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| TITLE: | YOUTH VIOLENCE AND JUVENILE JUSTICE. |
| PUBLISHER/PLACE: | Sage Publications Thousand Oaks, CA |
| VOLUME/ISSUE/PAG | 5 / 3 328-345 |
| DATE: | 2007 |
| AUTHOR OF | Chesney Lind |
| TITLE OF | POLICING GIRLHOOD? RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION |
| ISSN: | 15412040 |
| OCLC: | 50304560 |
| MAX COST: | $25.00 IFM |
| COPYRIGHT COMP.: | CCL |
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BARCODE=REG-1044
Policing Girlhood?

Relational Aggression and Violence Prevention

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Relational, covert, and indirect aggression among girls has recently caught the attention of those interested in school violence prevention. In the name of being gender responsive, violence prevention or antibullying programs are being encouraged to include this form of aggression among the sorts of behaviors one seeks to prevent. The authors review the literature on relational aggression and suggest that the research to date does not necessarily support the notions that such aggression is the exclusive province of girls, that those who engage in it have other social problems, and most importantly, that it is equivalent to physical aggression, violence, or bullying. The authors argue, then, that scarce violence prevention resources should not be diverted to prevent this nonviolent behavior. Furthermore, the authors speculate that policing what is essentially noncriminal behavior simply encourages further and unnecessary control over girls and brings an increased number of girls into noncompliance with school rules and policies.

**Keywords:** girls; aggression; social control

The turn of the century has been characterized by an increased attention to girls’ violence and aggression. Much of the intense media interest in girls’ violence is the product of dramatic increases in girls’ arrests for nontraditional, violent offenses. Between 1980 and 2000, for example, girls’ arrests for aggravated assault, simple assault, and weapons law violations increased by 121%, 257%, and 134%, respectively. Boys’ arrests also increased in these categories, but by far less (28%, 109%, and 20%). And the trend continues. For example, between 1995 and 2004, girls’ arrests for simple assault increased by 31.4%, whereas boys’ arrests decreased by 1.4%. Arrests of girls for aggravated assault did drop (by 2.9%) but compare that to the 27.6% drop in boys’ arrests for this offense (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005, p. 285).

It is important, though, to keep these figures in perspective. Despite the increases seen in girls’ arrests, girls still accounted for relatively small proportions of violent crime arrests of juveniles: 10% of murders or negligent manslaughter arrests, 3% of forcible rapes, 9% of robberies, and 24% of aggravated assaults (Snyder, 2004, p. 3). Data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s National Incident-Based Reporting System further confirm the low level of girls’ violence compared to boys’; relatively few (26%) victims who reported
violent crimes by juveniles said that the offender was a female (McCurley & Snyder, 2004, p. 6). Girls were responsible for just 8% of victimizations for sexual assault, 6% of robberies, 22% of aggravated assaults, and 30% of simple assaults committed by a juvenile. In no category did they account for close to half of the victimizations.¹

There are reasons to be somewhat skeptical of police and court statistics showing that girls are increasing in their use of violence. Self-report data sources failed to corroborate this surge in girls’ arrests for violence. In fact, self-report studies often found that girls were becoming less violent during the period that saw their arrests increase dramatically. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that between 1991 and 2005 there was a decrease in the percentage of girls who reported being in a fight, from 34.2% to 28.1% of girls. Boys’ self-reported violence during the same time also decreased, from 50.2% to 43.4%. But in each year, it was still higher than the girls’ rate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1992-2003; see also Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2005).

Why the difference between official statistics and self-reports? Many suspect that zero tolerance policies in public schools and mandatory arrests for domestic violence may have led to more arrests of girls for acts that previously would have been considered either family matters, school matters, or for some other reason, outside of the purview of the police and the courts (Bartollas, 1993; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2007; Russ, 2004). There also is some evidence that police and courts treat girls more harshly than boys (Horowitz & Pottieger, 1991) and that this practice inflates the official statistics for girls.

Although there is debate about whether girls are increasing or maintaining their use of violence, it is recognized that some girls have problems—sometimes serious—with violence and that they hurt others. Given the importance of gender in our society, the etiology of girls’ violence is likely to be influenced by gender, in combination with race, class, and ethnicity, and thus interventions must be carefully targeted to any gender-related and culturally specific causes. The need to understand the etiology of girls’ violence is not in dispute here. Indeed, the authors of this article as well as other researchers have explored the context of girls’ violence and the need for those seeking to intervene in this behavior to foreground these gender-related issues (see Artz & Riecken, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Belknap, 2004; Morash & Chesney-Lind, in press).

Although we very much support gender-responsive prevention and intervention efforts aimed at reducing girls’ violence, we are troubled by another trend: focusing violence prevention and intervention efforts on the policing of girls’ (and occasionally boys’) nonviolent, covert or relational aggression. In this article, we will discuss our reasons for raising questions about this approach, which some contend is a gender-balanced approach to violence prevention and bullying.

In fact, we contend that public concern about youth violence and the many programs created to prevent and intervene in the problem offer an instructive and cautionary case study of the new gender-balanced approach in youth programming. Instead of just implementing programs for boys or taking programs developed for boys and then superficially adapting them for girls, policy makers and program designers in the post-Columbine years drew from the studies about girls and specifically responded to the idea that girls and boys experience and express violence and aggression differently. Also, these policy makers and program designers have made a specific effort to include these indirect or
covert aggressions in violence prevention programs and policies. In this article, we will explore how this gender-balanced strategy can go awry—in ways that we feel seriously disadvantage girls. Specifically, we fear that the focus on girls’ nonviolent aggression in the name of gender responsiveness actually increases the formal social control of girlhood with no concomitant gain in violence prevention.

**Covert Aggression and Girls**

The manipulative and damaging characteristics of girls’ social worlds have been the subject of high-profile bestselling books such as *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (Wiseman, 2002), publications that prompted innumerable newspaper articles as well as hit movies, such as *Mean Girls* (Fey & Waters, 2004), on the topic of girls’ aggression. These works all rely on recent psychological research on aggression, particularly what is termed relational, covert, or indirect aggressions (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001, p. 248). A critical assessment of this literature is vital not only because of the media hype surrounding the topic, but also, as we will document, because this line of research clearly informs current violence prevention and antibullying programs.

To critically assess this approach to girls’ aggression, it is first important to understand the psychological concept of aggression and how this academic definition relates to common sense understandings of aggression (which typically includes fighting and other forms of violence). Psychologists define aggression as “behaviors that are intended to hurt or harm others” (Crick et al., 1999, p. 77). This means that a wide variety of behaviors fall under the category, ranging from rolling one’s eyes and deliberately ignoring people to assault, rape, and murder. Owens et al. (2000) used focus groups to identify the following indirect forms of girls’ aggression: talking about other girls; spreading rumors; breaking confidences; criticizing others’ clothing, appearance, or personality; exclusionary behaviors; making prank phone calls; writing about other girls on desks; and sarcasm. As we shall see, this area of research has created an interesting set of conversations about the harms of indirect or covert aggression. Yet we also need to keep in mind that there may be some problems with a concept of aggression that is so inclusive that such disparate behaviors are covered by the same concept. Although an understanding of all forms of aggression is important, the degree of harm involved in such behavior is important to keep in mind. Finally, we need to recall that this concept clearly includes both illegal and, however unpleasant, legal behaviors.

More to the point, there is increasing evidence that recognition of this new aggression can prompt more formal monitoring and intervention directed at behaviors assumed to be typical for schoolgirls. For example, with support from the National Institute of Mental Health, Stephen Leff, a clinical psychologist at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, designed a school-based intervention, Friend to Friend, for urban, African American elementary school girls considered to be at risk. The at-risk group included not only physically aggressive girls who often pushed, hit, or threatened others, but also relationally aggressive girls, who gossiped, left others out on purpose, and threatened to withdraw friendships. Certainly, it is laudable to assist all children, including boys, in developing positive relationships with each other; however, is it useful to prohibit students, especially girls
who are allegedly most prone to the relationally aggressive behaviors—from gossipping, leaving others out, and threatening to withdrawing friendship for the purpose of reducing bullying and physical aggression? And is it accurate to consider the behaviors of relational aggression to be serious bullying?

Some examples suggest an affirmative answer to these questions. Finessa Ferrell-Smith (2003), a research analyst for the National Conference of State Legislatures, equated bullying with relational aggression in the following statement:

Although relational aggression can be as psychologically or emotionally destructive as the more direct and physical bullying behavior of boys, many school harassment policies focus on physical or direct violence and do not address relational aggression. In addition, female bullying is less likely to come to the attention of school personnel, even though students report that it is common. (p. 1)

A resource made available for the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services within the National Institute of Justice advocates that bullying be addressed with a “multifaceted, comprehensive approach” that includes “establishing a school-wide policy that addresses indirect bullying (e.g., rumor spreading, isolation, social exclusion), which is more hidden, as well as direct bullying (e.g., physical aggression)” (Sampson, 2002, p. 19). Notice that relational aggression is again folded into the mix of behaviors that constitute bullying. Also, Monitor on Psychology, a publication of the American Psychological Association, included an article in a special issue of Psychology and the Prison System. In the article, “Girls use a Different Kind of Weapon,” DeAngelis (2003) notes that relational aggression “may lead girls into trouble” (p. 51) and that “[w]hile no one has shown a tie between high levels of relational aggression and girls’ propensity to break the law, psychologists in the juvenile justice system say they see the behavior all the time” (p. 51). DeAngelis goes on to describe an innovative program that trains foster care parents to recognize and address girls’ relational aggression. Similarly, the emerging research on girls’ aggression is closely linked with and serves as a partial basis for the concept of indirect bullying, as it appears in the Olweus’s antibullying program. A problem with the conceptual mixing of the notion of relational aggression with bullying is that it can open the door, or widen the net, for greater social control and scrutiny of particularly girls’ behaviors, without attention to whether these behaviors actually constitute harmful bullying. For this reason, it is important to examine the literature on indirect or covert aggression and gender differences in these domains closely and carefully and to fully consider what behaviors constitute bullying.

At this point, it is useful to distinguish bullying from aggression. Olweus (1993) defines bullying as either physical or relational aggression, repeated over time, that involves a perpetrator or perpetrators who have more power (e.g., strength) than the victim (pp. 8-10). Aggression is a more general concept, and aggression as it is relevant to youth development varies along three dimensions (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995). Aggression can be physical or nonphysical, overt or covert. It can be a one-time event or continue over time. And it can escalate, decrease, or stay at the same level. Unfortunately, none of the recommendations for increased attention to (especially girls, and at least in one case, African American, urban girls) relational regression include cautions about the difference between
relational aggression and bullying and the variations in severity of aggression. In fact, some of the program models and recommendations conflate girls’ relationship aggression with bullying and other illegal activities.

A Critical Look at Research on Girls’ Aggression

Early research has concluded that, as a group, boys exhibit significantly higher levels of aggression than girls (see Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). This is consistent with arrest statistics illustrating higher rates of violent crime (i.e., murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) for male versus female youth (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005). The perception that males are more aggressive, however, might be more of a factor of how aggression is defined, which historically tended to reflect more overt manifestations. Increasingly, in both the empirical and popular literature, the concept of relational aggression has been discussed and associated with girls.

As noted earlier, the concept of relational or covert aggression relates to a repertoire of passive and/or indirect behaviors (e.g., rolling eyes, spreading rumors, ostracizing, and ignoring), used with the intent to hurt or harm others (Crick et al., 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), and thus the concept expands the range of behaviors that are considered aggressive in nature. On one end of the spectrum are covert, nonphysical forms of aggressive behaviors identified in social science research, whereas on the other end are overt, physical forms of aggressive behaviors that are typically described as violence in common discourse.

By identifying a relational, covert, or indirect aggression, rather than physical type of aggression, researchers argued that they shattered the myth of the nonaggressive girl (see Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992a). These researchers note that girls are as aggressive as boys, when these indirect aggressions are considered. In fact, they claimed that they were not only shattering myths but also unraveling years of gender bias in which male researchers tended to only look at male problems. Bjorkqvist and Niemela (1992b) argued that researchers, “the majority being males . . . may, for personal reasons, find male aggression easier to understand and a more appealing object of study” (p. 5). Consequently, the discovery of female aggression was seen as taking on old stereotypes and also seemed to end a long history of male-biased research and to provide a more gender-balanced approach to explaining adolescent development.

Although this characterization of the discovery has been widely accepted, there are reasons to be a bit more skeptical that this concept benefits girls. First, does this aggression really challenge stereotypes and myths about girls? Recall that the behaviors included in relational or indirect aggression include retaliating against or manipulating another person by spreading rumors about them, giving them the silent treatment, or threatening to end a relationship. In essence, this research is arguing that girls and women are manipulative, sneaky, mean spirited, and backstabbing. These ideas are hardly new, which may, in fact, be one reason that the public and the media embraced them so quickly.

What this area of research is really doing is systematically measuring a set of attributes that have always been associated with girls and women (i.e., their devious and venomous natures) and then intellectually equating these aggressions to boys’ violence. Consider
researchers’ contention that the discovery of girls’ meanness is part of a gender-balanced project and a systematic assessment of problems that are relevant to both sexes (Crick et al., 1999). Looking back at two decades of work, scholars Smith and Brain (2000) concluded that “indirect aggression is more evident in females, and this applies also to bullying,” and because indirect aggression is so hard to pin down and discourage, there are important issues related to “tackling it” (p. 4). In the name of gender balance and equity, we are actually providing new ways to devalue and demonize girls and suggesting the need to police their behavior even more assiduously.

Implicit in this discovery is also the contention that there is a significant gender difference in this behavior, and that “girls are more likely than boys to engage in relational, as opposed to overt, aggression” (Crick, 1996, p. 2317). As we note, although this notion is intuitively appealing, because it tracks gender stereotypes, research addressing this question has been decidedly mixed. Consistent with the view that girls and boys are similarly aggressive, Crick and Grooteter (1995), for example, found that girls in their sample of 3rd to 6th-grade students were significantly more relationally aggressive than were boys. Similarly, Bjorkqvist and Niemelä (1992a) found that when types of verbal aggression (e.g., gossiping, spreading rumors, etc.) were included in their overall measurement of aggression, only 5% of the variance in the composite measure of aggression was explained by gender. This suggests that by using a broader definition of aggression, both boys’ and girls’ unique forms of aggression were accounted for in their study, and gender differences were largely erased.

However, there are a number of studies finding no differences between boys’ and girls’ perpetration of relational aggression (Crick & Grooteter, 1995; Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998; McMaster, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2002; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vemberg, 2001; Putallaz, Kupersmidt, Grimes, & DeNero, 1999; Rys & Bear, 1997). There are a few studies concluding that boys are actually more relationally aggressive than girls are (Craig 1998; Hennington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1998; Little, Henrich, Jones, & Hawley, 2003; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). When we shift to the problem of bullying, according to Olweus’s (1993) research, boys perpetrate the majority of indirect bullying experienced by girls (see Whitney & Smith, 1993). Note that if Olweus’ findings are correct, girls are indirectly victimized more often by boys than by girls; yet this phenomenon rarely makes it into any of the popular books on the topic, which instead showcase girl-on-girl aggression almost exclusively (Chesney-Lind, 2002).

Looking at the research, there are a few possible reasons for these divergent findings. These reasons include the way that aggression is defined as well as how it is measured. For example, Olweus (1993) was examining bullying, which includes direct or indirect victimization carried out repeatedly over time. In contrast, relational aggression can include, but is not limited to, single hurtful acts. Boys might be more likely than girls to practice indirect aggression repeatedly. These differing findings might also be because of sample size and representativeness. Olweus’ (1993) research studied large samples ranging from 900 to 130,000 students, and, in contrast, the relational aggression research tended to draw from smaller samples with 500 or fewer students (sometimes as few as 105; see Storch, Werner, & Storch, 2003). The small-sample studies may reflect atypical school environments or populations of youth.
In addition, Olweus (1993) relied on students’ self-reports of victimization to identify bullying problems, and Little et al. (2003) used self-report methods to measure aggression. In contrast, many relational aggression researchers identify aggressors through peer nominations (see De Los Reyes & Prinstein, 2004, for a review of self-reports vs. peer reports of victimization). In general, classmates tend to nominate boys as more physically aggressive and girls as relationally aggressive; though self-reports confirm the boys’ greater involvement in physical aggression, they show boys and girls to be similar in relational aggression (Odgens & Moretti, 2002, p. 106).

Another reason for the conflicting findings regarding the difference between girls’ and boys’ relational aggression might be that the use of indirect aggression depends on a combination of gender and developmental stage. Girls may be more aggressive than boys in early childhood, but by late adolescence, girls and boys might be equal in their perpetration of relational aggression (Bjorkvist, 1994; Chessler, 2001; Little et al., 2003; Roeker-Phelps, 2001; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et al., 2001; Rys & Bear, 1997; Storch, Nock, Masia-Warner, & Barlas, 2003).

To date, it is not clear whether girls are really more relationally aggressive than boys are. What we do know, however, is that the existing literature suggests that the early conclusions drawn by Crick et al. (1999) were overstated (see also Underwood et al., 2001). The truth is that we need studies with larger samples and multiple measurement techniques to definitively state, once and for all, that girls are equally or even more relationally aggressive than boys. Also, it is probably necessary to distinguish between single relationally aggressive acts and relational aggression that is repeated over time and to make a very clear distinction between relational aggression and actual bullying.

Is Relational Aggression a Serious Problem?

One of the core claims in the emerging literature has been that relational aggression is a major problem that had been ignored. These aggressions, we have been told, exist under the radar of most parents and virtually all teachers, because teachers and parents have their hands full dealing with the much more obvious physical aggression and violence of boys. As a result, “the day-to-day aggression that persists among girls, a dark underside of their social universe, remains uncharted and explored. We have no language for it” (Simmons, 2002, p. 69). Rachel Simmons, in fact, opens Odd Girl Out with her own story. In her case, when she was 8, a popular friend of hers began to whisper to Rachel’s best friend that they should run away from Rachel. One day, they did so on the way to dance class at a local community theater, and she spent much of that year trying to make sense of their desertion. As she puts it, “the sorrow is overwhelming” (p. 2) so “now is the time to end the silence” (p. 3). Paying attention to this aggression, as both academics and journalists who highlight the problem would have us do, reveals that Simmons’ experience is not unique. Not only are the behaviors intended to harm but also do measurable harm arguably for both the victim and the perpetrator. Let’s review the evidence to see if this is, in fact, the case.
First, it appears that relational aggression is one of the most common forms of aggression among children (see Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996). Here, researchers have argued that the commonplace nature of it implies that it should be taken seriously. Specific arguments for the damage caused by relational aggression are that girls report relational aggression to be very hurtful and distressing (Crick, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997) and that victims of relational aggression experience difficulties with peer rejection, depression, isolation, and loneliness (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, 1996; Nansel et al., 2001; Prinstein et al., 2001; Storch, Nock, et al., 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). Similar to the findings that girls are more aggressive than boys, the connection between victimization by relational aggression and negative outcomes is inconsistent and questionable. In some studies, relational aggression does not lead to isolation (Storch, Nock, et al., 2003) or depression (Storch, Nock, et al., 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). Moreover, support from peers may mediate the relationship between relational aggression and loneliness (Storch, Nock, et al., 2003).

To date, the vast majority of studies in this area have been cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, meaning that researchers cannot establish the temporal order between the onset of relational aggression and other problems among youth. Of the few longitudinal studies conducted, the time period examined was very short. For example, one study (Crick, 1996) looked at 3rd- through 6th-grade students for 6 months and established that relationally aggressive girls persist in their behaviors through most of a school year. This finding hardly establishes a temporal order among all the factors under investigation. In fact, the researchers have tended to imply causation when in fact they have established only correlations (and inconsistent correlations, at that) between relational aggression victimization and isolation, depression, and peer rejection. This is a significant shortcoming of the current literature.

More importantly, there is some evidence to suggest that some indirect or relational aggression is actually prosocial rather than antisocial for youth (Underwood et al., 2001; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). Specifically, from a narrative study of aggression among 475 7th-grade youth, Xie et al. (2002) found that “social aggression,” which they defined as “concealed social attack,” was associated with “higher network centrality” among adolescents (p. 205). Expanding on the meaning of this, they speculate that “the majority of socially aggressive children and adolescents may be neither socially incompetent nor suffering from deficits in social cognition” (p. 219); instead, they argue that youth who use indirect aggression might actually have “higher social intelligence” than their counterparts who do not know that “socially aggressive behaviors serve important functions for the individual and social groups” (p. 219).

In contrast to the failure of scientists to identify any long-term negative consequences of relational aggression, the bullying research has identified several negative outcomes of direct bullying. For example, Olweus (1993) stated that bullying is part of a repertoire of antisocial and conduct-disordered behavior that starts in adolescence and becomes progressively worse as time goes on. This statement stems from the finding that, 60% of bullies in Grades 6 to 9 were convicted of a crime by age 24 (Olweus, 1993). It is important to note that this likelihood of arrest was only true for the perpetrators of direct bullying, and it was not true for youth who engaged only in indirect bullying.
In short, although popular books such as *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) claimed that there were many harms associated with indirect aggression, the truth is that to date, aggression researchers have failed to identify any long-term negative consequences of indirect aggression in contrast to clear evidence of harm associated with physical aggression.

**Does Relational Aggression Lead to Physical Aggression?**

Turning now to the idea that relational and physical aggression comprise two types of the same underlying behavior, perhaps with one leading to the other, there is reason to question this version of equality. Researchers have generally supported the idea that relational and physical aggression are different types of the same underlying behavior, because relational and physical aggression are moderately correlated (see Crick & Grotfeldt, 1995). As Crick and Grotfeldt (1995) argued, “the moderate magnitude of this correlation \( r = .54, p < .01 \) is what one would expect for two constructs that are hypothesized to be different forms of the same general behavior” (p. 715). If they lacked any correlation, then these behaviors would be seen as completely different, and if they were highly correlated, they would be viewed as the same behavior. We, however, argue that establishing a moderate correlation is not sufficient enough to state that physical and relational aggression are two parts of a whole. Finding a considerably larger correlation between relational and physical aggression, Little et al. (2003) agreed with our conclusion, based on the additional finding that the two types of aggression were differently related to other variables (p. 83).

Finally, and most importantly, is relational aggression a step in the development of a pattern of violence? Recall that it is violence prevention that started the whole antibullying initiative and supplies the justification for intervention into the lives of young people. There is certainly reason to continue to be concerned about youth violence in the United States. Although youth violence has been dropping in the last decade, the United States still has the highest rate of firearm-related deaths among youths in the industrialized world (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001) and, as of 2003, violence was still the second leading cause of death for 15 to 24 year olds (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Death statistics are just the most serious outcomes of violence and do not include the physical injuries that youth sustain and survive on a daily basis as the outcome of physical violence. Even if we accept the findings of studies showing high correlations between relational and physical violence, it is as plausible, if not more plausible, that a common cause accounts for this correlation, rather than a tendency for relational aggression to lead to physical aggression.

Indeed, other more careful research has failed to confirm a clear progression from covert or relational aggression to violence. Data from a longitudinal study of 475 youth followed from Grade 7 into adulthood showed that although physical aggression “significantly increased a person’s risk for school dropout and criminal arrest” and verbal aggression “significantly increased teen parenthood,” social or relational aggressions “were not predictive of developmental maladjustment.” (Xie et al., 2002, p. 219) The authors argued, in fact, that these results “suggest that subtle aggressive behaviors may be normative in development” (Xie et al., 2002, p. 219).
Gender Responsive or Gender Blaming: The Emergence of the Girl Bully

Linda, aged 12, was allegedly victimized by her classmates because she was “too posh.” It appears that Linda had made friends with another girl in the class and they went around together. The alleged ringleader of the small bully group tried to destroy this friendship and eventually succeeded, leaving Linda fairly isolated. Later on, another girl in the bully group persuaded Linda to give a party at home and then made sure no one came. Linda’s self-confidence was completely destroyed. (Olweus, 1993, p. 8)

Linda’s story was one of those chosen by Olweus (1993) to open his book Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do. When the book first appeared in 1993, bullying was considered a normal aspect of adolescent life both in the United States and Norway. Olweus, a psychology professor at the University of Bergen in Norway, had been up to that point best known in the academic community for his research on aggression among adolescent boys (Olweus, 1977, 1978, 1979). His interest remained largely scientific and academic until 1982, when the suicides of three adolescent boys who had been severely bullied shocked Norway. In Olweus’ (1993) own words, the triple suicide “triggered a chain of reactions, the end result of which was a nationwide campaign against bully/victim problems in Norwegian primary and secondary/junior schools” (p. 2). Having spent a decade researching peers and aggression, Olweus found himself taking a leadership position in the northern European antibullying movement, lending a scientific and research-based perspective to the design and implementation of national antibullying strategies. Ultimately, he would create his own intervention curricula.

Olweus’s (2002) Bullying at School, a book intended for teachers, parents, school administrators, and legislators, would become central to framing the problem and offering potential solutions. In fact, Linda’s story was gleaned from newspaper accounts and was slightly adapted for inclusion in Olweus’ book. But including Linda’s story before launching into the research and facts about bullying implied that the problem of bullying had both a female and a male face.

That Linda’s friends were certainly cruel, at least in this constructed account, is undeniable; however, the narrative item immediately following Linda’s story in Olweus’ book details a far more serious situation:

Schoolboy Philip C. was driven to his death by playground bullying. He hanged himself after being constantly threatened, pushed around, and humiliated by three of his classmates. Finally, when the shy 16-year-old’s examination notes were stolen days before he was due to sit an important exam, he could take no more. Frightened to tell his parents, Philip chose to die. When he came home from school, he hanged himself by a rope from his bedroom door. (Olweus, 1993, p. 8)

Note that girls’ gossip and relational aggression is clearly equated and conflated with boys’ violence in the positioning of these two accounts of bullying. However, none of this would have necessarily been any concern in the United States had not a critical event occurred in the late 1990s that would propel bullying to the top of every school administrator’s to-do list.
The horrific Columbine shootings of 1999 had a dramatic policy fallout that initially focused on gun violence but gradually shifted to a national concern about bullying. This shift was largely a product of the determined and effective opposition of the National Rifle Association to any form of gun control legislation (CBS Evening News, 2000), but it was also the product of an influential report by the Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education that examined common traits among numerous school shooting incidents (or targeted events) in the United States. The finding that “almost three-quarters of the attackers \( n = 29 \) felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others prior to the incident” (Vossekuil, Robert, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002, p. 21) became one of the most noteworthy and oft-cited points made in the report.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Colorado set a national precedent by being one of the first states to link bullying and school violence and to pass antibullying legislation in 2001. Although previous legislation addressing school violence had focused on zero-tolerance policies, the Colorado antibullying legislation mandated that each school district adopt a bullying prevention and education policy and strongly encouraged schools to adopt antibullying programs (www.ncsl.gov). By May 2003, 32 states had introduced antibullying bills, and according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, by September of 2006, 28 states had passed some sort of antibullying legislation (http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/SchBullyingLegislation.htm).

Although Colorado’s approach encouraged the adoption of prevention programs, other states, such as Arizona, mandated that school personnel report suspected bullying incidents to appropriate officials. Once bullying became a behavior that could result in formal reporting, investigations, and mandatory punishments, states and schools needed to define what constituted bullying. In some states, such as Georgia, bullying was limited to actions that caused or threatened bodily harm. Other states, including New Jersey, adopted broader definitions that also included actions or words meant to insult or demean students or to interfere with the orderly operation of the school. In fact many states, such as Idaho and Mississippi, have combined antibullying with antiharassment policies. Maine specifically included sexual harassment in its antibullying legislation.

The merging of bullying and harassment problems is extremely problematic for girls. Girls are not only more likely than boys to be the victims of sexual harassment, especially in its most severe forms, but also they have clear legal rights when they experience this form of sex discrimination. Those gains could well be lost when sexual harassment is relabeled as a form of bullying, a behavior that, remember, included indirect and relational aggression (Brown, Chesney-Lind, & Stein, in press). More to the point, here, violence prevention initiatives that conflate covert and relational aggressions with direct aggression and violence seem to suggest that girls’ nonviolent aggressions are roughly equivalent to boy’s violence—enter the “girl bully” and programs to control her, such as Olweus’ Bullying Prevention Program.

**Girls and Bullying Prevention**

On the surface, the focus on bullying in the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program seems to offer schools an egalitarian approach to youth violence and an alternative to many of the
more punitive, zero-tolerance approaches also being implemented at the time. Instead of removing bullies from the school, the Olweus program was designed to intervene in bullying and change behaviors at early stages, working with bullies or potential bullies before they became more serious delinquents. The fact that self-reported rates of delinquency decreased when bullying prevention programs were implemented in research trials (Melton et al., 1998) seemed to suggest that schools do not need to suspend, transfer, or expel students to solve behavior problems.

So what about gender? For years, researchers had critiqued the fact that delinquency prevention and intervention programs were too often developed using data from studies of boys, then applied in practice to boys and girls (Kersten, 1989; Mann, 1984). In shaping his antibullying program, Olweus sought to avoid this problem. Although his primary research focus was boys’ aggression, he was aware of emerging research about aggressive girls (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992a) and made sure to consider these research findings as he created his program. He also tested the program with girls and boys, and his guides to implementers thoroughly discussed the ways in which both genders experienced bullying (Olweus, 1993).

Olweus’ attempts to address girls’ aggression with his program emerged at the same time that a collection of research findings about girls’ developmental outcomes chronicled additional reasons to be concerned about the state of girlhood. Because of Gilligan’s pathbreaking work in the 1980s, a growing literature on girls’ development documented that adolescence is a difficult time for girls, but later girl-focused books would increasingly locate the source of the problem not with sexism, ageism, or racism in the settings where girls find themselves but rather in girlhood itself (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2007). Certainly, the mean-girl books of the 1990s, particularly Odd Girl Out, identified the source as what might be described as a toxic girl culture.

Olweus’ efforts to incorporate research regarding girls’ aggression into bullying prevention seemed, on the surface, to offer an approach to violence prevention that includes the unique challenges that girls confront on the pathway to adulthood—being the victim of other girl’s relational aggression. We are fundamentally concerned, though, that this equity is misleading and that it has encouraged both negative attention to and inappropriate interventions with girls.

The programs’ primary flaw was that it included an overly broad spectrum of behaviors into its definition of bullying. As noted earlier, Olweus (1993) contends “a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 9). Furthermore, “such negative actions include intentionally inflicting, or attempting to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another” (Elliott, Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 2002, pp. 7-8). Bullying was categorized as direct (physical or verbal attacks) or indirect—“making faces or obscene gestures, or intentional exclusion from a group” (Elliott et al., 2002, p. 8).

According to the logic of the bullying prevention program, rolling one’s eyes at another person is a less extreme form of bullying than hitting or punching them, but they are, at their core, both bullying. We argue that this construction of aggression is problematic, for a number of reasons. Notably, there is evidence to suggest that nonphysical but emotionally hurtful behaviors such as rolling eyes at, spreading rumors about, or excluding individuals from a group belong in a different category of behaviors than physical attacks, in terms of the dynamics involved, the consequences of the behavior, and the long-term implications of the
behavior. Beyond the logical imprecision of conflating indirect or relational aggression with direct bullying (i.e., violence), there are important practical reasons to separate the two behaviors. As we have seen, bullying has been increasingly connected to school violence, particularly lethal school violence, in popular opinion and legislative action. For this reason, we argue that this conflation has encouraged public condemnation of and increasingly harsh punishments against girls absent any data to indicate that these interventions are either warranted or necessary.

In their attempts to educate the public about the consequences of bullying, proponents of the Olweus program contended that bullying is a serious problem and should not be treated as a normal part of growing up for either boys or girls. The data used to advance these claims were usually alarming. For example, in his bullying prevention literature, Olweus (1993) argues that long-term studies of bullying victims demonstrated that they were more prone to depression and low self-esteem than nonbullied individuals. In addition, it was argued that “in some cases, the victims’ devaluation of themselves becomes so overwhelming that they see suicide as the only possible solution” (Elliott et al., 2002, p. 12). The bullying prevention program encourages schools to make parents aware of the seriousness of bullying by circulating informational fliers and fact sheets about bullying. Included in one sample brochure is the statement that “60 percent of children who are identified as bullies in middle school go on to have arrest records. We need to address the behavior problems of these children at an early age, before it becomes [sic] even more serious” (Elliott et al., 2002, p. 69). Apparently, schools also suffer at the hands of bullies. In “schools with high levels of bullying problems, students tend to feel less safe and are less satisfied with school life” (Elliott et al., 2002, p. 13). The message is that bullies are making schools unsafe places to be. Moreover, if bullying is not stopped, society will have a worse time containing the bullies when they become even bigger menaces.

These arguments about the severity of the bullying problem come from research on the long-term effect of boys’ direct bullying—not girls’ or boys’ indirect bullying—and the conclusion that direct bullies went on to have arrest records comes from research on boy bullies. Because the program defines bullying as direct and indirect behaviors, however, the public assumes that it is both types of bullying that lead bullies to become criminal, victims to develop depression and low self esteem, and students, in general, to feel less safe and satisfied at school. And because the public perceives girls to be the major culprits of indirect bullying (although, as we have shown, this is actually not consistently found in the research literature), it is consequently assumed that it is both girls and boys who are responsible for these negative outcomes.

**Gender Responsive or Gender Blaming?**

As this article has noted, there are a number of reasons why trying to prevent girls’ violence by curbing their meanness is a questionable strategy. First, relational aggression does not predict developmental maladjustment; there is evidence that it is normative and desirable for youth (Underwood et al., 2001; Xie et al., 2002). Aggression has the positive effects of making separation from others, individualization, competition, achievement, and the initiation of new relationships possible (Hadley, 2003, p. 391). Second, as already noted,
it is debatable that girls are particularly inclined to use and/or approve of relational aggression, and if there are gender differences in these forms of aggression, they seem to end by late adolescence. Finally, relational aggression is not illegal, and any focus on it would expand the juvenile justice intervention net to a group of people that are not even likely to be involved in the physical violence that is illegal. Even if intervention into relational aggression for both boys and girls improves youths’ social skills in school, peer group, or family settings (an outcome that is debatable), it cannot be viewed as a useful violence prevention strategy.

Even for girls who act violently and direct relational aggression toward other girls, how relational aggression is handled must be carefully thought through. Many girls are socialized to be conciliatory and to avoid conflict so that they are included in relationships and liked by other people (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Underwood, 2003; Zahn-Waxler, 2000). Indirect acts are sometimes the only way that girls have to express their anger or even their preferences for friends. Alternatives to physical and direct aggressions are, fundamentally, weapons of the weak, and as such, they are as reflective of girl’s powerlessness as they are of girl’s meanness (Brown, 2003). Girls, women, and others in relatively powerless groups have not, historically, been permitted direct aggression (without terrible consequences). As a result, in certain contexts, and against certain individuals, relational aggressions were ways the powerless punished the bad behavior of the powerful. This was, after all, how slaves and indentured servants—female and male—got back at abusive masters, how women before legal divorce dealt with violent husbands, and how working women today get back at abusive bosses. As one psychologist put it, “There is reason to question any approach that potentially serves to discourage females from expressing anger and aggression and reminds them of their subordinate positions in society” (Zahn-Waxler, 1993, p. 81). Given the many negative contexts and experiences that contribute to girls’ violence, a focus on their own meanness misses the mark in addressing the causes of that violence.

**What is Really Going On Here?**

The indirect aggression, school violence, and bullying literatures suggest the need for interventions that will stop girls from being mean to each other, and perhaps to boys as well. Research on girls’ lives, however, suggests the need for interventions that give girls a fuller picture of where their criticisms of other girls might come from. For example, numerous examples from Owen et al.’s (2000) focus groups suggest that gender relations and statuses are important in aggression in school settings but not as ordering mechanisms that lead girls to mostly use indirect aggression and boys to use physical aggression. When girls (and boys) call girls *sluts* or make jokes by asking about pregnancy test results in prank phone calls, they are reflecting the common double standard that prohibits sexuality in teenage girls, but encourages it for boys. Moreover, Owen’s focus group participants said they engaged in bitching and talking for “something to do,” and she observed the male-dominated use of the playground and the small areas where girls indeed had little else to do but to “bitch.” Again, gender arrangements are central to understanding girls’ and boys’ behavior. However, the decontextualization of research participants from these gender arrangements can lead to recommendations for policing rather than empowerment.
Notes

1. There are some situations and contexts where girls come closer to boys in their levels of violence but none where they surpass boys. Particularly in large cities, significant numbers of girls are beaten by their peers, in most cases by other girls (Singer, Anglin, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995). Also, probably because of their involvement in childcare, among children younger than 2 years who were victimized by a juvenile, 34% were victimized by a girl. In U.S. schools, national surveys reveal that boys are three times more likely to carry weapons than girls (Odgars & Moretti, 2002, p. 104), but in selected inner-city schools, there is no gender difference (Webster, Gainer, & Champion, 1993).

2. Similar programs targeting girls' relational aggression include the Empower Program designed by Roselind Wiseman, author of Queen Bees and Wannabes, and the Girls' Leadership Institute founded by Rachel Simmons, author of Odd Girl Out.

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