

# “I know they are manipulating me...” Unmasking indirect aggression in an adolescent girls’ friendship group: A case study

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**Jillian Huntley**

School of Education, Flinders University [jillianh@smc.sa.edu.au](mailto:jillianh@smc.sa.edu.au)

**Laurence Owens**

School of Education, Flinders University [larry.owens@flinders.edu.au](mailto:larry.owens@flinders.edu.au)

*Adolescence marks the beginning of a significant shift away from the world of parental support to the formation of intimate friendships with peers. Developmentally, this is an important time for adolescents as they seek to develop interpersonal skills, share activities and develop a deeper sense of understanding of themselves and others through shared confidences and self-disclosure. This is particularly the case for adolescent girls, who value the intimacy they find in small close-knit friendship groups. However, these groups, due to their intimate structure, can become a breeding ground for conflict including indirect aggression. This paper examines one girl’s experience of the hurt and alienation she suffered within her friendship group. An interventionist approach using Narrative Therapy and the practices associated with externalising the problems within her friendship group allowed this girl to reclaim her sense of self and reconstruct new expectations for the inclusion of new friends in her life.*

Adolescence, girls, narrative therapy, externalising, indirect aggression

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of dramatic changes incorporating the onset of puberty, the development of abstract patterns of thinking (Erwin, 1998) and the transformation of social networks that become “both more diverse and differentiated” (Furman and Buhrmester, 1992; Hunter and Youniss, 1982, cited in Collins and Laursen, 2004, p.57.) Extremely important to adolescents during this period is the development of social networks that offer intimate friendships. “Intimacy in friendship is defined narrowly as self-disclosure or sharing of private thoughts” (Santrock, 2001, p.196), and involves the ability to share one’s personal information, thoughts and feelings with another person or persons. Intimacy is usually characterised by a sense of physical and emotional closeness where hugging and touching is permitted allowing the person to relate to another on a deeper level. It is these friendship groups that become the major reference points for adolescents to obtain feedback regarding their own abilities as well as information about the world outside the family (Santrock, 2001).

Sullivan (1953 cited in Collins and Larsen, 2004) suggested that intimate friendships (which intensify during adolescence) provide adolescents not only with an outlet for self-disclosure, but also with the opportunity for a deeper understanding of others.

Adolescents find a sense of themselves and of belonging through emotional support and shared discussions of ideas, values and goals. Intimate friendships contribute to the development of an

adolescent's identity, which Sullivan argued was necessary for an adolescent to find a healthy sense of self. Erikson (1968) named adolescence as a time of "Identity versus Identity Confusion." He said that adolescence is a time of teenagers finding out who they are and where they are going in life. Erikson suggested that adolescents must be allowed to explore this process in a healthy manner so that they can find their own identity and move into the next stage of development - "Intimacy versus Isolation." Failure to move through this process through too much parental intervention or an inability to explore a range of options can lead to "Identity Confusion." Erikson suggested that one must have a healthy sense of self before experiencing healthy intimate relationships, while Sullivan maintained that failure to find a healthy sense of identity leads to feelings of poor self worth and loneliness.

### **Friendship**

The importance of same-sex friendship groups during adolescence cannot be underestimated, as it is within these groups that adolescents begin to explore the nature of intimacy, mutuality, self-disclosure, trust and loyalty. These relationships "appear to provide critical interpersonal experiences that establish a template for all subsequent close peer affiliations" (Sullivan, 1953, cited in Collins and Laursen, 2004, p.59). Connell and others (cited in Dunphy, 1969, p.26) "found widespread agreement among adolescents on the qualities most desirable in peer group companions." These qualities included – an attractive personality, someone who could take a joke, was a good sport, good mixer, friendly, even-tempered, honest, reliable, good sporting ability, looked good, shared the ideas and activities of the group and was willing to conform to the group's expectations. Conformity to the culture of the group would be imperative if an adolescent were to be accepted into that group.

The nature of adolescent friendship groups differs markedly between boys and girls. While there are some similarities in terms of connections with peers who have similar social backgrounds and similar likes and dislikes, (Erwin, 1998), the way in which same-sex groups experience intimacy differs significantly. Adolescent boys are most likely to have friends who participate in the same sports or are involved in the same activities, share similar attitudes and enjoy companionship (Erwin, 1998; Maccoby, 1998). While they do show intimacy through self-disclosure to friends they are less likely and less interested in "a deep and repeated analysis of personal experience and reactions that are so characteristic of adolescent girls' friendships." (Dolgin and Kim, 1994, cited in Erwin, 1998, p.82). Boys often operate in larger groups "and learn to live within a complex organisational structure with a broad system of rules and possibly including a number of individuals who are not particularly liked" (Erwin, 1998, p.82). Through identification with and support from the group, boys gradually develop a level of personal autonomy, although the cost of group membership requires loyalty and conformity to the rules of the group.

Adolescent girls however, have smaller groups of close personal friends allowing them to share an emotional closeness based on trust, personal worth and intimacy. Adolescent girls look to their friendship groups for support and confidantes, placing great importance on the value of trust and confidentiality. It is within these groups that girls come to understand the world and their place in it (Jones and Costin, 1995, cited in Erwin, 1998).

### **Cliques and Crowds**

Dunphy (1969, p.76) suggested that with both sexes: "Initial acceptance into a group depends on conformity to the group culture [although] this does not guarantee membership indefinitely." Being able to remain in one's group involves the ability to conform to the changing expectations of the group as adolescents change developmentally. Dunphy (1969) asserted that the most commonly identified peer groups in adolescence were the clique and the crowd. The clique was generally considered to be a "small and highly cohesive group of intimate friends"(about a third of

the size of a crowd) who met with high frequency providing an adolescent with a basic safety and opportunity to talk and exchange ideas. Dunphy (1969, p.59) said that, "Analysis of the content of conversation in the clique shows that it performs an important instrumental function in that it is the centre for preparation of crowd activities, for dissemination of information about them, and for their evaluation after they are over." The crowd would be larger and "more loosely organised associations made up of the members of a number of cliques who regard each other as peers of equals" (Dunphy, 1969, p.60). Crowd activities included organised social events such as parties, dances, and sporting events and provided an opportunity for the sexes to interact. Dunphy suggested that for an individual, the crowd was the most significant group because of the opportunities to interact with the opposite sex, but that membership in a crowd was preceded by prior membership in a clique.

Dunphy's (1969) study of adolescent friendships and the way in which cross-sex relationships emerged is documented in his research on the five developmental stages of transition for adolescents as they moved from same-sex relationships to cross-sex relationships in cliques and crowds. The first of Dunphy's five stages, the Pre-crowd Stage was the one most relevant to this paper. This stage involved isolated unisexual cliques where boys and girls were both still active in same sex groups, but with boys forming larger more stable groups that actively joined each other to do things. At this stage girls formed smaller more intimate groups and got together for talking and personal sharing. Erwin (1998, p.86) said, "Same-sex friendships become more intimate and irreplaceable throughout adolescence, and generally demand higher levels of loyalty and commitment. This is especially marked in female relationships."

### **Peer Conflict**

However, Cole and Hall (1964, cited in Dunphy, 1969) suggested that cliques were crowds that had become dysfunctional and that a clique was a 'caricature of a crowd' emphasising the least desirable characteristics. Cole and Hall further suggested that cliques were unhealthy both socially and emotionally for the welfare of the members, because as an organisation they were too tight and intolerant. This could be particularly evident in the tight social structure of adolescent girls' friendship groups, where intimacy, trust, confidentiality and relationship was highly valued, but it could also become a breeding ground for damaging, hurtful and exclusionary behaviour. This behaviour, referred to as "relational" aggression (Crick 1995; Crick and Bigbee, 1998; Crick, Casas and Mosher, 1997; Rys and Bear, 1997), "social" aggression, (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson and Garipey, 1989; Galen and Underwood, 1997; Paquette and Underwood, 1999) and "indirect" aggression (Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Kaukiainen, 1992; Owens, 1996, Osterman et al., 1998, Owens, Shute and Slee, 2000) is currently the terminology used to describe the damaging and exclusionary behaviour girls can inflict on each other within their friendship groups.

Finnish researchers (Bjorkqvist, et al., 1992, p.52) have defined 'indirect aggression' to be

a kind of social manipulation: the aggressor manipulates others to attack the victim, or by other means, makes use of the social structure in order to harm the target person, without being personally involved in the attack.

However, in intervening with the conflicts and victimising behaviours that occurred within girls' friendship groups it would be necessary to recognise that every group consisted of "a process of interaction between a number of individuals" (Dunphy, 1969 p.31) and within these groups, it was the "process of interaction" that caused the problems.

### **Externalising as an Intervention**

Narrative therapy is a process that offers strategies for understanding the ways in which people's lives are affected by the problems they experience. "It views problems as separate from people

and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to change their relationship with the problems in their lives” (Morgan, 2000, p.2). Using a Narrative approach to examine the so-called problem-saturated ‘process of interaction’ by acknowledging the problem as the problem, rather than the personalities of the girls as the problem is an alternative way of intervening in the difficulties caused by girls’ peer aggression.

Engaging a client in externalising conversations establishes a context for allowing the person to speak about the problem in ways that separate himself or herself from the problem. Through externalising conversations, a person is able to speak about the problem in a way that makes it less fixed and restrictive. The process of ‘externalising’ encourages a person to speak of the problem as a separate entity, external to the problem to which it is ascribed (White, 1998). Morgan (2000, p.4) said,

Externalising conversations begin to disempower the effects of labelling, pathologising and diagnosing that are commonly experienced of people as impoverishing of their lives. They open possibilities for people to describe themselves, each other and their relationships from a new non-problem saturated story.

Externalising conversations allow the development of an alternative story, which includes the possibilities for a person

to take action to retrieve their lives and relationships from the problems and its influence and to undermine the sense of failure that has developed for many persons in response to the continuing existence of the problem despite their attempts to resolve it. (White, 1988, p.6)

The following case study examines the way one female student (called Jana in this study) dealt with significant aggression (mainly indirect) from her school friendship group. Separating her identity from the problem by acknowledging and documenting her own understandings of what was appropriate and inappropriate within friendship groups enabled her to learn new skills and strategies to deal with the difficulties in her friendship group. Morgan (2000, p.8) said that,

By enabling people to separate from the problems about which they are seeking assistance, externalising conversations allow for exploration of the relationship *between* the person and the problem.

Using externalising conversations to examine the problems associated with the process of interaction within the student’s friendship group not only allowed Jana to see what was occurring, but also allowed her to generate new expectations for constructing respectful friendships.

### CASE STUDY

This case study is written from the point of view of the first author and was undertaken in a middle-class co-educational senior secondary school in metropolitan Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. Informed consents were obtained from the student, her parent and appropriate school personnel. The names below are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Jana was a 17 year-old Year 11 student I was supporting with literacy tutoring and counselling for a range of difficulties she was experiencing in her life. Her parents had migrated from Eastern Europe, and her father, whom she had been particularly close to, had died some years earlier, leaving her mother to raise three adolescent children. There was very little support for the family as their relatives were all in Europe. Jana had an older brother living at home whom she had not spoken to for a number of years, and a younger brother with whom she was in constant conflict. The generation gap and her mother’s European background meant that Jana had a tense

relationship with her mother. It was very difficult for Jana's mother to manage the aggressive behaviour of her children and this created further conflict because her children had very little regard for her methods of discipline. Jana felt that her mother did not understand the Australian culture and the difficulties that she was trying to cope with academically and socially.

Very early in my work with Jana it became apparent that not only was her home life difficult but her friendship group was causing her significant difficulties and this was affecting her ability to cope with her schoolwork. Jana was often in tears and anxious because of hurtful comments, did not know whom she could trust within the group, and was beginning to define herself negatively based on the hurtful comments within the group. In particular, Jana was very anxious about going to her Science classes as one of the girls from the group was also in the class. This girl, knowing how close Jana had been to her father, frequently mouthed or whispered unkind comments to Jana about her father, sometimes also passing her notes. Jana, despite her numerous attempts to sit away from the girl was always aware of her presence no matter where she sat. Jana said she was often preoccupied in Science because she was trying to ignore this girl so that she would not cry. She believed the teacher was unaware of what was happening and she did not want to tell him. Crick and Grotper (1995) have reported high levels of depression, social anxiety, social avoidance and loneliness among victims of relational aggression which, on occasions, have led to a girl wanting to leave the school or of having thoughts of committing suicide.

In my work with adolescents, so often I see that what is done in the name of 'friendship' can be profoundly abusive, and can have adolescents judging themselves in ways that are not only detrimental to their sense of self, but also to their understanding of the ways in which people relate to each other. Owens, Shute and Slee (2000b) found that there are two main categories for the explanation of girls' indirect aggression. First, it alleviated boredom and creates excitement, thereby giving the girls something to do, and second, a girl's desire to be part of the group and to have close friends led them into indirect aggressive behaviours as a form of self protection and acceptance within the group.

Indirect aggression is present in a variety of ways within tight knit adolescent girls' groups. Typical behaviour includes spreading false rumours about a particular girl, speaking derogatorily about a girl when she is not present, "bitching," gossiping and perhaps most hurtful of all, exclusion from the group (Owens, Shute and Slee, 2000). The covert nature of indirect harassment means that it does not always come to the attention of teaching staff or school authorities. However, girls who are victims of indirect aggression through adverse peer relationships can experience significant emotional distress with suicidal tendencies surfacing (Rigby and Slee, 1999).

In Jana's friendship group there were seven girls aged between 16 and 17 years old. All but two of the girls accessed extra tutoring to help them cope with the curriculum. The girls as a group, were enmeshed through circumstances rather than choice as they were girls who were not part of the so-called 'in' crowd, were not highly literate, and did not have many skills for coping with the difficulties they faced – academically and socially – which was why many of the problems occurred.

My discussions with Jana focussed on the behaviours and attitudes occurring within the group, the so-called 'process of interaction', looking at the problem as the problem rather than specific girls within the group. Frequently, any one of the girls could be drawn into negative behaviour and attitudes, so what was occurring was not being caused by one particular girl but rather, was part of the group dynamics. Owens, Slee and Shute (2001) found that girls, in their desire to have close friendships and be part of a group, were prepared to "endure on going harassment" for the sake of popularity, but when a number of girls were involved in excluding an individual, there could be a "diffusion" or "dilution" of responsibility, which in turn, resulted in a diminished sense of guilt on

the part of the aggressor (Owens, Slee and Shute, 2001, p.223). Unmasking the behaviour and attitudes of the group became our focus.

In our early discussions we talked about what the term ‘friendship’ meant and what Jana’s understanding of a friend meant. This was something Jana had not previously considered. Hay, Payne and Chadwick (2003, p.5) suggested that: “Successful social interaction depends on a mutual understanding of each participant’s status as an active intentional agent.” Erwin (1998, p.77) said: “the quality of relationship that the adolescent is able to establish with the peer group is important” because it is within this group that “they will derive corresponding benefits in terms of the amount of emotional support, assistance and social learning that is possible, and this is reflected in their self esteem.” Through our discussions, Jana began to analyse the types of behaviours that were occurring in the group, and whether the particular behaviours were appropriate or inappropriate in terms of relating to friends. Jana was able to name the particular qualities she was looking for in a friendship group, none of which she saw operating in her current group. Jana was clear that the group interaction consisted of what she named as abuse, competitiveness and manipulation.

As Jana had named the interactions as abuse, competitiveness and manipulation, I suggested that we document these attitudes of the group so that we could separate the behaviours into specific categories. I asked Jana to consider what sorts of behaviour within the group constituted abuse, what sorts of behaviours were manipulative and what sort of behaviours were competitive. Making visible the social practices that promoted, nurtured and sustained the life of the problem were important considerations in helping Jana develop an alternative solution to dealing with the group (Morgan, 2000).

Lists provide an easy and effective way of helping adolescents understand processes and keep track of experiences (Huntley, 1999). On a large piece of paper we made three distinct headings: ‘Abusive Behaviours’, ‘Manipulative Behaviours’, and ‘Competitive Behaviours’. Under each of these headings, Jana documented the process of interaction she saw occurring in the group.

The following is Jana’s list:

***Abusive Behaviours***

- Betrayal – when you tell someone a secret and they tell someone else.
- Taking advantage of you on weekends to go places with them, and then treating you as if you don’t exist at school.
- Swearing/putdowns.
- Threats of spreading a rumour about you, or that they will get someone (like their brother) to come and bash you.
- Trying to have power/control over you through threatening to tell a teacher something about you.
- Sarcasm (tone of Voice) in the way they speak to you.
- Spiteful – bitching.
- Verbal harassment by saying mean things about you in front of the group.
- Lies - saying that you have been involved in doing things that you have not been involved in.
- Physical abuse (hitting, pinching, kicking).

***Manipulative Friendships***

- Being used by being asked to help out when they have problems, but they don’t help you out when you need help.
- They make you feel like you’re needed but you know that you’re being used.
- Attention seeking – shouting out and thinking they are smart and cool.

- When Jane needs help she seeks me out as the only person that can help because I give her the care and attention that she needs but then the support and care is abused because once she goes into the group she ignores you like you don't exist.
- Selfishness – want everything to go their own way without considering what anyone else wants.
- One-sided friendship – one gives all the time – support, care friendship, the other takes and gives nothing back.

### ***Competitive Friendships***

- Jealousy – jealous of friendships, achievements and things you own.
- Always trying to go one better.
- Trying to make themselves sound and look better than everyone else.
- Competition in everything - Who has the best? How much did it cost?
- Always think their way of doing things is the best way.
- They often copy you (but never tell you that they like what you have). They just make sure that what they get is bigger and better than yours.
- You feel 'put down' by them (they have ways of putting you down that are hard to ignore).

Jana said that when she saw the list of all the behaviours that were occurring, she knew at that moment that this was not about her, but rather about the effect all these negative attitudes were having on her. She was able to separate herself from the problems that were occurring, by seeing that the problems were located outside herself, rather than within herself. White (1995, p.86) argued that assisting “people to give expression to their experience of abuse in ways that don't bring about negative consequences” allowed “people to find themselves standing in some of the alternative territories of their lives, territories in which they can get in touch with different and more positive stories of their identity.” As we continued to document and discuss the behaviour and attitudes that were occurring in the group, Jana could see that most of what was occurring certainly did not fall under the definition of friendship or of the way she wanted to relate to people with her own understanding of what it meant to be a friend. White said (1995, p.89) that once this knowledge becomes clear it

assists people to develop a degree of “discernment” that makes it possible for them to distinguish those actions that are directed towards them that are exploitative, abusive or neglectful in nature from those actions directed towards them that are supportive, loving and caring in nature.

Our discussions turned to what we called a 'respectful friendship' would look like. Jana was absolutely clear about what she knew respectful friendships consisted of, and what she would be looking for in a friend. Alongside her previous list, Jana drew up a new list entitled 'Respectful Friendships' based on her knowledge of what constituted respect.

### ***Respectful Friendships***

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You give and get respect.</li> <li>▪ No put downs.</li> <li>▪ Give support and care.</li> <li>▪ Sharing.</li> <li>▪ Not abusive physically or verbally.</li> <li>▪ Accept you for who you are.</li> <li>▪ Keep secrets.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does not talk behind your back.</li> <li>▪ Someone you feel comfortable with.</li> <li>▪ Someone you can open up to.</li> <li>▪ Someone who sticks up for you.</li> <li>▪ Someone who does not get angry with you.</li> <li>▪ Someone you enjoy being with.</li> </ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Jana took her lists home and pinned them on the wall next to her bed. She said that she needed to see these behaviours written down and to have them somewhere accessible so that she could think about what was occurring in the group and what she would do about her place in the group.

I continued to see Jana weekly throughout the year, and over the following weeks, many things changed for her within the group. Jana said that having the lists made it much clearer for her to understand what was happening in the group, and that she was able to name the behaviours to herself as they were occurring. She said,

*Now I know what's going on, I know they are manipulating me and I know that they are not my true friends. I know what they are doing, but it's not going to work any more because I have the diagram, the lists, in my head. It has made me so much stronger because they don't know that I know what they are doing.*

Jana felt that documenting the behaviours was a powerful way for her to understand and think about the ways in which the girls were constantly in conflict with each other. This knowledge allowed her to find a new strength and confidence in herself to begin a shift away from the problem-saturated experiences of the group into new territory that would be more in line with her own skills, competencies, values and preferences for living (Morgan, 2000).

Jana wrote herself a new list, which said that being strong, and taking a stand for herself had allowed her to:

- Be aware of sarcasm and ignore it.
- Not listen to the put-downs – dispose of them.
- Not be affected by other people's immature behaviour.
- Take a stand for herself and have a voice.

Jana also noticed that her changed responses unsettled the group. She no longer cried or became distressed, and she did not join with them in what she called their immature behaviour. She became more of an observer, watching the interactions, and naming the behaviours to herself. Jana thought the other girls were slightly unsettled by her changed response, they were not quite sure what had happened to her but they could see that their negative attitudes no longer impacted on her and that she no longer needed the group socially.

Jana continued to stay in touch with the group, but more as a peripheral member, coming and going as it suited her. She had not yet established a new friendship group, and did not want to be seen as a loner, so she decided she would continue to stay in touch with the girls but it would be on her terms. She would spend lunch times in the library doing research for her assignments, or would sometimes have lunch with the group. Jana's sense of awareness of the behaviours being displayed, and her new found strength in herself meant that her confidence returned and her ability to manage her schoolwork greatly improved. When I stopped working with Jana, she reported that she had found two girls whom she thought would become her new friends. She was confident that she could find the respectful friendships she was looking for.

## CONCLUSION

This paper describes the importance and nature of adolescent friendships focusing particularly on the tight knit structure of girls' friendship groups and the difficulties that can occur within those structures. Aggressive behaviour (mainly indirect) is a serious flaw within the process of interaction of girls' relationships with each other. Examining the process of interaction through externalising conversations rather than targeting the particular personalities of the girls, highlights the way in which the social interactions are damaged and flawed. Specifically naming the behaviours that are occurring in the group make visible the negative interactions of the group.

Research has shown the damaging and extremely hurtful consequences of indirect aggression, leading some girls to consider leaving their school, or even considering suicide as an alternative to the pain they had experienced from indirect aggression (Owens, Slee and Shute, 2000). Very little has been written regarding intervention methods for this specific form of aggression. However,

externalising conversations have been shown to be particularly successful in working with adolescents. This approach allowed Jana to see that she was not the cause of the problems in her group, and what was happening was not about her, but rather about the way this particular group interacted. Externalising conversations allowed Jana to make decisions in her own best interests and gave her the power to decide what she was and was not prepared to accept in a friendship group.

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