

Adolescent Girls' Peer Conflicts: Friendship and Relational Aggression

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ABSTRACT

This study is aimed at gaining a clearer understanding of adolescent girls' friendships and conflicts in the context of relational aggression. The negative psychological effects of relational aggression suggest that conflicts among girls need to be considered as possible acts of bullying rather than petty quarrels. The research will focus on girls' subjective accounts of incidences in which they were the victim of relational aggression. The design of the study is structured within a qualitative, interpretative framework. The participants included 12 grade 9 girls from a predominantly White middle-class high school in South Africa. Individual interviews were conducted to collect data. The data was analysed using the voice-centred relational method of analysis articulated by Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown.

Key words: relational aggression; adolescent girls; conflict; friendships.

The complex nature of girls' friendships and conflicts in the context of aggression has previously received little attention. Most research on aggression has focused on overt, physical forms of aggression among boys and men. In the past decade, however, there has been an increased interest in exploring and understanding the ways in which girls engage in conflict. Recent studies on girls' aggressive behaviour have produced consistent findings: girls are aggressive toward each other but usually in more covert, indirect ways, which are motivated by the relational goals concerned with the making and breaking of friendships (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick, 1996; Gilligan & Brown, 1992; James & Owen, 2005; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000; Underwood 2003).

Only relatively recently has the damage caused by negative peer relationships been recognised. Studies have shown that frequent acts of aggression toward victims, are related to increased loneliness for the victim (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004; Underwood, 2003), anxiety (La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004), depression (Jack, 1999; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Underwood, 2003) and low self-esteem (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004; Underwood, 2003). Furthermore, Casey-Canon, Hayward, and Gowen (2001) stated that many girls reported negative feelings such as sadness, hurt or anger in relation to victimization. In addition, however, studies have highlighted the positive influence that close friendships have on adolescents' social and personality development (Cole & Cole, 2001). Storch and Masia-Warner (2004) found that pro-social behaviours from peers moderated the effect of aggression on loneliness. They suggest that it may be that positive peer relationships provide a space to correct negative beliefs about self and others, thereby reducing loneliness and enhancing self-esteem.

Overall, however, the negative psychological effects of relational aggression, suggest that conflicts among girls need to be considered as possible acts of bullying rather than petty quarrels. Therefore the purpose of this particular study follows the need to gain a clearer understanding of the aggressive behaviours, coping strategies and conflict resolution experiences of girls. This study will consider the subjective experience of girls' conflicts.

Relational Aggression and Girls

Within the school environment, aggressiveness between learners is often referred to as bullying (or peer victimization). By definition, however, bullying is only one aspect of aggression³ (Roland & Idsoe, 2001). Bullying is carried out with the intention of hurting someone. In definitions of aggression the act of hurting the victim is also central. However, bullying always involves hurting someone who is not quite able to defend himself/herself, whereas aggression encompasses bullying as well as conflicts between parties of equal power that occur in two-way processes of attack and retaliation (Roland & Idsoe, 2001). This notion of aggression rather than only bullying is particularly important when considering the conflicts between girls of similar social status.

Research on girls has found that female bullying relies more on psychological methods that are indirect, relational and socially motivated (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist et al., 1992; Hadley, 2003). These less overt modes of aggression have been termed variously, as “indirect”¹ (James & Owens, 2005; Lagerspetz et al., 1992; Owens et al., 2000), “social”² (Crick, 1996; Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005; Casey-Canon et al., 2001; Remillard & Lamb, 2005; Vail, 2002) or “relational” (Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Underwood, 2003). Despite minor differences they are essentially the same form of aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005, Underwood, 2003). An important characteristic of all the behaviours recognised as aggressive are their covert nature, whereby they are masked to not appear aggressive. Furthermore, all aggressive acts by girls are aimed at damaging the victim’s social status or self-esteem. The term used in this study is ‘relational aggression’, as used by Remillard and Lamb (2005) in the context of girls’ aggression toward their peers.

Relational aggression is defined as “the intent to harm another through the exploitation of a friendship” (Remillard & Lamb, 2005, p. 221). Acts of relational aggression include gossiping and spreading rumours; ignoring; staring or giving nasty looks; exclusion from the group, isolation, or alienation; writing hurtful letters; and stealing friends or boyfriends (Crothers et al., 2005).

Socio-Cultural and Developmental Theories associated with Aggression

Socio-cultural and developmental theories have been used to explain the differences apparent in aggressive behaviours and conflict strategies for boys and girls. In Western cultures boys and men are socialised and encouraged to be domineering and directly aggressive, whereas similar behaviour from girls and women is socially discouraged. As a result girls/women have been forced to hide their intent to hurt others by initiating peaceful outcomes and delivering their aggression in culturally approved, but more covert ways (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist & Peltonen, 1988). Women are socialised to be nurturing and to focus their energies on creating and sustaining relationships.

Studies have considered relational aggression within a developmental context. Relational aggression has been shown to occur between girls of all ages, but is most salient during adolescence (Owens et al., 2005). Developmental theories define adolescence as a critical period in psychosocial development, marked by an increase in peer interaction and importance of close friendships and the emergence of romantic relationships. During adolescence, time spent with parents decreases and is no longer the primary source of social support. Friends and peers tend to contribute considerably toward adolescents' self-concept and well-being (Cole & Cole, 2001).

Developmental research suggests the reason for girls reporting higher levels of relational victimization may be the relative importance they place on social relationships as compared to boys. Girls focus on and invest highly in their close intimate friendships and value being accepted within the group (Gilligan & Brown, 1992; Underwood, 2003). Besag (2006) found that girls nominated the breaking up of a friendship as the most anxiety provoking aspect of school life. However, although the friendship bonds between girls are more powerful, their friendships have been shown to be less stable and more fragile than those of boys. The disappointment of losing a friend is exacerbated by the closeness of the bonds girls frequently build up in their personal relationships. This dichotomy between the closeness of a friendship and the volatile nature of their relationships often lead to conflict. Besag (2006) found evidence that most of the conflicts among girls stemmed from emotions triggered about their friendships such as jealousy, suspicion, disappointment and anger. Consistent with these findings, James and Owen (2005) found that bullying among

girls was primarily related to the manipulation and maintenance of their peer social networks. Due to the fact that girls' friendships are so intimate, relational aggression is extremely effective in hurting a girl (Bright, 2005; James & Owen, 2005; Remillard & Lamb, 2005).

Many years ago, psychologists, such as Erikson and Kohlberg, studied adolescent boys and created theories of human development that were more accurately theories of development for white, middle and upper class boys. Among the many claims they made, one still remains today: a central conflict in human development takes place during adolescence and involves the struggle for individuation and autonomy (Cole & Cole, 2001). Gilligan and Brown (1992) studied the narratives of girls and women over a long period of time and proposed an alternate theory of development more in line with girls' experiences. The researchers suggest that a woman's sense of self is based on connectedness and interdependence with others and that affiliation and acceptance by other girls or women often becomes an essential element of identity. The edge of adolescence (the meeting between childhood and adolescence) is therefore a time of heightened psychological risk for girls. Gilligan and Brown (1992, p. 4) define adolescence as a time of "disconnection, some times of dissociation or repression in girls' lives". Girls at this time have been observed to "lose their vitality, their resilience, their immunity to depression, their sense of themselves and their character". They argue that women are socialised to silence themselves in relationships rather than risk open conflict or disagreement that might lead to rejection or isolation. This loss of voice leads to inauthentic or idealised relationships. Their research raises a major question about the relationship between women's psychological development and the society and culture in which women are living.

In agreement with Gilligan and Brown (1992), Jack (1999) argues that previous knowledge on aggression has been shaped largely from a male perspective. She suggests that because women's aggression develops within a different social reality to males, female accounts may offer a new perspective on this pervasive dilemma. Jack (1999) studied women's aggression in relation to depression by allowing women themselves to share their personal experiences of conflict with others. She found that social expectations and the fear of being judged by others often lead to women silencing themselves in conflict situations. She found a distinction between two ways

of speaking about the self (the “I” voice). The one “I” voice speaks “clearly and directly” (I feel, I know, I want I believe)” and the other “I” voice (termed the ‘over-eye’) speaks for the part of the self that observes, judges and shames the self (I should, I have to). Jack (1999) observed the relationship between these two voices and found that “the voice of the over-eye came in to silence the I, and how the resistance or resilience of the I, as it was repeatedly overruled by the over-eye, contributed to the exhaustion of depression (the extraordinary effort it took to silence the self)” (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, L. 2003, p.165).

Campbell (1993) argues that social representations are connected with the way we think about aggression. Campbell, (1993, p. 85) claims that “social representations glue together societies expectations (women don’t fight) and our expectations of ourselves (fighting is destructive and selfish)”. It is our society that teaches boys to see aggression as an issue of interpersonal dominance, whereas, girls learn that it is a failure of personal control. She studied men and women and their intimate relationships with each other. She concluded that there are two different approaches to aggression: the *expressive* approach by women and the *instrumental* approach by men. She found that in conflict situations both men and women are subject to anger, stress, and frustration. However these reactions are carried out in different ways. Men express their aggression openly, whereas women suppress their aggression. Instrumental aggression for men is about controlling others and a willingness to put oneself on the line. She found that women’s experiences are ones of anger and restraint. Men’s accounts of aggression tell what it is like to take control. In women’s accounts we hear about what it means to lose control. Instrumental and expressive views of aggression are played out presently, in the 21st century in Western society. However, Campbell (1993, p. 85) emphasises that there “are other explanations to understand aggression as the form of our knowledge changes and as culture transmits new ideas and concepts around the world”.

In addition, Campbell (1993) found women’s stories of aggression followed a sequence that is peculiarly characteristic of expressive accounts. “First comes anger, for these women and for many others a force of destruction that looms as a constant threat to relationships. Initially it is accompanied by constraint and self- control. But when the provocation continues, as it does when their restraint is mistaken for

acceptance, the anger mounts until it must find some means of release. The first option for most women is crying. But when fury builds up higher” (Campbell, 1993, p. 40), and becomes intolerable, women are as capable of physical aggression as men. Women tend to lash out blindly to release their pent up rage and thus show far less control and direction. Their actions look very different from men and include: Pushing, grabbing, shoving, throwing things, slapping, kicking, biting or hitting. This behaviour appears to men to be truly senseless, because it does not achieve the obvious instrumental goal of dominating another person. Women are however “painfully conscious of the fact that their explosions of physical violence are considered bitchy hysterical or just plain crazy” (Campbell, 1993, p. 50). Responses from others include horror, amusement or embarrassment. Their responses reinforce her realisation that she has broken the rules. “For women, the aim is a cataclysmic release of accumulated tension, for men, the reward is power over another person” (Campbell, 1993, p. 7). For women the fear of aggression is a fear of breaking relationships.

Conflict Resolutions and Coping Strategies

Researchers have studied adolescents’ coping, but few have done so in the context of relational aggression. General research on adolescent coping suggests two main strategies adolescents use to cope: emotion – focused strategies, which include avoidance, ignoring and expressing oneself negatively; and problem – focused strategies, which are characterised by gaining support from others and organising a plan of action to deal with the issue (Remillard & Lamb, 2005).

James and Owens (2005) used a letter writing methodology to examine girls’ peer conflicts. Adolescent girls were asked to write letters about their conflicts with other girls and their coping strategies used. They found that girls’ peer conflicts generated a number of different reactions and responses from the participants. This included seeking support from peers and mothers; avoidance of the situation; revenge or retaliation against the bully; or confrontation of the bully in attempt to find out why they were being aggressed. Consistent with James and Owens’ (2005) findings, Casey-Canon et al. (2001) collected information on middle school girls’ reports of peer victimization by using qualitative interviews. They found that girls’ behavioural responses to victimization included retaliation, ignoring or minimising the incident.

Remillard and Lamb (2005) examined girls coping strategies in regard to relational aggression. The participants in the study completed a structured questionnaire combined with writing a brief personal account of an incident in which they were the victim of relational aggression. An important finding of this study was that 40% of the girls remained friends and became even closer friends with the bully after the incident. The researchers propose that these data may indicate that either relational aggression might not be as harmful as most may think, or rather that girls have developed effective coping mechanisms to deal with such aggression. Further results indicated that seeking social support is the most significant coping strategy in resolving a conflict. The authors suggest that seeking social support may work to preserve a friendship by allowing expression of negative feelings yet avoiding confrontation. Contrary to Remillard and Lamb (2005), Underwood (2003) states that research points to the fact that immediate challenge to the perpetrator by a peer often disrupts the escalation of socially aggressive behaviours. This involves openly confronting the bully about her mean behaviour.

In South Africa, research on aggression and bullying has received little attention in academic scholarship. Recently, however, there has been frequent reporting in the news of disastrous occurrences with school children and aggressive acts towards peers and teachers. There is some recent research that has been conducted on bullying in general in South African schools (Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007). Studies have begun to look at bullying and teachers experiences (De Wet, 2006). However, there is no evidence of studies on girls' aggression and conflicts within the South African context.

In summary, friendships are an important factor in the lives of most girls, yet the relationships between their friendships and conflicts, appears to have eluded close investigation. A few qualitative studies have focused on women/girls subjective experiences of their own aggression in general (Brown, 1998; Campbell, 1993; Jack, 1999; Gilligan & Brown, 1992). These studies have provided an important contextual background for this study. Their research raises a major question about the relationship between women's psychological development and the society and culture in which women are living. This study aims to explore the subjective experience of girls who have been aggressed against by a close friend or friends. The study therefore

focuses on the specific topic of girls' personal accounts of relationally aggressive acts by friends towards them. This study differs from James and Owens (1995) and Casey-Canon et al (2001) in that it explores the verbal accounts of girls' experiences using the voice-centred relational method of analysis. Girls can tell us. Their voices can be heard and knowledge will come from their stories. I hope to learn about girls' experiences, by exploring their feelings and thoughts about themselves, their friendships, and their experiences of conflict with other girls.

Aims of the Study

The main aim of the study is to explore girls' aggression and conflict focusing on the relationship with their friends. A further aim is to find evidence of how girl's experiences of conflict with friends are situated within or in relation to the societal and cultural expectations.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Design

The design of my study is structured within a qualitative, interpretative framework. Qualitative studies enable the researcher to study specific issues in depth, openness and detail as they identify and attempt to understand the information that emerges from the subjects (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Qualitative studies generally select a few information-rich cases which provide for a more detailed and in-depth analysis (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The knowledge that is gained will come from girls' personal accounts of relational aggression. The purpose of this study is largely explorative in nature, as it attempts to look for new insights into girls' peer conflicts (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). An interpretive stance has been taken which assumes that experiences, words, actions and meanings can only be ascertained in relation to the contexts in which they occur. This requires a certain level of 'empathy' from the researcher, whereby it is necessary to try and understand the point of view of the subject under study (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Narratives are seen as dialogues generated within a relationship of interviewer and subject (Gilligan & Brown, 1992). The interviews are thus co-constructed between the participant and researcher. I therefore take a reflexive stance and acknowledge my own participation in the study.

Participants

The study involved 12 Grade 9 girls (14-15 years old) from an all-girls, predominantly White, government high school in Cape Town. The girls come from primarily middle-class or upper-middle-class families. The sample size was small due to limited time and resources; however this is not a major concern for a qualitative study. I used a non-probability, purposeful technique to obtain participants. The study included girls that I previously taught and I have therefore already established a trusting and communicative relationship. This method of sampling is limiting in that it lacks generalisability of results (Mouton, 2001). However, it can be argued that research findings should be transferable. The understandings of detailed accounts within a specific context can be transferred to new contexts to provide a framework with which to make meaning from (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Data Collection

Individual interviews lasting between 10 and 30 minutes were conducted and recorded. As it is the researcher who was the primary instrument for both collecting and analysing the data, skills such as listening, questioning and interpreting were essential (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The individual interviews were unstructured so as to allow the participant the freedom to tell her story in her own way. I followed each girl's lead to enquire more deeply into the meanings attached to her actions and into the context in which they occurred. Individual interviews are a natural form of collecting data and provide for a more intimate and trusting relationship with participants (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The interviews focussed on personal issues and experiences of relational aggression that the girls wished to discuss. Girls were asked to describe an incident in which they were relationally aggressed against (Appendix A).

Procedure

Participants were contacted through the school counsellor and informed in advance as to the general nature of the research. Participants were made aware that participation was voluntary. As the participants are under the age of 18, girls who agreed to participate submitted a parental consent form (Appendix B) prior to being interviewed. Participants assent was also obtained. Interviews took place in a private setting in the school building. The interviews were recorded and notes and reflections

were taken after the interviews. Girls were asked to complete a reflection form about their participation in the study.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct research was obtained from Rustenburg Girls' High School and the Western Cape Education Department (Appendix C). Parental consent was obtained as well as assent from the participants. The participants were ensured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were given the option of withdrawing from the study at will. The interview took place at suitable times so as not to disrupt the academic school schedule. The school counsellor was informed of the research so as to aid if future concerns or problems arose. In the written report all participants were given pseudo-names so as to remain anonymous.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed using the voice-centred relational method of analysis, articulated by Gilligan and Brown (1992). This method is similar to narrative analysis and is called the Listening Guide. The Listening Guide was developed to uncover how girls and women talk about themselves through their relationships while considering research themes (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). The Listening guide is considered to be a feminist method of analysis as it attempts to address unjust social attitudes, actions and beliefs (Cruz, 2003). The transcripts are read and listened to several times with multiple purposes to gain a holistic understanding rather than coding that would fragment the data. The Listening guide requires the researcher to encounter the participant's narrative several times, each time listening for different voices, each of which tells a different narrative of the relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). The analysis requires self-awareness and the ability to hear others from their own standpoints.

The first reading/listening involves examining the overall plot as well as identifying the researcher's response to the narrative. The aim of the second reading is to examine how the participant experiences, feels and speaks about the self. This is done by following the self-statements ("I" and "me") of the participant. The third reading shows how the participant experiences and discusses her relationships. The fourth reading takes a look at the broader social and cultural contexts and structures. The

researcher listens for different voices in the narrative that react with each other, such as conflict, harmony or resolution with each other (Gilligan & Brown, 1992). The tension of or weaving of these different voices is referred to as *contrapuntal*.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The reparation story

Listening to the 12 girls' stories of conflict with friends an overarching plot line emerged. The girls' stories followed the standard story structure including a beginning, middle and end. The stories were scripted along the following kinds of lines: (a) begins with the friendship intact, (b) the friendship begins to take strain and tension builds up (c) relational aggressive acts occur (d) over time friendship is restored (to varying degrees). An example of this overarching story line was captured by the voice of 1 of the girls:

Robyn: I don't know there's definitely like this patch where you sort of like you don't really want to be near each other or you don't want to be around each other and then umm sort of uh I don't know like also sometimes a break like you've had a fight with someone and even though you haven't been talking for a while then all of a sudden there's conversation and you start talking to each other again and then sometimes that triggers it like remember the two girls I told you who all of a sudden stopped being good friends...like now, it happened in the holidays...and now straight away we've coming back to school they weren't talking to each other but slowly and slowly and slowly again they started to talk to each other when they've been around each other...

Ten of the 12 girls gave accounts of past experiences of conflict. These stories all ended with their friendship being repaired to some extent. In narrative analysis this is termed a reparation story. However, 2 of the girls spoke of a conflict situation in which they were currently involved. Both of these girls indicated that at present, they were not friends with the girl involved and remained distant from each other. Despite evidence, it is my feeling that in accordance with the other 10 girls' stories, these 2 girls will most probably restore their friendships over time. I would hypothesize that their current stories place them within the period of distance and not speaking to each other. However, over time this may change.

The first few stages of the reparative story closely resemble the particular sequence of *expressive* accounts identified by Campbell (1993) in relation to her studies on women's aggression with their male partners. All of the girls' narratives show evidence of a threat to their relationship for various reasons. There is a gradual build up of tension which is accompanied by relationally aggressive acts which are masked to not appear aggressive. This can be likened to the stage of constraint and self-control suggested by Campbell (1993). As with expressive accounts, the girls speak of a build up of tension. However, this tension results in relational aggressive acts rather than physical aggressive acts. The conflicts are resolved by forgetting about or ignoring the incident; suppressing their feelings; minimising the incident; or some form of confrontation. If the conflict was confronted it resulted in girls becoming emotional and crying, apologising, and becoming friends again. However, most of the girls told of their friendships repairing over time. This included a period of not talking and not spending time together. This space apart meant that they could become friends again. This suggests that the girls take time out to "get over" their hurt and anger. One of the girls summarised how girls resolve their conflicts:

Sally: but it will like never really be like an upfront, like they won't like go and confront the person about what they have done...A lot of the times they don't, a lot of the time they just like sorta dissolve but they never actually like been diminished or like totally wiped out like ja like no a lot of the time it is never resolved just like they might say something to each other and...

The following paragraphs will take a closer look at the plot line of the girls' narratives and give evidence for the different stages of the story.

(a) Begins with the friendship intact

The story begins with the girl being involved in a friendship with another girl. There is a time when their friendship was intact. The girls speak of themselves in relation to another. They begin their stories with a sense of a unit, an "us" and "we" – a friendship that involves a relationship with another.

Karen: I was best **friends** with...

Kelly: I was **friends**... **we** were...**we** had...

Sarah: ...and when I used to have break with **them**

Ann: **we** were meant to go

Robyn: okay well **we** were best **friends**

Christine: **Amy and I** just fell out

Caitlyn: the time **with Amy**

Gail: ...between **me and Kate**...**we** had a miscommunication

(b) The friendship begins to take strain and tension builds up

All the girls gave different reasons for falling out with their friends. These included: change in interests and self, jealousy, spending too much time together and irritations.

Karen: We different friends we're different now and we were so close last year...

Sally: when I spend too much time with a person...It just gets like so much tension

Sarah: ...like I don't really get along with Taryn and there's tension...we were drifting apart...

Tanya: ...it's just about silly little things

Chrisine: okay well we were best friends and umm she we sort of I became friends with two other people... and she didn't like that

Robyn: it was all like little lies that were built up

Karen: it just got too much...

Hayley: We weren't hanging out with each other as much...

The voices of girls shift from "we" to "I" as they fall out of relationship. The "I" (refer to Appendix D for complete of the girls "I poems") voice coincides with their feelings of isolation, exclusion, and hurt. Without a friend they are alone. Their voices reveal how agonising the break up of a friendship can be.

Hayley: I felt really hurt

Karen: I was so upset and I just I was so angry and I was, fill of with mixed emotions

Kelly: I got really cross...then I got really upset

Sarah: ...and I felt very like I felt like alone

Robyn: like shit, it was terrible. I felt like I started like thinking back again thinking oh my God this is, am I actually doing this stuff?

Ann: ... I'm just over it like I really don't... ja, I don't care really

(c) Relational Aggression occurs

Gossip (speaking behind another's back) and two-faced behaviour were the predominant forms of relational aggressive acts. However, some of the girls' stories included a number of relational aggressive acts including exclusion, ignoring, stealing friends or boyfriends. Examples of relational aggression include:

Sally: there's also a lot of like secret bitchiness

Karen: I started hearing things that she'd been talking about behind my back

Robyn: and umm so she went like behind my back and started making up stories and telling her mom this

Sarah: and like I know she speaks about me behind my back and when she really irritates me I do the same thing

Robyn: because what happened was like I think she was hearing things from other people I was getting cross with her but I was saying stuff that she was saying and I was like oh my word flip is she really my friend

Caitlin: like I just heard a lot of stuff about what she had been saying with other girls behind my back

The covert behaviour of girls suggests that girls silence themselves in order to maintain or restore a friendship. It becomes apparent that this behaviour is what is expected of them as girls in society. The relationship between the authentic "I" and the over-eye (Jack, 1999) causes much confusion and anxiety. This confusion becomes evident in the "I" poems created. (Appendix D) Examples of this tension and confusion include phrases such as: "I didn't know", "I didn't think", "I don't know", "I didn't want to", "I don't want to", "I don't really want" "you don't think".

This confusion causes them to silence themselves: "I just didn't like really talk", "I just wouldn't speak", "I just didn't", "I just like kind of backed off and stuff", "I just bite my tongue... I know I'll say something that's not right...I don't know...".

This tension struggle and effort is evident in their attempts to be the perfect girl:

Karen: I'm just trying to stop talking ... I'm trying to be positive...you know...I don't know I'm just trying not to get involved...

Sally: I'd be like I wasn't being like, I wasn't

Karen: I'm trying to keep friends with her

Sally: trying to please Kim ...

Sarah: I don't try to be nice like I will be nice to

Kelly: I'm trying to stay out of it

The tension and conflicting thoughts and behaviours within themselves is mimicked in their friendships and conflicts with girls. Girls hide their true feelings and their friendships are thus perceived as fake:

Karen: there're not like true friends... I don't know I think just girls trying to be fake and not being who they really are

Sally: they don't have true friendships, they like its sort of false friendships

Sarah: ...they don't have true friendships, they like its sort of false friendships... That they like to pretend they're are good friends but they are not really...

Sally: You either mature and you like start understanding and just ignoring like silly comments that could ruin a friendship... or you umm you'll retaliate and ruin the friendship most of the time.

(e) Gradually become friends again (to varying degrees).

The girls' friendships are restored over time either by forgetting or eventually confronting the issue and revealing their hurt feelings.

Sarah: umm we haven't really spoken about that book thing though but...

Ann: umm I don't know I think I like just forgot about it cause like she doesn't really umm acknowledge like things that she's done wrong and so...

Robyn: like I don't , I don't, I don't remember speaking to her...so like it's taken a really long time to get back like friends again but... I suppose because we haven't talked about it like properly or anything

Kate: ja but I mean not straight away but like slowly but surely like now we...

Kelly: "umm basically we were talking, just friendly, and and she said sorry and cause I just felt like it was so awkward between us and we had this huge long conversation about how she felt like she regretted everything she did and ja it was cool

Ann: so I just said ja I sorry about everything that happened and we just carried on from there...Well we aren't as close as we used to be... but we are friends there's no conflict

Sarah: and umm I've become really good friends with them

Hayley: umm no we're still friends like we've made up and everything ... we were like, like we haven't spent any time together but we still like friendly and stuff

Robyn: so like it's taken a really long time to get back like friends again but..... I suppose because we haven't talked about it like properly or anything

Karen: ...and then um eventually it just got too much and then the one break everyone justjust let all our feelings and said it all straight and just everyone was like crying and it was just such an emotional like a little circus and um I think we just laid it out and said you know just talking a lot about gossiping and talking behind each others back and disrespecting each other and stuff.

Tanya: I have had a few fights with friends but we've got over it now and moved on.

The form of the girls stories of conflict shift back from the "I" voice to the "we" voice - in relation again. There is sense of relief and contentment in their voices. Their personal feelings are positive when in relationship with others. Their sense of self is restored and negative feelings dissipate. However feelings of uncertainty and distrust of their friends may be hidden for fear of losing their friendship again.

Kelly: **we** actually kind of resolved it... **we** realised... **we've** been **friends** for so long... **we** were talking...I just felt like...it was cool...I just said... I am sorry ...**we** just carried on from there...we aren't as close as we used to be... but **we** are friends

Tanya: now **we** like talk to each other ...but **we've** got over it now and moved on...

The girl's stories overall did not focus on the negative feelings or how they resolved the conflict. Instead their stories emphasised the fact that they were friends again and it was all fine. They almost seemed to want to get to the end of the story quickly to let me know that the friendship had been mended and they were friends again. There stories were told in a matter of fact way. Their emotional responses to the conflict and how the conflict was resolved seemed to have been forgotten. I had to ask them how they felt and how the conflict was resolved. What was most important for them was that they were friends again. It was important to examine my relationship with the

girls my and my position of power (being a former teacher). The girls relayed their stories to me in sweet, polite voices. They may have been telling me what they thought I wanted to know. As with conflicts and friendships, their relation to me may be a way of telling their story in line with the societal role of being “a nice, peace-keeping girl”.

REFLEXIVITY

I recorded all my personal thoughts, feelings and reactions after each individual interview. This is a vital step when using the voice-centred relational method of analysis so as to know what counts as evidence (Gilligan & brown, 1992). The recording of my assumptions allowed me to consider my position of power and reflect on and reveal my own personal experiences. This aided my understanding of why I heard what I did and gave space to the voices of the girls.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex nature of girls’ aggression and conflict with their friends. The nature of their friendships and conflicts can be summarised in the words of the girls’: ...”it’s so, I don’t know, it’s complicated” and “it’s skitso the whole time on and off, on and off”. In line with the socio-cultural and developmental theories, this study gives evidence of how girl’s experiences of conflict with friends are situated within or in relation to the societal and cultural expectations.

Due to South Africa’s diverse cultural background studies examining the subjective experiences of girls of different classes, cultural backgrounds and ‘races’ should be conducted. These studies will provide and chance to explore, incorporate and contrast the conflict experiences of girls across the spectrum.

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AUTHOR NOTE

I thank Professor. D. Foster for his supervision and encouragement of my research. I also thank the school involved as well as those girls who kindly volunteered to participate in the study.

FOOTNOTES

1. Indirect aggression is accomplished by the bully without ever interacting with the victim. The bully makes use of social manipulation, often attacking the victim in circuitous ways through a third person in order to conceal the aggressive intent, or otherwise pretending that the behaviour was not aggressive at all (Lagerspetz, et al, 1988).
2. Social aggression is defined as manipulating group acceptance and damaging others social standing (Underwood, 2003).
3. Olweus (1991, p. 413, as cited in Roland & Idsoe, 2001) suggests that, “A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons”.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Individual Interview questionnaire

“I want you to think of a time in the past few years when a very close female friend hurt you by for example: excluding you, gossiping about you, spreading a rumour, or saying something mean behind your back. Please describe the incident in detail and explain how you handled it and what happened after”.

Appendix C

Dear Miss L. Kotze

RESEARCH PROPOSAL: ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PEER CONFLICTS: FRIENDSHIP AND AGGRESSION.

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, educators and learners are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, educators, learners and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. Educators' programmes are not to be interrupted.
5. The Study is to be conducted from **19th June 2007 to 17th August 2007.**
6. No research can be conducted during the fourth term as schools are preparing and finalizing syllabi for examinations (October to December 2007).
7. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey, please contact Dr R. Cornelissen at the contact numbers above quoting the reference number.
8. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the Principal where the intended research is to be conducted.
9. Your research will be limited to the following school: **Rustenburg Girls High.**
10. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Education Research.
11. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:

**The Director: Education Research
Western Cape Education Department
Private Bag X9114
CAPE TOWN
8000**

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards.

Signed: Ronald S. Cornelissen
for: **HEAD: EDUCATION**
DATE: 19th June 2007

Appendix D

I poems

Karen: I was best friends...I got like all off vibes from Chelsea... I started hearing things... she'd been talking ... and then I spoke to...and I didn't know ...I felt really hurt... I didn't know...I wasn't like good friends... but I was friends...I spoke to...I'm... I was so upset... I just... I was so angry...I was full of with mixed emotions ...I just heard ... when she was with me she gave off such a nice vibe... I didn't think I just felt ...and I started...you know... you are not the friendliest...cause they've hurt you ...I just didn't like really talk ...as much as I would...I said I started not ignoring her...I just, wouldn't speak... I just didn't... should I... don't want to be around me... I just like kind of backed off and stuff...it just got too much...just let all our feelings... said it all straight...um I think we just laid it out ...you know just talking...I don't know ...I don't know I just thought...I'm just ...I'm just trying to stop talking ...I know...I'm trying to be positive...you know...I don't know I'm just trying not to get involved... I just get hurt and everyone around me also

Sally: I know it happens to me... I spend too much time with a person...It just gets like so much tension...it's just like, I just bite my tongue... I know I'll say something that's not right...I don't know... I'm getting over it...came to my house ...it just got like too much...she'd be with me...she came to my house...I was just like...so I don't mind...little things that like tick you off... in the end you don't think about it... you realise...you dealing with...little things that like annoy you...I don't know... I'll just say... I'd be like I wasn't being like, I wasn't offended... I don't think she noticed I uhh, was, I didn't think...I didn't want to make it... annoys me... this annoys me about you... I would get upset and she would get upset and then there'd be like a whole big thing...but now it's fine...I feel much better

Kelly: I was friends... I had... I really liked... I got really cross... I didn't talk... I wanted... wouldn't let me...she wouldn't be friends with me... if I got...I think we stopped being friends...and then we just got closer... I invited her to my party... my best guy friend...I liked him... I got really upset...if she was really my friend...I

think....we actually kind of resolved it... I just felt like...it was cool...I just said... I am sorry ...

Tanya: I haven't had... I know...I don't know...I have had a few fights with friends but we've got over it now and moved on...offend me... you would take it seriously...
 Sarah: I think...I'm friends...I am friends...spoken about me behind my back...but it is like that with all of us, it's how we are ...I've never had anything said about me... you know... I haven't... I don't think I've ever fought with someone like just by myself like it's just me... you know...have been said about me ...I try not to like take it too personally... you hear ...you don't want I mean... you don't want... speaking about you...I just feel like hurt and stuff...I get over it...I remember ...I used to go... I used to have... I felt very excluded ... I wasn't allowed ...I didn't feel...were like pinpointing like me... I didn't think...I just kind of felt... I can't have...speak about it in front of me... I felt very like... I felt like alone... I don't know... I don't know... I was like...I don't really know... not about me... but I don't know...I just found... and then I just ...I like now...I've become really good friends...

Ann: she told me... she phoned me...she told me ...I was like okay... she didn't think I was going ...I went ...I phoned ...we went ...I went and she was there ...I was just I walked home... we're still friends... we've made...I don't know... I think I like just forgot...we were like, like we haven't spent any time...we still like friendly... I think ... I was like really upset...we've had... we always fight...I would run after her ...I'm just over it... I really don't...I would like talk ...I would say sorry... I was doing anything ...I don't care really

Robyn: we were best friends... I became friends with two other people ...her mom like started like picking on me ...she came to me...shouting at me ...I was in tears my best friend sort of went behind my back...started fighting with me ...I felt like I started like thinking back... am I actually doing this stuff?...you have second thoughts I mean... we were drifting apart...I think... I don't I don't , I don't, I don't remember speaking to her ...I don't know... my parents...I don't know now we are friends again... I we obviously weren't like as close... you know...come towards you... we talk to each other we're good friends

Caitlin: I think...I think...I would tell her... I was like okay I only told her so... affected my friendship with um other girls...but now its kind of its fine... we don't really talk now... I think it started... was Courtney, Amy and I... I think I asked her, I was like why do you hate me...I never picked that up ...I started noticing...I would come to school... she'll lie to me... I didn't go ... I was just a bit confused... not nice for me... I was...I'm losing... but now I'm actually quite glad... I spoke to her and I spoke to Courtney... I think I asked...I asked her I didn't really know what to say...I think I just left it ...she kind of judges

Christine: my own experience... I don't know...Amy and I just fell out... I don't know ...I don't know...I don't mind not being friends with her...if I worried then I would... I don't know...I don't know... I don't hate her...I don't care...I don't know...I'm not friends... I'm not friends

Gail :I just had a thing with Kate, me and Sam... both trying to be my one friend...but its fine, its like completely sorted out now: I spoke...they told me what...I just spoke... I was like...I don't know... I was like.... I don't want to lose either... I told them ...I don't want to lose either of you...I'm friends with the other person...I don't know... I spoke... I went ... Sam slept at my house... I just spoke ...I was like...I think Sam thought I was excluding her...I was not...I spoke to them... its fine, its fine with me... I think...I've noticed... I don't feel like there's tension... I think its fine

Kate: I can think...my friend... I don't know why...I think... I think...I couldn't go... I'm not quite sure...I almost like wasn't cool...pushed me... I was in the classroom...wait for me...I'm not going to be your friend ...I didn't want to like cause trouble... I just like stood back and watched... I felt so depressed... I was like what have I done... I felt like... I felt... I almost felt like it was my fault...I had done something...what have I done...it wasn't my fault...I think ...I think basically I changed my attitude...I had a very negative attitude... cross with me... I still had such like a negative attitude.... I don't know...now we're friends again...I think talking...I've like got...my other best friend...I stayed here...don't want to be around me...I think...I felt like really, really left out...I would go okay...I stayed...we're really good friends now...I don't know...you just don't...you just...once you decide you know it's sorted...you don't have to like admit its sorted out ...I think...changing

my attitude towards things...I think...I didn't realise I was being so negative... I realised...I was so negative...I changed... I don't, no one told me...I hoped...I wanted to...I'm thinking...I'm not going to...I wouldn't go...I thought...I was positive...I can go...I really wanted to go

Hayley: I came to Rustenburg... she would almost get cross when I went out with other people...I also made like a whole bunch of new friends...I came to high school...I would have to see her...my friends also wanted to see me... I went out with them...I would, I almost like grew...my parents would let me go out...would let me... you know...you know like my friends...I think...act off to me...I would speak to her...you know...I'm okay, I'm never good...I would ask her...I said...I was...I don't like... I had been friends with her since I was like one... I was like...I was like no...I didn't really know...I thought...I went...I think...I saw her...I see her...I think... I wouldn't spend the whole night...I would say hi...I think I saw her...I was used to... I think... it's always like, me and Julia... I said... come to my house... I must go to her house...introduce her to my friends...I'll be friends with her friends... I can go out...she can come out with me...I haven't spoken... I don't know...I don't really speak I can't tell...I don't like I, I hate it...she's cross with me... I feel like she's cross with me... I ask her, I'll be like...you cross with me...disappointed in me... and then I'll tell her how I feel...I've got a whole different life...I don't know, I think...I just don't have time...I'm free... I'm going out...I don't ...I sometimes feel... I'm making the effort...makes me upset...I feel...be my friend...I'll speak...I'll be like...she'll never invite me...she's choosing her other friends over me... I think...I don't know...I was speaking to her...I said...I was like...I would never...I would always...you'll always be my friend...you'll always be my friend cause its just always the way its been ...the way I know it... I just kind of said...I'm going out... I was like...I might go...maybe I'll see you...I felt...I was like...I'm over it because I kept on trying...I don't really know what else I can do...I want to do stuff...I want...I want... never say to me...

Plagiarism Declaration

1. I know that Plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and pretend that it is one's own.

2. I have used the *American Psychological Association (APA)* as the convention for citation and referencing. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in this assignment/essay/report...from the work or works of other people has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

3. This assignment/essay/report... is my own work.

4. I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.

5. I acknowledge that copying someone else's assignment or essay, or part of it, is wrong, and declare that this is my own work.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Student Number: _____

