

## “In the eye of the beholder ...”: Girls’, boys’ and teachers’ perceptions of boys’ aggression to girls

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*Because children and young teenagers usually associate in same-sex groups, psychological research concerned with adolescent aggression has often concentrated on within-sex relationships. However, during adolescence, boys and girls increasingly interact socially. This paper reports a study of boy-to-girl aggression as perceived by girls, boys and their teachers. Focus group discussions were conducted with groups of Grade 9 adolescents (aged between 14 and 15 years) across four middle class schools in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia, and individual interviews were conducted with their teachers. Thematic analyses revealed different understandings by girls, boys and teachers of the same behaviour. Girls and teachers reported that boys frequently use verbally offensive language including sexual harassment toward girls but boys argued that they were often not being malicious but rather just joking and that girls over-reacted. Girls, boys and teachers agreed that boys often harassed girls in order to impress other boys and for their own entertainment or fun. Teachers also emphasised home and cultural background factors in influencing boys’ behaviour toward girls. All three groups agreed that boys’ behaviour toward girls could have devastating effects on the girl victims. Girls’ appearance was reported as a major contributing factor associated with boys’ victimisation such that, while physical attractiveness could protect a girl from boys’ meanness, over-weight girls or those seen as being unattractive or ‘uncool’ were vulnerable. However, girls were not seen universally as passive victims. Girls, boys and teachers reported that many girls responded assertively and even matched boys’ aggression. Girls and boys agreed that teacher intervention was often not helpful. In contrast, teachers reported the effectiveness of school anti-harassment policies and a range of successful interventions. This study highlights the importance of understanding behaviour from different perspectives and confirms research that emphasises the crucial role of the peer group in influencing aggressive interactions among students in schools.*

Aggression, cross-sex aggression, adolescence, multiple perspectives, peers

### INTRODUCTION

In previous research, there has been a focus on same-sex aggression (namely, behaviour which is intended to hurt or harm others) among school-aged students. For instance, Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Kaukiainen (1992) argued that because boys and girls mixed predominantly in same-sex groups, it made more sense to study within-sex aggression. However, during adolescence, boys

and girls increasingly mix and there have been some studies of cross-sex aggression. For example, although Russell and Owens (1999) reported evidence that boys and girls occupied “separate spheres”, these authors noted that cross-gender interactions might provide a parallel social context in which children learnt somewhat different behaviour patterns. In their study, Russell and Owens (1999) found that in the cross-sex context, boys and girls tended to use a little more of the style of aggression typical of the other sex (that is, when compared with within-sex forms of aggression, girls tended to use a little more overt aggression to boys and boys tended to use a little more indirect or social forms of aggression toward girls).

Although the literature specifically on bullying (a form of aggression in which there is an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim) indicated that boys were generally more victimised than girls, figures presented by Rigby (1998) showed that girls in co-educational high schools were more victimised than those in single-sex schools, and at a similar level to boys. Tulloch (1995) found that girls were as victimised as boys in Grade 8, and that girl victims reported being physically bullied, picked on and teased more by boys than by girls. Victimisation of girls by boys was thus an important aspect of the co-educational high school environment.

It is only relatively recently that research in the broadly-defined field of peer aggression has begun to address the issue of cross-sex aggression. For example, Crick, Bigbee and Howes (1996) found that 9 to 12 year-old students agreed that the commonest form of cross-gender aggression was the verbal insult. Paquette and Underwood (1999) asked young adolescents to provide examples of various types of aggression they had experienced: over 20 per cent of boys and over 30 per cent of girls gave cross-gender examples. Although physical aggression towards boys was usually from other boys, in nearly half the incidents of physical aggression towards girls, boys were the perpetrators.

The sexual harassment literature describes the serious negative effects of boy to girl harassment. For example, Collins (1997) found that in South Australia, 44 per cent of high schools students reported that verbal sexual harassment happened often to girls in their school. Bayliss (1995) found that girls chose academic subjects on the basis of avoiding harassment and many of the girls felt so victimised that they wished to leave school.

Any examination of between-sex aggression would need to take account of the perspective of the reporter. Hudley, Wakefield et al. (2001) reported that a particular behavioural episode might be judged differently by perceivers differing in gender. Murnen and Smolak (2000) found that ten-year-old boys and girls had different perspectives on sexually-toned behaviour from opposite-sex peers – girls were more likely to see the behaviours as frightening and boys as flattering. Owens (1998) reported that boys estimated less boy-to-girl aggression than did girls and teachers. Tulloch (1995) also found that girls reported more boy-to-girl bullying than did boys. In quantitative studies, the problem of shared method variance highlighted the importance of getting different perspectives when measuring amounts of social behaviours including aggression.

Investigations of aggressive behaviour among school students have revealed gender distinctive motives for within-sex aggressive behaviour. Girls’ tendency to harm each other in indirect ways was consistent with relational goals associated with manipulation of friendships (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, and Peltonen, 1988; Owens, Shute, and Slee, 2000a; Owens, 1996). Furthermore, our own research (Owens, Shute, and Slee, 2000b) has indicated that the alleviation of boredom and creation of excitement were also important factors in girls’ aggressive behaviour toward peers. Boys’ greater tendency than girls to use more overt forms of aggression is consistent with their gender typical goals of instrumentality and dominance (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Maccoby, 1990; Owens et al., 2000b). These understandings are helpful in relation to interventions to redress teenage peer aggression. One aim

of the current study was to investigate explanations for peer aggression, but in the cross-gender rather than same-gender context.

Studies of within-sex aggression have considered the characteristics of typical victims (Olweus, 1999; Rigby and Slee, 1999). Olweus (1999) summarised a number of studies in arriving at the following list of characteristics of typical passive or submissive victims: they were, insecure and lacking in self esteem; they felt stupid, ashamed and unattractive; they were unable to retaliate; and they felt lonely and abandoned at school. Olweus described another group of children as provocative victims who tended to irritate and antagonise their peers and who might react aggressively to victimisation. In the current study we asked the question about vulnerability in the across-sex context, namely, what are the characteristics of girls which make them vulnerable or typical targets of boy peers?

There is a comprehensive literature on interventions particularly for boy-to-boy aggression (Coie, Underwood, and Lochman, 1991; Olweus, 1991; Rigby, 1996, , 2002). Our own research on interventions in relation to girl-to-girl aggression (Owens, Shute, and Slee, 2001) suggested that there was a mismatch between what girls and teachers thought about the success of interventions to redress indirect forms of aggression. In this current study, we considered the views of girls, boys and teachers on interventions to redress boy-to-girl aggressive behaviour.

In summary, the present study aimed to investigate the perspectives of girls, boys, and teachers on the nature of boy-to-girl aggression among teenagers, drawing data from four schools in the Adelaide metropolitan area. With a population of just over one million people, Adelaide is the capital city of the state of South Australia. In this paper, we provide a brief overview of the study through reporting the following elements:

- types of boy-to-girl aggression,
- effects on girls,
- explanations for this aggression,
- characteristics of victims,
- girls' responses to boys' aggression, and
- views on interventions.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants were 40 girls and 32 boys randomly selected from Grade 9 classes (14-15 year-olds) and seven of their so-called 'key' teachers (namely, teachers to whom students are likely to come to discuss peer relationship issues, such as, student counsellors or grade level coordinators) from four lower-middle to middle-class co-educational secondary schools in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. We have named the schools in this study Balton, Hyland, Hills and Valley.

### **Procedure**

The students were interviewed in small groups (5 to 7 students per group) by a female graduate Psychology student who was experienced in working with youth groups. In order to encourage discussion, a scenario was presented in which a new girl had just arrived at the school and at recess time she joined one of the boy groups instead of any of the girl groups. The participants were asked to comment on this behaviour, and then discuss relationships between boys and girls at their own school. The interviewer used a semi-structured interview guide to address the research aims. This procedure was modelled on that adopted by Owens, Shute, and Slee (2000a).

## Analysis of the Data

The interviews were taped and transcribed and a thematic analysis was conducted by the first author with the assistance of the NUD.IST qualitative software program.

### *Agreement Checking*

In order to check reliability of the material classified under categories and codes determined by the first author, an agreement checking exercise was conducted. Approximately one fifth of the transcripts were coded by the second and third authors and a graduate Education student external to the project. The level of agreement with the first author was approximately 85 per cent. The coding was discussed and any differences were resolved between the different coders.

## RESULTS

### Types of Aggression by Boys to Girls

#### *Use of Physical Aggression: "Guys never hit girls"*

Boys, girls and teachers were in agreement that there was very little physical aggression by boys to girls. The boys and girls relied upon the concept of a social rule or the stigma involved in boys hitting girls. For example, a girl from Balton reported: "There's a social rule that guys can't beat up the girls." A Balton boy said: "It's an actual rule. Unwritten rule." As a boy from Hyland put it: "You'd be called a girl basher and stuff." The teachers, too, agreed that boys were very seldom physically aggressive to girls. A female Hills teacher explained the lack of physical aggression by boys as resulting from a sense of "old fashioned" chivalry.

#### *Use of Verbal Aggression: "It's usually sexually oriented"*

In contrast to the rare use of physical aggression, the girls in all four schools reported the use of verbal aggression by boys to girls to be very frequent. The girls agreed that nasty comments by boys were often about girls' physical appearance (for example, breast size) or about perceived sexual reputation. As a Hills girl said: "I get called a whale a lot." Later the same girl reported: "They pay you out if you're not the picture perfect long blonde hair, big boobs, long legs."

Unlike the girls, boys generally reported that there was "not much" verbal aggression by them to girls. They argued that when it did occur, they were "only joking" and that girls took it too seriously. Some boys, however, did admit to sexual harassment. For example, a Balton boy reported: "A boy might go up to a girl and ask her is she's a virgin and stuff like that." The following interchange between the Interviewer (I) and a group of boys (B) from Hills is illustrative:

I: What sorts of things would you pay a girl out about to do with sex?

B1: She never gets any.

B2: She gets too much

B3: Or she sleeps around, you know!"

Like the girls, the teachers were convinced that boys do verbally harass girls, often about appearance and reputed sexual behaviour. The female counsellor from Hyland reported that the harassment was "usually sexually oriented, so it might be slut or it might be something to do with their body shape – fat or big tits or no tits or something like that." Unlike the boys, the teachers believed that the boys were not joking but that their behaviour was deliberate and nasty and intended to hurt.

***Indirect Aggression: "She slept with him"***

The girls reported that boys often spread rumours, exaggerating about girls' sexual behaviours at social events such as parties. In contrast, many boys denied this, although some admitted it: "Then everyone throughout the school just earmarked her as a slut. And then they keep changing it around, and it gets worse and worse. Yeah, and it's funny." (Hills Boy). The teachers were uncertain of the extent to which boys were involved in spreading rumours about girls. Teachers' awareness seemed to be related to their role within the school – for example, student counsellors appeared more aware of this type of behaviour than did subject teachers.

**Effects on Girls*****"They'll probably cry themselves to sleep"***

Boys, girls and teachers were in agreement that boys' harassing behaviour toward girls could have devastating effects on girls. A girl from Hills reported her fear: "I try to get someone to walk across the quadrangle with me because I don't feel comfortable walking across there because they might say something and you're by yourself." While boys acknowledged the pain for girls, they maintained that girls often took things too seriously. A boy from Hyland explained it like this: "All the girls take it to heart. And then they'll go have a cry: "I'm all ugly and that." The teachers were particularly concerned about girls being absent from school and actually transferring to another school because of their treatment by boys.

**Explanations for Boys' Aggression to Girls*****Impressing Other Boys, Gaining Acceptance from the Group: "What the mates think is really important"***

Girls, boys and teachers agreed that boys often were verbally aggressive to girls as a way of impressing other boys and being "macho and tough." A girl from Balton reported: "I found that, like, boys are horrible to you, they tease you and they're horrible when they are in a group, like, they put on a show, but then you get them by themselves, they are really nice to you." A Balton boy argued that boys "paid out" girls "to impress their friends or from peer pressure." A female teacher from Hyland described boys' behaviour as arising from a "pack mentality." She continued: "They'll probably do things or say things that if they were by themselves they probably wouldn't."

***Fun or Entertainment: "They do it to get a laugh"***

Girls, boys and teachers agreed that boys often said nasty things to girls as a form of fun or entertainment for themselves. A girl from Hills reported: "They'll do it to give themselves a laugh. For their own entertainment." A girl from Valley said: "I think they're just bored." A boy from Hills reported: "Maybe some people just want to have a joke once in a while. And it's a good laugh." A female Hills teacher said: "It's to make themselves look tough and strong and funny ... and to enhance that boys' reputation as someone who's very funny and popular."

***Impressing Girls or Flirting: "It's a kind of flirtation"***

Some boys and teachers (but no girls) reported that boys sometimes verbally "put down" girls as a way of trying to flirt with them. A Hyland boy said: "to impress girls, flirt with them." A male Balton teacher reported: "It's competition and trying to impress." Later that same teacher said: "It's all that strutting about. It's all sex and natural."

***Power: "They abuse their power"***

Some girls and teachers but no boys used power as an explanation for boys' aggressive behaviour to girls. A girl from Hills reported: "I think it just makes them look powerful." The Hyland female

student counsellor reported: "It's a power and a put down thing." A female Hills teacher reported: "My general philosophy about bullying is it's very much into power."

***Revenge: "They've been mean to you"***

Several of the boys mentioned the idea of retaliation for something that girls did. A boy from Hills suggested: "Mainly because they are mean to you." Consistent with the boys, some teachers were aware of the revenge motive. The Hyland female student counsellor reported: "For some boys it's because they've been hassled by the girls. And they say things back." None of the girls mentioned the revenge motive.

***Teacher-Only Explanations: "They come from a sexist home background"***

The teachers provided several further explanations that were not evident in the boys' and girls' transcripts. The first of these is sexism. The Hyland female student counsellor described the type of boys who harass girls as those "who often come from a male dominated family. Boys who have a particular view of women, as not equal to men." The second additional explanation is one related to the boys' home backgrounds. This is one that a number of teachers emphasised and is illustrated well by a Balton male teacher: "It's culturally at home, whatever the background, all they're seeing is role modelling. It's what happens at home: This is what I'm expected to do." Related to home background is a cultural background explanation. The teachers who subscribed to this idea argued that poor treatment of females arise in part from immigrants who came to Australia with a background of male domination within the family. A male Balton teacher explained: "Certainly it's cultural. It is culturally brought to school and we had boys treating female teachers with almost disdain."

## **Types of Girl Victims**

***"You need to be cool and good looking"***

Boys and girls agreed that whether or not a girl became a victim of boys' nasty verbal aggression depended largely on a girl's physical appearance. Attractiveness served to protect a girl from boys' meanness. The following exchange from two Hyland girls (G) is illustrative:

G1: "It depends if she's like really really pretty, and she wears, like, mini skirts and stuff to school."

G2: "Ah, the guys would love that!"

Other factors that might contribute to victimisation included girls who lacked self confidence, and how "cool" a girl was perceived to be. A female teacher from Hills reported: "Some girls who are obviously different, in their mannerisms or they say things that are not within the narrow confines of what's cool or appropriate to say." Girls also reported that it was dangerous to react to provocation by the boys. As one girl said: "Guys love getting a rise out of girls." The female Hyland counsellor reported: "The girls who laugh it off and it doesn't affect at all ... they don't get harassed again." The girls, boys and teachers also emphasised the importance of having friends. A girl from Balton reported: "If you're part of a big group of friends they don't do it as much." Boys and teachers mentioned that girls with a sexual reputation could become targets. A Hills boy remarked about a girl victim: "She sleeps around." Finally, consistent with the revenge explanation mentioned above, some boys mentioned that they "paid out" girls who were annoying or irritating or who thought they were too "high and mighty."

## **Girls' Responses to Boys' Aggression**

### ***Girls Hitting Back: "They can drive your friends away"***

While it has been reported above that boys might be encouraged by a girl who reacted to harassment, girls could respond assertively, even matching boys' aggression. A girl from Balton reported: "I got so sick of it that I started spreading a rumour about him and I just yell all the way down the corridor." A girl from Valley reported: "They get really offended if you say they've got a small penis." The boys indicated that girls were not just passive recipients of boys' aggression and they could hit back, often using their friends to make life unpleasant for the offending boy(s). The following extract from a Balton boys' group is illustrative:

- B1: If you call, you go up to a girl in a group, call her a bitch to her face, or something, some of the girls just slap you right there.
- B2: Some other girls will hurt you, otherwise, like, going around and making sure you're a loner or whatever.
- B3: Yes, making influence on their friends.
- B4: Some, like, . . . if they're, like, . . . a really popular chick does this to you she can, like, probably drive your friends away from you.

(All agree)

- B1: The more popular they come, the more influence they've got.

- B3: They're good at luring people away, yes they can do that.

The teachers, too were aware that girls hit back as this female teacher from Hyland revealed: "Girls at this school are pretty good at answering back though; they're pretty good at standing up for themselves mostly, um, although there are, you know, always the more sensitive shy ones."

## **Interventions**

### ***"The only people I'd go to would be friends"***

The general view from boys and girls was that teachers should stay out of it and that teachers could in fact make the situation worse. Some students, however, reported examples where teachers had been helpful. Some others said that teachers ignored boys' aggression towards girls or even laughed about it. Teachers, however, had a quite different view, citing examples where their interventions had worked. Students were pessimistic about the value of turning to parents, with one girl from Hills suggesting "that's the worst thing they can do." The girls, in particular, emphasised the important role of friends in offering consolation and support when a peer was being harassed by one or more boys.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study revealed that girls, boys and teachers had different perspectives on boys' aggression to girls. While all agreed that boys seldom used physical aggression to girls, boys disagreed with girls and teachers about the amount and deliberateness of boys' verbally harassing behaviours towards girls. This finding is consistent with the earlier work by Owens (1998) who found that boys estimated less boy-to-girl aggression than did girls and teachers. This study also revealed the use by boys of indirect aggressive behaviours toward girls, specifically the spreading of rumours. Boys were less inclined to mention this than were girls. Overall, the study highlights the importance of using multiple sources for the collection of data on human behaviours.

Our finding that boys believed that they were only having fun is consistent with Tulloch's (1995) finding that what girls saw as bullying was seen as harmless fun by boys. Our results are also consistent with Murnen and Smolak's (2000) finding that what ten-year-old girls saw as frightening, boys saw as flattering.

Our results revealed that much of the boy-to-girl aggression takes the form of verbal sexual harassment, very often focusing on girls' physical appearances and sexual reputations. This is reminiscent of Duncan's (1999) sociological work in which he wrote in vivid detail about sexualised bullying in British schools including boys' harassment of girls, a clear indicator of the value of a qualitative study. Quantitative studies in the aggression literature have usually utilised questionnaires that have asked only general questions where the context has been lost so that sexual harassment has not been detected. Indeed there has been little overlap between the sexual harassment literature and the aggression literature with the former considering broad social influences and the latter taking individualistic perspectives, something the teachers in this study acknowledged. It would appear that future research should include combinations of research approaches, possibly including qualitative and quantitative methods to an equal degree, to victimising behaviours by boys to girls that were and were not sexually toned.

Even though boys tended to believe that girls took their harassing behaviours too seriously, they did agree with girls and teachers that the effects of their behaviour on girls could be very damaging. This acknowledgement by boys provides optimism for intervention efforts to redress this negative behaviour toward their opposite-sex peers. Pikas (1989), for instance, argued that empathy for a victim's pain was an important first step toward behaviour change by the perpetrators of aggression.

Our study reveals that the key explanations for boys' aggression to girls include the desire to have fun and the desire to impress other male friends. These findings are strikingly similar to previous research by our research team (Owens et al., 2000a; 2000b) where we questioned 15 year-old girls about their explanations for their within-sex aggression. In that earlier work, we found that girls tended to victimise same-sex peers in order to have fun and reduce boredom and for a host of reasons concerned with friendship and group processes, including gaining attention and impressing same-sex peers so as to be included in the peer group. Some girls and teachers also specifically referred to boys' abuse of power in their interactions with girls. Teachers in the current study had some additional explanations mainly concerned with the home and cultural backgrounds of students. Once again the importance of gaining multiple perspectives is evident in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of social behaviours such as peer aggression.

Our study reveals that girls with certain characteristics are more vulnerable to being the targets of boys' aggression. These pre-disposing factors include being over-weight, not having friends, lacking confidence, being perceived to be 'uncool', over-reacting and having a sexual reputation. In particular, physical attractiveness could protect a girl from boys' harassment. In addition, it would seem that boys often targeted girls in revenge or retaliation for what boys perceived as nasty behaviour by girls towards boys. It should be noted that this last point was mentioned frequently by boys but never by girls, highlighting again the understanding of behaviour according to the so-called "eye of the beholder." Some of these findings on victim characteristics are consistent with our earlier research (Owens et al., 2000a) where we found that girls tended to blame their own peers for bringing aggression upon themselves through their own annoying or aggravating behaviour and the importance of having good friends as protection from being singled out.

Our findings reveal that not all girls respond in a submissive way to boys' victimisation. Indeed some girls reported their own effective aggressive reactions to boys. Girls were astute enough to realise that they could hurt a boy's masculine pride through abusing his sexual anatomy (for



example, reference to small penis size). Some boys reported the use by girls of sophisticated forms of indirect aggression aimed at isolating boys from friendships.

In relation to interventions, the results of the present study reveal that students and teachers see the success of intervention differently. Teachers were optimistic that their interventions worked but students often (but not always) saw teacher intervention as flawed. Girls in particular highlighted the importance of turning to friends for assistance for peer relationship difficulties. Again, this finding is consistent with our earlier work (Owens et al., 2001) where girls reported on the success of using friends to assist in resolving peer conflicts. The finding is also consistent with research which indicated that girls used constructive forms of conflict resolution including compromise and seeking peer support (Osterman et al., 1997; Owens, Daly, and Slee, 2005). This study provides a timely reminder, therefore, of the importance of considering student perspectives in relation to the potential of peer mediation processes in school intervention policies and practices.

Our intention in this paper is to provide a brief overview of our study on boy-to-girl aggression, highlighting in particular the different perspectives of boys, girls and teachers. In future papers we plan to explore in more detail elements of this study including explanations of boy-to-girl aggression, sexual harassment, and issues related to intervention.

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