying. Adolescent girls who respond in predictable ways or social patterns through practicing social and relational aggression often are trying to please other girls within their peer circle, perpetuating the cycle of female bullying.

Finally, significant adults, including mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, may have created the original training ground for social and relational aggression within a family. Some girls, observing the influential women in their lives, may have learned that they are not to be open about discussing conflict with others. They may learn that avoiding conflict is

the best course, therefore making it incredibly challenging to find resolution to some relational problems. Additionally, some girls may have learned to act nice to someone and then talk behind her back or "cut off" or isolate someone by not inviting her to an event and making sure the woman learns that she was excluded. Finally, some adults may also model how to threaten to withdraw from a relationship if the female counterpart is not following a prescribed formula for how to relate to one another. In a 2005 qualitative study, girls reported that their "tendency either to indirectly address or to avoid conflict was supported by adults" (Crothers et al., 2005, p. 353). Therefore, adult females may be unconsciously or consciously endorsing behaviors that lead to or reinforce bullying. If adult females are willing to examine their own approaches to conflict and competition with other females and model constructive behaviors for resolving differences, this would provide young women with exposure to alternatives to relational and social aggression.

DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

A broad range of coping skills is needed for young females to successfully navigate adolescence and adulthood while achieving a positive sense of self, healthy relationships, and hope and direction for one's future. Interestingly, just as female adolescents are experiencing tremendous shifts in their biological, emotional, intellectual, and physical growth, they are simultaneously separating psychologically from parents and moving toward peers for advice, support, and identification. In his stages of psychosocial development, Erik Erikson described this developmental passage as *identity versus role confusion* and believed that most females develop according to an interpersonal pattern (e.g., focus on relationships, emphasizing affiliation or connection to others), whereby males develop according to an intrapersonal pattern (e.g., focus on individual, personal success, competition with others) (Lytle, Bakken, & Romig, 1997). Because of the separation from parents, peers become the preferred socializing agents. Some adolescent females may adopt maladaptive behaviors or less desirable coping skills that nonetheless allow them to function in their social circles. For example, because their peers may gossip, some girls or adolescent females may begin to adopt this social practice to gain social status with peers, feel comfortable in social situations in which they are less familiar, and relieve themselves of undesirable feelings (e.g., social anxiety).

"Fitting in" with a desired peer group is important during the elementary years; however, it takes on even more significance during adolescence. Peer groups are often the most important social connection for

teenagers. For some adolescent females, relational or social aggression is an automatic response to anger or conflict that allows them to react in a way that is predictable and consistent with how many peers respond to perceived provoking events and helps to alleviate their own anger and frustration. Incredibly, some adolescent females are not consciously aware that gossiping about someone is actually what they are doing to work through their anger.

If able to spend enough time with adolescent females, one is quickly able to discover that many are in conflict with others on a regular basis, which is in part due to them being in conflict with themselves. Because of the focus on identity development and the use of peers as a litmus test for one's own sense of self and success, questions such as, "Do I look good?" "Do people like me?" "Am I okay?" "What do they think about me?" and "How can I get them to like me?" can plague a young woman's thoughts and cause her to at times feel desperate, confused, and anxious to belong. While engaged in the process of worrying about these competing thoughts, it is often difficult to be patient, forgiving, and understanding of a peer whose less-than-sensitive behavior is driven by her own egocentrism and similar insecure thoughts. This internal conflict of wanting to be okay can also produce a hypersensitivity to actual or perceived criticism or negative appraisal by others.

For example, if a young woman takes the risk of answering a question in class and is shunned by the teacher for her response, and peers around her giggle because of this transaction, she may or may not be able to see humor in the situation and may instead believe that her friends are disloyal and making fun of her in a mean-spirited way. If this teenager is filled with self-doubt, she may quickly become angry about the situation and direct it toward her peers who may not have had negative intentions. Typically, an adolescent female will seek out a confidant to tell the story to and who will hopefully lend support. The moment she describes this scenario to the confidant and articulates anger toward the peers in her class, the person lending support ultimately decides whether to keep the friend's frustration in confidence and allow her to vent or transfer that information to others— using it as social information to stir up controversy ("She is really ticked at the girls in her math class today because . . .") or to gain social leverage ("Guess what I heard today? Call me later, and I will tell you!"). Carriers of secrets possess, even if momentarily, social power and prestige. They can receive attention by being sought after and confirming details of what she said about them. If the young woman in the scenario above were not self-conscious and could see the teacher's rudeness and her friends' amusement as separate from herself or not revealing anything about who *she* is, then the social outlet for anger is not needed. Therefore, relational and

social aggression can certainly occur because of internal conflict and lack of self-confidence or ego strength. Fortunately, if girls are given the opportunity to engage in perspective taking with others, acknowledging that they may be quick to inaccurately judge a situation at times, they will learn critical thinking skills about their social environment.

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE IN A RELATIONALLY AND SOCIALLY AGGRESSIVE CLIMATE?

The previous portion of this chapter has outlined potential explanations for why girls may use relational and social aggression with one another. It is only natural for counselors then to turn their attention to what they can do to intervene successfully. Additionally, parents and teachers may come to counselors seeking information about how to help their daughters or students. However, prior to learning how to intervene, it is important for adults to attempt to understand what it is like to be in a social climate where this type of bullying is used. Parents, teachers, and counselors may or may not be effective in their efforts to help because of the adult's inability to empathize with what a girl may be going through mentally and emotionally when faced with these issues. Advice such as, "Just ignore them!" "Get over it!" "It will pass, and they will pick on someone else soon," or "You know what they are saying is not true, so don't worry about it" may seem particularly unsupportive for a person whose friendships and social support are in the midst of a vanishing act. To assist adults in understanding the dynamics associated with bullying among girls and adolescent females, a military metaphor is used to explain the norms or unwritten, often unmentioned, rules of engagement. Although these norms are identifiable, it does not mean that they are inevitable or unalterable.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Rule of Engagement 1: Be on Guard

In a setting where practices of relational and social aggression may abound (e.g., school), young women may feel the need to be on alert for any subtle change in peers' or associates' behavior that can be interpreted (accurately or inaccurately) as warning signs for an oncoming attack. This monitoring can cause high levels of anxiety, sensitivity, and reactivity when a perceived incident does occur. Culotta and Goldstein (2008) found that adolescent girls are more socially anxious and jealous than

boys, perhaps due to their tendency to emphasize the importance of relationships and friendships. Feeling vulnerable to the moods of others can cause young women to feel anxious, irritable, and under pressure.

Rule of Engagement 2: Know the Ranks

Males and females, young and old understand that some individuals possess more power and influence than others, which may manifest as controlling what others will socially do or say. Among adolescent females, there is a social ranking or hierarchy that determines how much attention a person receives, how much others strive to be like this person, who this person will most likely date, and how easy it may be for her to rally the troops in support of her goals (e.g., to destroy the reputation of another girl). Adolescent girls often feel that they need to be aware of this ranking system and perhaps tread lightly while in the company of "generals" and "colonels" at their school.

Rule of Engagement 3: Camouflage Is Used for a Reason

Although many teens often desire a sense of independence and act in rebellious ways, fitting in with one's peer group is a mandate for teens who want broad social circles of support. Hair, clothing, shoes, hobbies, interests, and one's vernacular are all methods by which individuals may conform to trends in their peer group. Acting in ways that differentiate oneself from the crowd can cause an adolescent female to be more vulnerable to social attack, particularly if she is successful in some way that causes her to stand out from the crowd or garners a great deal of attention from males. This is where ranking can become confusing, as the socially awkward girl without trendy clothes and the homecoming queen can both be in jeopardy of being targeted by socially aggressive peers.

Rule of Engagement 4: Know Your Enemy

One of the most frustrating aspects of relational and social aggression is that the aggressor may remain undetected. For example, an adolescent female may begin to experience the cold shoulder from a circle of girls, and she may not know who initiated the attack or why. Therefore, it is often left up to the recipient of the attack to investigate the origin of the offensive. This may include asking others who appear close to or part of the circle of girls who are doing the ignoring or shunning. This investigation can often reveal troubling results, as the attack may have been launched due to faulty information, a miscommunication, or for fun. As

stated previously, many females employ relational and social aggression as it allows them to appear kind and friendly to peers and outside observers as no observable attacking behaviors may be evident. Furthermore, if confronted, many perpetrators will pretend to not know what the victim is talking about or attempt to make the victim feel as if she has misunderstood what is happening.

Rule of Engagement 5: Prepare the Troops or "Fight When I Say Fight!"

When conflict is occurring among adolescent females, one is expected to go to battle alongside one's friends. This behavior is a testament to a friend's sense of loyalty to another and is expected. If a friend attempts to straddle the fence or not take sides, there may be repercussions after this particular battle is waged. Going to battle poses certain risks as the friend may become part of the ridicule, rumor mill, or silent treatment and not participating can cause that person to be seen as a traitor. A special weapon that can be used is enlisting male participants who will join a particular side and participate in battle. If males are on the attack, they may be willing to carry out more overt orders that can cause additional layers of embarrassment. For example, if a male soldier comments on a girl's weight or sexuality, it can feel especially devastating to the victim. Males may be willing to engage in such acts as they may win the social rewards of associating with the females in the highest ranks or circle of power.

Rule of Engagement 6: Treason May Be Likely

As soldiers are recruited to do battle, girls, who normally garner very little attention from others or who are low in rank, influence, and popularity, may capitalize on the opportunity to earn social status by becoming involved in the conflict by taking sides, relaying information back and forth, and manipulating the message to heighten the stakes and their own importance as a messenger. Treasonous individuals, who are often peripheral to the actual conflict, can fan the flame and interfere with resolving the conflict. Often, when girls (or students in general) participate in a mediation session to resolve a conflict, the counselor must first determine the main combatants and bring them together. After the conflict is worked through, a final step in the mediation process is to have the combatants inform their army that the battle is over and any additional action, whether it is spreading rumors, giving threatening looks, or talking badly about a person, should cease and desist.

Rule of Engagement 7:
Medals for Bravery May Not Be Honored

Unfortunately, girls who possess a firm set of personal boundaries and work to rise above the fray of interpersonal conflict may be at risk for heightened attacks. Bullying is often used because it works, meaning that those using these strategies often achieve the desired results. Inflicting relational and/or social harm to the point that a girl is publicly upset, walking on egg shells in attempt to comply, seeking help from authority figures, or avoiding social settings indicates that she is raising the white flag, and the attackers are victorious. Not responding in a predictable manner by being upset or influenced by relationally or socially aggressive acts can cause a surge by the individuals inflicting the attack, expanding the assault. It is sometimes helpful if the girl who deserves a purple heart knows ahead of time that her attackers may try harder to win before they give up the battle.

Rule of Engagement 8: Peace Treaties May Be Elusive

Because of the indirect nature of relational and social aggression, adolescent females may not participate in the direct expression of anger. In contrast to boys who may feel free to be angry and even physical with a peer (which often deescalates the conflict), females may not feel that there is an available peer or socially sanctioned avenue to deal directly with a person with whom they are in conflict. Furthermore, keeping one's frustration below the surface allows the young woman to maintain her public image of composure or innocence. Assertiveness skills may be in short supply if a young woman has not learned this approach to conflict resolution from her significant adults or if assertiveness is not reinforced. Furthermore, peace treaties may not be possible while females are actively competing for attention, popularity, and social status among peers.

CONCLUSION

There are various theoretical explanations that may help to explain why girls or adolescent females may use various bullying techniques. However, understanding why it exists is not nearly as important as knowing what it is and how it may compromise a girl's social and emotional development. Being familiar with the rules of engagement for relational and social aggression can assist adults in imagining the angst, confusion, anger, and frustration that may be experienced by girls or adolescent females while navigating their social climate. Furthermore, these rules may help to highlight for counselors and educators the types of behaviors to look for

when monitoring a school climate for bullying. Measuring the incidences of relational or social aggression or assessing how this form of bullying is operationalized in a particular class, grade level, or school will help to organize counselors' thinking for potential interventions.

Reflective Questions

✓ Do most schools tolerate relational and social aggression among students and why?

✓ Do most administrators and teachers know how to define relational and social aggression?

✓ How can a counselor educate administrators and teachers on the potential harm of relational and social aggression?