

**EXPERIENCES OF INDIRECT AGGRESSION:**

**A SYSTEMIC INVESTIGATION**

By

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I declare that *Experiences of indirect aggression: A systemic investigation* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references

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## **ABSTRACT**

The past 20 years have seen a growing interest amongst researchers into indirect forms of aggression and bullying. The evidence suggests that covert forms of aggression are largely used by adolescent girls as a means of inflicting harm on another and that the effects of such interactions can be detrimental to the individual's psychological and emotional well-being. This study aims to explore the social experiences of four adolescent girls, with particular reference to indirect aggression practices that they may have encountered. Data was collected in the form of unstructured interviews, which were conducted with each participant separately. Prominent themes were then identified and explored by the researcher. This was done from a systemic epistemological stance within the post-modern paradigm. A qualitative methodological design was followed allowing for the personal experiences and meaning attributions of each participant to come to the fore. The study's results were presented in the form of descriptive text with particular reference to the systemic processes that came to the fore. Overall, the study explicated the unique experiences of four adolescent girls with indirect aggression and how these experiences are interwoven with systemic processes that take place in social groups.

Key words: indirect aggression, covert aggression, adolescents, systemic epistemology, social constructionism, post-modernism, qualitative research, hermeneutics.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Aggressive behaviour was traditionally viewed as physical, overt means of inflicting harm on another, and aggressive behaviours were considered to be more wide-spread and prevalent amongst males rather than females. In the past 20 years, however, the focus of research on aggression has broadened to include indirect, more covert forms of aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Olweus, 1993a; Rigby & Slee, 1991, 1999; Slee & Rigby, 1993; Smith 1991). Nowadays, the notion that females can be just as aggressive as males and that indirect aggression can be equally as hurtful as other means of aggression, *albeit* more on a psychological level, has largely gained acceptance amongst researchers and public alike (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2001).

Particularly in the past two to three years, public interest into other forms of aggression has grown, with a number of reported stories in the news highlighting the potentially destructive psychological repercussions indirect aggression and bullying can have on children and adolescents (Olweus, 1993b; Talbot, 2002). When some public reports speculated whether bullying practices and indirect aggression could have been to blame for a number of attempted and completed suicides by adolescents, intense interest and concern was sparked amongst researchers and the public at large (Rigby & Slee, 1999). This seems to have perpetuated a movement in research

endeavours to uncover the intricacies and workings of aggressive systems and, in particular, aggressive systems where indirect aggressive methods reign, so as to develop preventative intervention strategies at school and in the work place.

In response to this need, research has been conducted in various countries, such as America (Leschied et al., 2001), Finland (Björkqvist, 1992, 1994; Lagerspetz, Björkqvist & Peltonen, 1988), and Australia (James & Owens, 2005; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Slee & Rigby, 1993). Limited research has been done on this topic in South Africa, and it was the intention to add to this small constituent with the present research. Hopefully this study would shed some light on the nature of indirect aggressive practices and would therefore allow for a greater understanding of the dynamics at play in aggressive systems. The findings should contribute to the already existing body of research and should provide a different viewpoint or angle by focusing particularly on the systemic processes involved in indirect aggression practices.

## **THE AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The primary aim of this research endeavour is to gain some insight into the individual experiences of indirect aggression of four adolescent girls. A further aim is to obtain a better understanding of the social systems and systemic processes these girls find themselves in and how indirect aggression forms a part of these larger discourses. This broader perspective serves to position

indirect aggression practices within the greater context of social interactions and relational processes that take place amongst adolescent girl peer groups.

A third aim of this study is to look at the growth and learning processes that take place in social interactions that are characterised by indirect aggression. Much of the research conducted so far has focused on the characteristics of aggressors and victims and the detrimental effects indirect aggression can have on the psychological and emotional well-being of the people involved. These accounts seem to have perpetuated a cycle of viewing deficit and suffering as a common and accepted outcome of aggression, thereby overshadowing the element of survival and inner strength, which seems to play a significant role in coping with indirect aggressive practices. It is hoped that this research provides a more balanced view of indirect aggression and the position these aggressive practices hold in the individual experiences of the four girls interviewed for this research.

## **THE RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the personal perceptions and meaning attributions made by the individual participants, I have approached this research from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism is a theoretical stance that falls under the philosophical umbrella of post-modernism. This supports the view that many different accounts, descriptions and meanings are possible regarding the same event or experience, and that there is no single correct explanation or interpretation (Lynch, 1997). This view therefore

lends itself well to a systemic investigation into indirect aggression, as it takes into account the interplay of various viewpoints and perspectives that form part of a larger context of meaning generation.

Coherent with the systemic epistemology which informs this research, indirect aggression is viewed as a systemic phenomenon that forms part of the interactional processes that occur between two or more people. It would be difficult to gauge the meaning and functionality of indirect aggression within a system by conducting a quantitative investigation, as the very details and nuances of the individual's experience, which are needed to construct a clearer understanding of a system's inner workings, would remain largely hidden by the researcher's attempts to generalise and globalise his/her findings (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000a, 2000b). It is mainly for this reason that I have chosen to use a qualitative approach in this research. A more detailed explanation of this approach is provided in Chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER OUTLINE**

The contents of this dissertation are as follows:

Chapter 2: *Aggression in context*, introduces the existing literature on the topic of indirect aggression and bullying. In a sense, the context of the research is set whereby the reader is guided through previous conceptions of aggression, the changing and evolving viewpoints regarding aggressive practices, and the aspects that have been considered as contributing to, and forming part of, the aggressive system.

Chapter 3: *The systemic backdrop*, provides a brief explanation of systems theory and how this relates to processes observed in aggressive systems. Specific primary premises and concepts of systemic thinking are highlighted, thereby providing the theoretical backdrop that guided this research.

Chapter 4: *Research design and paradigm*, uncovers the philosophical and theoretical framework upon which the current research design is based. Furthermore, it outlines the different steps of the research process followed throughout the study.

Chapter 5: *Through the eyes of adolescents* gives voice to the four adolescent girls interviewed for this research. Their unique experiences are presented in narrative form from which common themes are then extracted.

Chapter 6: *Discussion and conclusion*, relates these narratives and themes to the relevant literature. Certain themes that came to light in the interviews are emphasised and discussed in greater detail, with particular reference to systems theory and how this applies to indirect aggressive processes.

## **CONCLUSION**

The following chapter provides an overview of the existing literature on the topic of indirect aggression and thereby marks the beginning of the study.

## Chapter 2

### **AGGRESSION IN CONTEXT**

This chapter aims to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the various conceptions of aggression, how aggressive practices have evolved over the years, and the dynamics that are at play within the aggressive system, particularly with regard to systems where indirect aggression and emotional bullying predominate.

#### **1. AGGRESSION DEFINED**

The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology (Colman, 2003, p. 18) provides a useful starting point for this section with its definition of aggression: "Aggression *n.* Behaviour whose primary purpose or function is to injure another person or organism, whether physically or psychologically". Many experts furthermore suggest that the *intent* of a person's behaviour needs to be taken into consideration when determining whether a given action is aggressive (Lysak, Rule & Dobbs, 1989). If one considers intent as a necessary attribute to aggression, this can be seen as related to the aggressive behaviour serving a purpose or function for the aggressor. According to the above definition, such a function would be primarily to injure or hurt another person. Coupled with this supposed primary intent, numerous additional motivational factors have been put forward by researchers as possible contributing factors to the expression and enforcement of aggression.

Parens (1993) indicates that there is no consensus amongst investigators as to what purpose or goal aggressors intend to achieve when they attempt to hurt others. The following are some alternate objectives that have been suggested by various researchers as the driving force behind aggression (Berkowitz, 1993):

*Coercion:* The aggressor attempts to influence the other person's behaviour and aims to stop the individual from doing something that bothers him or her (Patterson, 1979). In other words, aggressors attempt to force a person to do what they want them to do by being negative and disapproving of anything that does not correlate with how they want things to be done.

*Power, dominance and control:* the aggressive behaviour is aimed at preserving or enhancing the aggressor's power and dominance (Berkowitz, 1993). Aggressors want to get their own way (coercion) in order to assert their dominant positions in their relationships – they are trying to show that they are not subordinate to their victims. As Gelles (1983) explains it, aggression appears to arise from the struggle for control and influence amongst two or more people within a relationship.

*Impression management and social approval:* according to this line of thinking, aggressors are mainly interested in what others think of them and care deeply about their reputations (Felson, 1978). Felson (1978) explains that some

aggressors may feel that they need to act in an aggressive or domineering way to gain acceptance and approval from a specific group they want to join.

*Pleasure seeking:* it appears that some people may want to hurt others when they are distressed and that they feel gratified when they accomplish this goal (Baron, 1977). If a pattern of repeated self-gratification by means of aggression establishes itself, people may simply attack others when they are lacking emotional arousal or simply because they have learned it is fun (Berkowitz, 1993). Boredom and unhappiness may therefore become adequate motivation to hurt others intentionally through aggressive acts (James & Owens, 2005).

The above indicated goals merely illustrate that aggression can be motivated by any number of purposes and that there is certainly never a clear cut, lone reason for an act of aggression. Apart from the interconnectedness of motivating factors posing a difficulty in establishing a clear intention for acts of aggression, a further problem is the mere fact that a person's intent behind any action is unobservable and can only be assumed by an observer, based on a person's overt behaviour (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). The identification of motivating factors is therefore largely based on an observer's attributions to – and interpretation of – certain behavioural sequences and the subsequent assumptions he or she makes regarding the motivations behind these actions (Kelly, 1999).



Rather than merely focusing on the intent of – and reasons behind – aggression, the *impact* of an aggressive act should also be considered. Aggression occurs in the context of an interaction, a relationship between two or more people. This implies that for aggression to exist and to be perceived as such, two or more people need mutually to qualify it to be so (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). In other words, if someone performs what, according to them, is behaviour intended to hurt someone, their intention would be ineffective if the very same behaviour is not viewed as aggressive or hurtful by the other party. Aggression can therefore be seen as the dynamic interplay between two or more individuals who mutually define their interaction as being characteristically aggressive – the meaning of ‘aggression’ is attached to the behaviour by everyone involved (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

Particularly with regard to indirect aggression, it is important to take note of the relational domain within which such an interaction takes place, as this provides the context, or frame, according to which the aggressive act will be identified, interpreted, and experienced (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Due to the subtle nature of its execution, this type of aggression relies heavily on a shared history and relationship between the two or more parties involved in order for the intent and impact to be clear (Baron, 1977). The aggressor uses subtle strategies of emotional manipulation targeted specifically at nodal points usually identified during prior interactions and exchanges with the victim (Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999).

## **1.1. TYPES OF AGGRESSION**

Historically, aggression was mostly associated with overt displays of anger and frustration that entailed physical acts of harm and verbal abuse, such as being hit, pushed, teased, or called mean names (Owens et al., 2000a; Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2001). However, in the past two decades, there has been an increase in research on aggression and it has come to light that aggression is not a unitary construct, but rather that there exist different forms of aggression.

According to Xie, Swift, Cairns and Cairns (2002), some aggressive behaviours are prototypic, such as physical aggression and verbal aggression, whilst others are less prototypic and include hurtful acts that are covert, more disguised and manipulative. Researchers found that assessing only overt and more general forms of peer harassment results in the failure to identify subgroups of victimised children, where the aggressive assaults may have been more subtle and covert in nature, such as in relational and indirect aggression (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005).

Different terms have been used in the past to label subtle aggressive behaviours, including social aggression (Xie et al., 2002), indirect aggression (Lagerspetz et al., 1988), and relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The different terms indicate different emphases and can be explained as follows:

*Social aggression* refers to actions that cause interpersonal damage and are achieved by non-confrontational and largely concealed methods that employ the social community. It includes gossiping, social exclusion, and social alienation (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Xie et al., 2002).

*Relational aggression* has been defined as behaviours that damage another child's friendships or feelings of inclusion by the peer group (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The behaviours involved in relational aggression can be either confrontational or non-confrontational.

*Indirect aggression* refers to such behaviours as ignoring, avoiding, and excluding others from social interchanges. In this sense, indirect aggression is confrontational in that the perpetrator is usually present (Lagerspetz et al., 1988). Furthermore, the perpetrator does not have to use the social community as a means of attack, as is the case with social aggression.

The above brief descriptions illustrate the different approaches and ways of perceiving more covert, manipulative acts of aggression. "Indirect" aggression appears to be the broadest and most commonly used term in the literature for referring to covert forms of aggression, and I will therefore use it as an umbrella term throughout this text when referring to this type of aggression. Cognisance should, however, be made of the fact that some researchers appear to make clear distinctions amongst the above terms and would probably prefer them to be dealt with in isolation, in accordance with their specific emphases (Archer, 2001).

## **1.2. AGGRESSION AND BULLYING**

Aggression and bullying are closely related terms, yet they are not mutually exclusive. They appear to refer to different levels of involvement and engagement. The term bullying incorporates additional contextual elements to previous conceptions of aggression, and therefore reflects many of the dynamics highlighted in acts of indirect aggression (Olweus, 1993b).

According to Rigby and Slee (1999), one typical feature of bullying is that it is systematic and not merely occasional, spontaneous aggression. This implies that purposefully harmful actions are repeatedly targeted at specific individuals in what appears to be a strategic onslaught on their physical, or in this case psychological, integrity (Mishna, 2004).

Lagerspetz et al. (1988) described bullying as collective aggression based on social relationships in the group context. It generally takes place in a social, peer group, context where there is an imbalance of power between people. Often the group of people in question is a rather permanent social group where membership is involuntary – like members of a class. Mishna (2004) found that bullying regularly occurs within friendship circles, or where the perpetrator is considered to be a friend. In many instances bullying is even considered as a primarily social activity, which takes place during times of boredom or when the perpetrator seeks a distraction from some mundane, routine activity (Salmivalli, Karhunen & Lagerspetz, 1996).

Furthermore, bullying can be seen as proactive, rather than reactive aggression, as it is not usually some reaction to a provocative act (Olweus, 1993a). In fact, the bully often presents as calm and collected and is not necessarily experiencing an emotional or physiological state of aggression arousal (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Furthermore, according to Sutton et al. (1999), the bully appears to process social information with ease and accuracy, using these skills to his or her advantage when manoeuvring towards some social goal. The use of social cognition skills appears to be more prominent amongst bullies who employ indirect aggression practices rather than those who make use of verbal and physical methods (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

The concept of bullying, in a sense, can therefore be seen as an extension or formalisation of aggression; an *act*-ualisation of aggression, where aggressive intent is incorporated into a plan of action (a strategy) for the purpose of systematically harming someone else (Olweus, 1993b). If one takes this line of thinking further, when indirect aggression is combined with a strategy, it can be referred to as indirect/emotional bullying.

## **2. THE DYNAMICS OF INDIRECT AGGRESSION AND BULLYING**

Researchers started to show an increasing interest into the topic of indirect aggression in the 1980's, following a pioneering study by a Finnish team of researchers in 1988. Lagerpetz, Björkqvist and Peltonen (1988) used a cross-sectional design to investigate the use of three forms of aggression (physical,

direct-verbal, and indirect) among 8-, 11-, 15-, and 18-year olds. The findings from this study laid the groundwork for future research endeavours into the topic of aggression, as they highlighted the different dynamics and trends that appear to play a role in the various forms of aggression.

In the years to follow, researchers have been more cognisant of the diverse expressions of aggression and, in particular, indirect aggression. Their attempts at gaining a clearer understanding of indirect aggression and related phenomena have yielded much useful and insightful information, the essence of which will be touched on and discussed below.

## **2.1. GENDER**

Research on gender differences in aggressive behaviours among young people only became visible in the journals around 1990. Hadley (2004) believes that this delayed interest in the topic is due to the longstanding, presumed connection of aggression as a male dominated activity. However, when the research designs incorporated the various subtypes of aggression, it came to light that in terms of levels of aggression, there are hardly any differences between males and females (Crain, Finch & Foster, 2005). In other words, females may be just as aggressive as their male counterparts, but the quality or form of aggression differs (Loudin, Loukas & Robinson, 2003).

The literature tends to suggest that there is a higher rate of relational/indirect aggression in females and physical/direct aggression among males (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; James & Owens, 2005). It needs to be mentioned though that there have been studies where no gender effects were found for either indirect or overt aggression (Rys & Bear, 1997; Walker, Richardson & Green, 2000). Overall, with a few exceptions, girls have been found to be just as relationally aggressive as boys or more relationally aggressive than boys, while boys are consistently found to be more overtly aggressive than girls (Crain et al., 2005).

Explanations for the above-suggested gender differences vary. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) argue that girls are more relationally oriented than boys, and therefore use forms of aggression which damage friendships. Activities such as spreading rumours and manipulation of the peer group through exclusion or threatening to withdraw friendship are hurtful to girls and perceived as aggressive by them (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Galen and Underwood (1997) and Crick and Grotpeter (1995) reported that girls found social aggression to be just as hurtful as physical aggression, damaging their friendships and feelings of inclusion in the peer group. In contrast boys are more motivated by instrumental and physical dominance goals so that their aggression takes on more overt forms consistent with the achievement of such goals (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Lagerspetz et al. (1988) found that boys' friendship groups were larger than those of girls and suggested that there may be a link between the smaller,

closer relationships amongst girls and the greater amount of indirect aggression displayed by them. Crain et al. (2005) put forward the notion that girls tend to be more emotionally intimate in their friendships and use their strong desire for connectedness as leverage against each other. Girls invest highly in their close relationships in the hope that they can turn to their friends for advice and help when coping with problems (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992). This intimacy of peer friendships provides a platform for indirect and verbal victimisation to take place and for this to have particularly damaging and hurtful effects (James & Owens, 2005).

Zarbatany, McDougall & Hymel (2000) found that gender relations may be closely tied to activities imposed by particular social and cultural contexts. Children are raised in such a manner so as to instil social norms and values aspired to within a specific cultural context (Crothers, Field & Kolbert, 2005). Cultural values and norms may for instance consider it less desirable for girls to perform acts of physical aggression and therefore a climate is generated where such acts are discouraged whilst other means of asserting oneself, such as putting someone else down by giving a snide remark or ignoring them, seems socially more acceptable (Björkqvist, Osterman & Kaukiainen, 1992; Owens et al., 2000b). Physical forms of aggression are seemingly more likely to be discouraged among girls by adults, whilst indirect aggression may be viewed as a safer and socially appropriate means of expressing disdain, displeasure, or anger (Prinstein et al., 2001).



Crothers, Field and Kolbert (2005) observed in their research on gender identity and indirect aggression, that girls who identified with a more traditional feminine gender role, were more likely to perceive themselves as using relational aggression than those who identified with a non-traditional gender role. This then begs the question, whether the feminine gender role is considered similar across cultures.

Osterman, Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, Kaukiainen, Huesmann and Franczek (1994) observed remarkable consistency across national groups in the development of girls' aggression; however, later research suggests that girls from different cultural, racial, and class contexts vary in the significance attached to different forms of aggression (Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1996). Taylor et al. (1996), for instance, observed that minority groups in the United States are more comfortable with all forms of aggression than are their white, middle-class counterparts.

As can be seen from the above arguments, numerous hypotheses exist regarding the reasons why indirect aggression and emotional bullying appear to predominate in female populations. Some hypotheses look at the characteristics of female interactions without considering how such interactional trends developed. It is interesting to note the evolutionary quality of indirect aggression and how, with growing age and maturity, there appears to be a gradual refinement of the tactics employed, as will be discussed below.

## **2.2. AGE AND DEVELOPMENTAL TRENDS**

It seems some degree of social maturation is required for the skilful use of indirect aggression and that, although the initial signs may already surface in early childhood, it is not fully developed among the youngest children. Björkqvist (1992) identified a developmental shift in style of aggressive behaviour located between the age of eight and eleven, with 11- and 15-year-old girls being significantly more likely to use indirect aggressive techniques.

Lagerspetz and Björkqvist (1994) came up with a stage theory of development of aggression, which proposes that young children are lacking verbal skills and therefore have to resort to physical aggression. As the verbal skills progressively become more refined, they are employed more readily for peaceful interactions as well as assertive purposes. Along with the development of social skills, more sophisticated strategies, like indirect aggression, become possible, with the aggressor being able to harm a victim without even being identified (Berkowitz, 1993; Slee & Rigby, 1993).

Past research on indirect aggression and victimisation has focused largely on children rather than adolescents. This seems strange considering that the occurrence of this type of aggression appears particularly relevant during this later developmental stage, due to the following reasons:

As alluded to in the stage theory put forward by Lagerspetz and Björkqvist (1994), the cognitive advances in adolescence, such as the increased

capacity for planning and greater understanding of sarcasm and innuendo, may allow the more refined and hurtful use of relational aggression (Creusere, 1999).

Furthermore, adolescents spend an increased amount of time with their peers and place much importance on peer support during this period, which could suggest that indirect forms of aggression and victimisation may be more salient (Parker, Rubin, Price & DeRosier, 1995). Björkqvist et al. (1992) explored the differences in structure of social networks amongst boys and girls at different ages. They found that at the age of eight, girls' and boys' social networks tended to be similar, but by age 11, girls were forming tighter groups. This shift was correlated with a marked increase in indirect aggression among girls at middle school age to mid-adolescence (Hadley, 2004). Björkqvist (1994) reported on a study that suggested that at a younger age, where the relationship structures are less intimate, there is less indirect aggression and no discrepancy between boys' and girls' aggressive behaviour. The same study suggested a correlation between social intelligence and indirect aggression, and that girls become more socially intelligent as they grow up, leading to an increase in indirect aggression (Björkqvist, 1994).

Rice (1996) explains that self-disclosure in friendships increases during adolescence and that this allows adolescents to gather vast amounts of personal and sensitive information about each other, which can then be used to develop intense and hurtful bullying strategies. Cliques also become prominent features of adolescent peer relationships, and these typically have

more sharply drawn boundaries than the less selective friendships of middle childhood (Brown, 1989). Indirect aggression may be one of many tools used to establish and enforce these rigid boundaries (Prinstein et al., 2001).

Feldman, Fischer, Ransom and Dimiceli (1995) refer to adolescent girls' peer culture as one of compliance and conformity. Particularly during adolescence, girls form exclusive friendships and hold great concerns about their connectedness to others (Adler et al., 1992; Feldman et al., 1995). This is thought to foster the development of social skills, emotional intimacy, expression and self-disclosure (Rice, 1996). However, it is these tight and dense social networks that are also believed to shape a social context suitable for the exhibition of indirect aggression (Green, Richardson & Lago, 1996).

### **2.3. THE AGGRESSIVE SYSTEM**

Indirect aggression and bullying occurs within a specific context, whether it is at the level of dyadic peer relations, the peer system, or the larger context of the classroom, school, neighbourhood, or society. It appears that certain characteristics tend to be in place that fuel the aggressive system, but that these vary depending on the key players involved, the social climate at the time, past experiences, etc. Every system is of course unique and every key player will have unique characteristics that shape his or her experience of the aggressive system. However, the literature does highlight some general

characteristics in this regard, which have stood out in previous research findings and which will be discussed below.

### **2.3.1. The aggressor**

There are conflicting views in terms of what characterises emotional bullies and what motivates them to employ covert tactics of aggression rather than being overtly aggressive.

Crick and Dodge (1994) suggest that, based on the social-information processing perspective, elevated levels of indirect aggression result from how individuals perceive and interpret other's behaviours and intentions. Individuals, who make hostile attributions regarding peer intentions, even when none are actually intended, may be highly likely to use aggressive means to retaliate (Crick, 1995).

Similarly, Loudin et al. (2003) found that individuals with better perspective-taking skills are likely to comprehend how others might feel when harm is directed at them, they may be less likely than peers to intentionally hurt others, whilst individuals who feared negative evaluation and who had poor perspective-taking skills were more likely to use relationally aggressive behaviours than their peers. Particularly individuals who fear negative evaluation may use indirect aggression to deflect criticism/disapproval by focusing attention on the weaknesses of others (Grotperter & Crick, 1996). However, the findings obtained from research conducted by Crain et al. (2005)

challenged the applicability of the social-information processing model and the theory that indirectly aggressive girls misperceive other girls' behaviour and intentions in social situations as being hostile.

Sutton et al. (1999) are of the opinion that, rather than lacking in social skills and understanding, bullies are in fact expert manipulators of social situations who have refined abilities at using subtle, indirect methods of aggression and persuasion. In their study on social skills and understanding in bullying, bullies showed remarkable ability in understanding the mental states, beliefs and emotions of others. Sutton et al. (1999) further suggest that someone who displays a heightened awareness of the feelings of others (high affective personality-taking ability) but also demonstrates an inability or unwillingness to share those feelings (i.e., low empathic disposition) would be especially manipulative in his or her dealings with others. It may therefore not necessarily be the social insight that is lacking in bullies but rather some form of empathic understanding.

Delveaux and Daniels (2000) conducted a study that examined the relationship between goal selection and relational aggression. According to them, children who chose relationally aggressive strategies also chose goals of self-interest, personal control, revenge, avoiding trouble, and maintaining relationships among the peer group. Crain et al. (2005) found similar patterns in that relational aggression was aimed at revenge and friendship exclusivity goals.

Some evidence exists that the families of children who bully are often characterised by a lack cohesion and imbalance of power between the parents (Bowers, Smith & Binney, 1992). It could be speculated that this style of relationship may serve as a behavioural model for children growing up in such an environment and be internalised by them (Bandura, 1999).

Considering the findings and hypotheses regarding the determinants of indirect aggression and the proposed cognitive variables at play in the manifestation indirect aggression are largely contradictory, it may be more fruitful to draw one's attention to the social-contextual factors involved in the aggressive system. Seeing as indirect aggression occurs within a relational domain, an examination of peer dynamics could shed more light on the motivations behind this phenomenon, rather than focusing on individual cognitive variables (Crain et al., 2005).

### **2.3.2. The victim**

Prinstein et al. (2001) point out that rather than viewing the effects of indirect aggression and victimisation in a unidirectional fashion, these factors may mutually contribute to one another. This transactional model suggests that victimisation indeed may predict concurrent and prospective psychological maladjustment, but also that adolescents experiencing adjustment difficulties could be more vulnerable to subsequent peer victimisation (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Similarly, peer aggression may be exacerbated by adjustment difficulties and contribute to future maladjustment. It is also possible that

adolescents with social-psychological adjustment difficulties are more likely to perceive peers' behaviour as aggressive and thus report higher levels of victimisation (Lochman & Dodge, 1994).

Victimisation is commonly attributed to something being 'wrong with me', particularly during adolescence, when there is an inward shift of self-knowledge (Rice, 1996). Adolescents rely on their personal judgement and insight to reach conclusions about the self, particularly when the reasons for behaviours directed against them are ambiguous (Harter, 1999). This could be part of the reason why victims of indirect aggression tend to express considerable self-doubt, insecurity, and anxiety (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Furthermore, they have also been found to yearn for approval and when rejected or hurt, try unsuccessfully to continue the relationship with the bully (Bernstein & Watson, 1997). Owens et al. (2000a) noted how some girls develop a 'victim mentality' from experiencing various difficulties at home and with friends, and that they would then portray a kind of wounded suffering identity. This tendency would obviously place these girls at greater risk for continued relationship difficulties, and a vicious cycle taking shape (Owens et al., 2000a).

Owens et al. (2000a), uncovered two characteristics on the part of the victims that were prominent reasons for bullies to lash out: 1. *Own fault* and 2. *Vulnerability*. Some girls in their study reported that the victims were usually at fault because they had done something annoying and aggravating. This ties in with the notion of the provocative victim brought forward by Olweus (1993b),



where the target is aggressive and incites peers to retaliate. However, considering previously mentioned research on bullies and the possibility that they may succumb to attributional bias, blaming the victim may be a rationalisation on the aggressor's part (Owens et al., 2000a). The other characteristic was the perception of some vulnerability in the victim. For instance, that the victim is new at the school and lacking in social support and friends, or there may be something different about the person, such as a disability, a lack of social skills or an unassertive style of interaction (Owens et al., 2000a). Alternatively, some people may be bullied because they possess something of which the bully is jealous or envious about.

Prinstein et al. (2001) and Vernberg (1990) found that high levels of close friendship support mitigated the association between relational victimisation and social-psychological maladjustment, whereas victimisation predicted declines in perceived social acceptance over time for isolated adolescents. This aspect is of course complicated when relational victimisation and social support occur within the context of the same friendship and that the very intimacy a friendship provides is used as a vehicle for indirect aggression.

### **2.3.3. The peer context**

Bullying occurs within social relationships and usually with peers present (Sutton et al., 1999). Studies entailing videotaping students on the playground and in classrooms found that peers were involved in 85 percent of the bullying activity (Craig & Pepler, 1997).

James and Owens (2005), for instance, noted that the behaviours of girls talking about other girls, neglecting and excluding and giving nasty looks were all explained as means of facilitating or manipulating friendships. Owens et al. (2000a) identified two broad categories that serve as potential explanations for girls' indirect aggression: 1. *Alleviating boredom/creating excitement*; and 2. *Friendship and group processes*. The second category has six subheadings, which comprise of the following: *Attention seeking; inclusion in the group; belonging to the right group; self-protection, jealousy, and revenge*. Looking at these categories, it becomes apparent that there is a dynamic interplay between individual motivations and goals and the group process as a whole when looking at indirect aggression.

The majority of bullying incidents occur in the presence of peers and often out of the sight of adults. Thus the cloak of secrecy extends to encircle a group of peers and excludes adults (Hawkins & Craig, 2001). Many bullied children do not tell potentially helpful adults about their difficulties for fear that their situation may worsen (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). This allows the bullies to continue their attack on the victim without fear of consequences. Gradually, a flawed interactional pattern unfolds where the bully progressively chips away at the victim's defences, and the victim endures a 'silent nightmare' with emotional consequences (Smith, 1991; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Salmivalli, Hattunen and Lagerspetz (1997) developed a measure, the Participant Role Questionnaire, to explore how other children, in addition to

the victims and bullies, are involved in the bullying process. They questioned what the other children do when the victim is harassed by the bully and highlighted four different roles. Each participant engages in specific behaviours that form a part of the pattern typically found in bullying practices, such as: helping the bully (Assistant), reinforcing the bully through watching, laughing, shouting encouragement (Reinforcer), or alternatively, sticking up for the victim (Defender), or remaining resolutely uninvolved (Outsider) (Salmivalli et al., 1997; Sutton et al., 1999).

Looking at the more recent literature (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000a, 2000b), it becomes apparent that the roles outlined above are not static and that different people move from one role to another depending on the situation and the individuals involved in the interpersonal exchange. Research reveals that adolescent girls do engage in retaliation and revenge seeking against one another (Owens et al., 2000b) and thereby a pattern of regular role-changing emerges, specifically adjusted to the incumbents' and system's needs at a specific time.

In a study by James and Owens (2005), bystanders (outsiders) reported that they suppress their outward expression of empathy when witnessing indirect aggression in a crowd. "As much as bystanders may feel 'bad' or 'sorry' for victims, they chose not to act in their defence for fear of also being victimised" (James & Owens, 2005, p. 85). Furthermore, Owens et al. (2000a) noted that girls would join the aggressor in spreading rumours or indirectly attacking another, even though the incident from which the conflict may have begun did

not personally involve them. They would largely engage with the 'reinforcer' role to prove they belong to the group. Adler et al. (1992) found that the relational bonds between the perpetrators (bully and reinforcers) would be strengthened through such acts of aggression, whilst children who tend to act as 'defenders' of the victims have been found to have the highest status among their peers (Sutton et al. 1999).

Particularly adolescent girls seem preoccupied with their social networks, friendships, image, and popularity status (Rice, 1996). Considering the above, indirect aggression appears to be a vehicle to manipulate and influence friendships and relationships, and thereby also one's social standing. However, findings have been mixed in terms of what level of popularity indirect aggressors occupy. For instance, Lindman and Sinclair (1988, in Rigby & Slee, 1999), found girl bullies to be surprisingly popular, whilst Salmivalli et al. (1997) found that female bullies scored high on both social rejection and social acceptance. They had a controversial status, being both highly liked and highly disliked by their peers (Salmivalli et al., 1997).

The discrepant findings could be as a result of emphasising different aspects of popularity. Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) provide a useful model by differentiating between two subtypes of peer popularity: *social preference* (sociometric popularity) and *social visibility* (perceived popularity). Sociometric popularity refers to the level of acceptance of a child by his or her peer group, whereas studies of perceived popularity refer more to individuals who occupy network centrality. Cillessen and Mayeux (2004, p. 3) explain that

“adolescents nominated as sociometrically popular are described by peers as kind, trustworthy, cooperative, and sociable (LaFontana & Cillessen, 1999, 2002; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Those nominated as perceived popular, however, are characterised as cool, dominant, arrogant, and both physically and relationally aggressive by their peers...”.

According to Mishna (2004), when bullying occurs amongst friends, it becomes very confusing for those involved, as there appears to be a blurring of functions – “both relational victimisation and social support occur within the context of the same friendship” (Prinstein et al., 2001, p. 489). Victims have been found to be less likely to judge behaviour as bullying when it occurred among friends. They are also more reluctant to mention such conflict to teachers and parents, as this could then mean the end of a friendship, which may a feared consequence of the victim (Newman, Murray & Lussier, 2001). The victim therefore feels entrapped in what appears to be an intense and possibly even close friendship, which is built onto ambiguous foundations (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005).

#### **2.4. THE REPERCUSSIONS**

Conflict is inevitable in close relationships and the proper management and resolution of conflict is imperative in the development and maintenance of friendships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). However, when it comes to bullying and indirect aggression, it is often difficult to diffuse the situation in a constructive and amicable manner. As Mishna (2004) points out, without

information to the contrary, adults regularly believe that leaving children to their own devices in navigating through indirect and emotional bullying is the best solution to the problem and that this fosters growth. Underestimating the harm caused by some forms of bullying, in particularly non-violent aggression, may lead to an inappropriate response by parents or teachers, which could potentially result in more damage or confusion on the part of the victim and further reinforcement for the bullying behaviour to continue (Mishna, 2004; Owens et al., 2000a).

If bullying behaviour and indirect aggression is ignored, and the victim and perpetrator are left to their own devices, a pervasive pattern of harmful and emotionally damaging behaviour could ensue, which is bound to have significant repercussions on both the victim and perpetrator in the long run.

Previously, researchers speculated that relational aggression among girls results in the same social outcomes as does overt aggression among boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Subsequent research suggests that there are differences in the dynamics surrounding relational and physical aggression (Prinstein et al., 2001). Prinstein et al. (2001) hypothesised that adolescent overt aggression appears to be associated more closely with concurrent externalising difficulties, whereas indicators of internal distress (i.e., depression, loneliness, and sense of self-worth) seem to be linked most closely to relational forms of peer aggression and victimisation. Recent research supports this notion, and has shown that girls' indirect aggression is perceived as very hurtful and that it may lead to severe social-psychological

distress (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000b; Prinstein et al., 2001).

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found that victims of indirect aggression tended to be more depressed and showed elevated levels of social anxiety, social avoidance and loneliness. Similarly, Olweus (1993b) noted that bullied children tend to suffer from low self-esteem, unhappiness, high levels of depression, including suicidal ideation, and anxiety.

Longitudinal studies have found that young adults who had been victims during their school years had higher levels of depression, poorer levels of self-esteem, poorer mental health in general, as well as were more likely to have physical health complaints including headaches and stomach pains (Olweus, 1993a; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

It is difficult to establish how adolescent bullying behaviour impacts the future relationships and friendships of the bully. Indirect aggression practices do not end with adolescence and definitely exist within the adult population (e.g., Loudin et al., 2003). However, due to the limited longitudinal research in this regard, it is merely speculative to suggest that the same people who were bullies at a young age will still be bullies later on in adult life, although there might be a strong link.

In the workplace, for instance, it is believed that bullies continue oppressing others through manipulative and deceiving strategies (Sutton et al., 1999).

Their rigid enforcement of social control and dominance may be suggestive of an 'autocratic style', which may in fact appreciate in some business settings where tough-minded, assertive and goal-directed behaviour is welcomed. Nonetheless, the use of indirect aggression in a controlled, efficient form in an environment that allows it to flourish, could generate similar dynamics to those found on the school playground (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996).

Furthermore, Slee and Rigby (1993) noted that in the long-term, bullies have been reported to have higher levels of psychoticism than groups of victims and controls, and Jacobson (1992) links early bullying behaviour with domestic violence. According to him, the more overt, physically aggressive bully may develop into a hot-headed, excessively reactive partner, whilst the indirect, emotional bully could come across as cool and calculating, and generally subjugating of the partner.

### **3. THE WAY FORWARD**

As can be seen from the contents of this chapter, our understanding of indirect aggression and emotional bullying has grown considerably over the last two decades. The majority of the research appears to agree that indirect aggression reaches a peak during adolescence and that it is the preferred form of aggression amongst females. Whilst various hypotheses have been tabled regarding the personal characteristics of the aggressor and the victim, there seemed to be limited focus in past research on the 'aggressive system' and how the social and peer context contributes to aggressive practices. This



is surprising seeing as indirect aggression and bullying are social and interactional phenomena that exist within a relational context. Nonetheless, there is a growing awareness amongst researchers that contextual and systemic aspects need to be considered and incorporated into research and it can be expected that the more current findings will predominantly reflect this awareness.

Seeing as the current study follows systemic thinking in its interpretation and understanding of indirect aggression and bullying practices, the following chapter provides a brief overview of the most pertinent aspects of systemic theory and how these relate to the phenomena under investigation.

## Chapter 3

### **THE SYSTEMIC BACKDROP**

General systems theory came into being in the 1950s when researchers started to direct their attention towards entire systems and how their interrelating parts make up a whole. Von Bertalanffy (1950, in Fourie, 1998) believed that systems theory could account for the behaviour of all systems, regardless what they are comprised of. In psychology, and particularly the family therapy movement, this theory found a number of followers, as it allowed therapists to shift their focus from making assumptions about certain thoughts, motivations, and intrapsychic processes that people may be experiencing, to studying the behaviour and relationships between them (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). Suddenly, the afflicted person was no longer seen as the carrier of some internally located psychological disorder, but rather, symptoms were viewed as forming part of a sequence of behaviour patterns entrenched in the familial system.

By observing entire systems and their behaviour sequences and patterns, researchers gained much insight into the dynamics that connect, change, contain, and shift entire systems, and how the individual members of a system mutually influence each other (Hoffman, 1981). For many therapists it became inconceivable to consider working with individuals in isolation, separate from their context, and without being mindful of the larger system with which they are intricately connected.

## 1. SYSTEMS THEORY AND THE AGGRESSIVE SYSTEM

Systems theory focuses on the *what?* and *how?* of certain phenomena, rather than *why* certain happenings occur (Hoffman, 1981). This means that a systemically minded researcher is more likely to investigate the actual here-and-now dynamics and experiences regarding an event, rather than attempt to delve into the possible causes leading up to the event. Becvar and Becvar (2006) explain that a systemic investigation focuses on describing what is happening by asking questions such as: Who are the members of the system? What are the characteristic patterns of interaction? What rules and roles form the boundaries of this system? How open and closed are these boundaries and how freely is information transmitted into or out of the system? Furthermore, the balance between stability and change and the system's tendency to move toward or away from order is considered.

Considering indirect aggression is a socially driven phenomenon that feeds off the social context and utilises interpersonal networks and interactional patterns to manipulate relationships, it lends itself very well to scrutiny from a systemic perspective. The following central notions of systems theory are particularly relevant in gaining a better understanding of the dynamics at play in bullying and indirect aggression practices. They provide the researcher with a useful framework for conceptualising the phenomena of indirect aggression.

## **1.1. RECURSION**

Recursiveness, or reciprocal causality, refers to the notion that people and events are in a context of mutual interaction and influence (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). The observer looks at the relationships and how each individual interacts and influences the other and how meaning is derived from the relation as each defines it. The principle of recursion is very important when considering research on indirect aggression. Up to now the overwhelming majority of research on this topic has sought to identify reasons as to *why* indirect aggression exists, *why* certain people are targeted by emotional bullies, and *why* certain people become indirect aggressors. Researchers have largely failed to take cognisance of the dynamic interplay between people and how they mutually interact and influence each other. Rather than searching for a plausible cause or initiator, researchers should possibly focus on what is happening between the people involved in the interaction and how they are mutually involved in a circular communication process (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Apart from individuals mutually influencing each other, systems are also nestled into – and connected with – other systems, that mutually exert influence on each other (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). A systemic investigation therefore needs to also take the dynamics of the larger systemic context into consideration.

## **1.2. FEEDBACK**

Feedback refers to the process whereby information about past behaviours is fed back into the system in circular patterns or 'feedback loops' (Hoffmann, 1981). Feedback *is* behaviour in that it is the response or reaction to one's actions and thereby provides us with information regarding our own behaviour. Powers (1973, p. 351) explains that "we know nothing of our own behaviour but the feedback effects of our own inputs". Feedback is an important aspect to consider when looking at indirect aggression practices, as it forms the actual backbone to the aggressive process unfolding. Participants in this process react to each other's feedback and make adjustments in their behaviour, either leading to the status quo being maintained (negative feedback), or the process escalating and deviating from previously established norms (positive feedback), thereby arriving at a new way of relating (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Hoffman, 1981).

Aggression, as a form of feedback, can either provoke the members of a system sufficiently to alter and change the rules and sometimes even the composition of a system (positive feedback); or it can contribute to the stability – and at times 'stuckness' – of the system and its members by reinforcing the pre-existing rules and state of functioning (negative feedback).

### **1.3. RULES AND BOUNDARIES**

The rules that govern a system at a given time can be inferred from the relationship patterns as well as the patterns of interaction within the system (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). They reflect the implicit values and roles adhered to within the system. Therefore, when indirect aggression forms part of the interactive pattern within a system, it can be interpreted as an extension of the rules that govern that particular system. In other words, that style of interaction is permissible within the system and serves some function for that system at a given time. The behaviours of everyone involved in the system fit together in a coherent and interlocking way, with the whole network evolving over time (Dell, 1982).

Rules also form the system's boundaries, which can be inferred from observing repetitive patterns of behaviour. They imply the notion of a hierarchy of systems, indicating the separateness of a system from a larger system and how these are related to each other (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). In systems where indirect aggression is prominent, these boundaries appear to become somewhat blurred. Members are uncertain as to whether they are 'in' or 'out'; whether someone is a friend to them or not, or whether they have been accepted into a circle of friends or not (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000a). Becvar and Becvar (2006) explain that boundaries function like gatekeepers – they screen the flow of information going into and out of the system for compatibility with the existing values and rules of the system. If a person wants to join an existing group of friends, for instance, they need to

prove to that system that their characteristics and values are compatible with those of the group and that they will fulfil a relevant role within that group.

#### **1.4. ROLES**

Group members all take on certain roles that play a part in reinforcing the patterns of interaction within the group, thereby upholding the system's intrinsic rule structure and boundaries (Hoffman, 1981). These roles appear to be mutually influencing and can be occupied by different members of the group at different times. The function of a role becomes evident when observing the behavioural patterns displayed by the role-taker and taking note of the relevant feedback generated by the other group members in response to that person's behaviour (Haley, 1963). However, this meta-view usually eludes the role-taker's immediate awareness. Examples of roles taken in systems where indirect aggression exists could be the following: Aggressor, victim, observer, protector, instigator, supporter, accomplice, leader, follower, peacemaker, defender etc (Sutton et al., 1999).

#### **1.5. RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS**

Becvar and Becvar (2006) explain that there are typically three styles or patterns of interaction found in relationships. These can be observed by taking into account the whole system as well as the context within which the behaviour exists.

The *complementary* pattern refers to a style of interacting where there is a high frequency of opposite kinds of behaviour. The *symmetrical* style entails a high frequency of similar kinds of behaviour, whilst the *parallel* relationship pattern involves alternating between complementary and symmetrical interactions (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). When considering acts of indirect aggression and bullying, all these styles of interaction probably come into play at one stage or another (Hoffman, 1981).

According to Olweus (1993b), bullying and aggression occur when there is an imbalance of power between the aggressor and victim. The bully may attempt to gain control over the definition of the relationship by setting up a complementary dynamic, where he or she is perceived as dominant whilst the other remains submissive. However, should the other person resist such a definition of the relationship and try to enforce a symmetrical relationship, an escalation and power struggle ensues where both participants unsuccessfully attempt to gain control of the relationship. In this case aggression occurs between parties of equal power, where a two-way process of attack and retaliation unfolds (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000a).

### **1.6. POWER AND CONTROL**

Whilst some researchers, such as Bateson (1979), viewed concepts of control and power within relationships as pathological, Haley (1963) developed the 'control theory', which supports the notion that people persistently engage in reciprocal attempts to control the nature of relationships. He explains that in



interaction with one another, people are always posed with two problems: 1. what messages or what kind of behaviours are to take place in this relationship, and 2. who controls what is to take place in this relationship and therefore the definition of the relationship (Hoffman, 1981; Vorster, 2003).

According to Haley (1963), people continuously attempt to control their interactions by defining and redefining their relationships. The definition of the relationship is important in terms of how a message will be interpreted and how people relate with each other. Difficult relationships are those where people cannot reach agreement on a mutual definition of areas in the relationship. When both partners in a relationship bid for control, as would be the case in a symmetrical struggle, open battle, sabotage, and passive resistance could come into play (Haley, 1963). With regard to indirect aggression practices, this type of interaction would take place if both members are seen holding equal amounts of power and control in the relationship.

If a relationship is not clearly defined, there may be some ambiguity as to how a certain message was intended and what meaning one should ascribe to it. This scenario seems to occur regularly in indirect aggression practices, where particularly the victim is unable to ascertain how the relationship has been defined. Some bullies may, for instance, create ambiguity by sending incongruent messages to their victims, leading them to believe that the relationship has been defined in one way, whilst in fact it has been defined

differently. This then results in confusion as to where they stand in relation to one another and the bully gains control of the relationship.

### **1.7. COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION PROCESSING**

According to Becvar and Becvar (2006), we attach meaning to messages by considering three modes of communication: the verbal mode, the nonverbal mode, and the context. These modes of communication can be grouped into two levels of communication – the content level (verbal information) and the process level (nonverbal and context). When these levels do not match, the communication is incongruent and confusion may arise (Haley, 1963). This type of communication is referred to as paradoxical, or double-bind communication (Hoffman, 1981).

People tend to feel entrapped and uncomfortable when confronted with a paradoxical message. Haley (1963) indicates that the receiver may respond in one of three ways: 1. terminate the relationship, 2. comment on the impossible situation one is being placed in, or 3. respond by indicating that one is not responding – in other words, responding with a counterparadox. The unfortunate thing about paradoxical relationships is that the person posing paradoxes wins control of a particular area of behaviour, but in doing so the other person is required to respond in a similar way and the conflictual relationship is perpetuated (Haley, 1963).

According to Watzlawick et al. (1967), prolonged exposure to incongruent communication patterns can lead to a difficulty in determining the meaning of one's own and others' communication. The person struggles to use context to assign meaning to behaviour and to distinguish between logical levels (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Gradually, all communication is seen as paradoxical and the person behaves accordingly, avoiding any definition of the relationship and retracting from meaningful interpersonal interaction (Vorster, 2003).

As indicated above, a popular technique in indirect aggression practices appears to entail the purposeful sending of incongruent messages so as to confuse the recipient. It may be that the actual incongruence and subsequent confusion of an indirect aggressive act makes it so aggressive, destructive, and powerful. Therefore, when someone is regularly and systematically bullied and bombarded with incongruent messages, the repercussions and psychological impact can be profound, particularly when this occurs at a time where social skills and self-confidence etc. are in the process of being shaped and entrenched, and "when both relational victimisation and social support occur within the context of the same friendship" (Prinstein et al., 2001, p. 489).

### **1.8. TRIANGULATION**

Initially, research into interactional processes and patterns tended to focus on dyadic, two-person exchanges (Hoffman, 1981). However, a shift occurred when researchers started noticing how pathology, such as schizophrenia, seems to predominantly occur where three or more people are interacting with

each other. Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland (1956) observed that in the schizophrenic family, no two persons seemed to get together whether to be close or disagree, without a third person interfering and taking part. They referred to this phenomenon as an 'infinite dance of shifting coalitions', as it became apparent how the members of the family were consistently manoeuvring each other and changing their relationship definitions (Hoffman, 1981). However, not all triadic interaction has to be viewed as pathological; benign relationship triangles are present, and serve a function, in every system (Hoffman, 1981).

According to Bowen (in Becvar and Becvar, 2006), the triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. He explained that a two-person emotional system tends to triangulate a third person into the system in order to relieve tension between the original pair. The involvement of a third person can however cause further tension in the system and confuse whatever difficulties were present in the initial interaction. This depends on the manner in which the system adapts to the third person's involvement, and how the members relate to each other (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Hoffman, 1981). Furthermore, the triangling in of a third person may activate other triangles, which are linked and reactive to one another, thereby generating a ripple effect through entire social networks (Hoffman, 1981).

With regard to indirect aggression and bullying, triangulation appears to play a prominent role in facilitating the aggressive system. As James and Owens (2005) explained, some girls will have two 'best friends' and alternate between

them, isolate others and form alliances so as to gang up against someone they were previously close to, and create conflict by means of spreading rumours or giving contradicting information to different members of a group. In friendship circles, it would seem that some members lived in constant fear of being ostracised, replaced, or allied against by people they rated as being close to them (James & Owens, 2005). All these strategies entail triangulation tactics and the strategic manipulation of the system.

According to Wynne (in Hoffman, 1981), the changes from splits to alignments, back and forth, have to do with the homeostatic maintenance processes in a system. They prevent members of a group from differentiating too much, thereby keeping the boundaries of the system in tact (Hoffman, 1981). Similarly, these 'dances' between friends mentioned by James and Owens (2005), may play a role in maintaining constancy and regularity in the system as a whole and counteracting positive feedback processes that may seem threatening to the rules and boundaries of the system.

### **1.9. HOMEOSTASIS AND CHANGE**

When looking at the impact of indirect aggression and bullying, the bullied person often feels 'stuck' or 'immobilised' in his or her situation. It is as if the process of bullying is one of entrapment and isolation, where the victim does not know whom to turn to and how to escape the situation (James & Owens, 2005). Both bully and victim are involved in an intricate dance where they mutually influence each other through their patterns of interaction. Therefore,

the questions one needs to consider are: what drives this pattern of interaction? and how can this repetitive cycle be broken?

Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) speak of a 'game without end' where a system is enmeshed in a problem in a persistent and repetitive way, despite desire and effort to alter the situation. According to them, there are two types of change, first- and second-order change, which are each on a different logical level in relation to the system. First-order change occurs within a given system which itself remains unchanged, and second-order change is a type of change whose occurrence changes the system itself to an altogether different state (Hoffman, 1981). In other words, second order change changes the body of rules governing a system's structure or internal order. According to Watzlawick et al. (1974), groups are invariant on the first-order level, but are open to change on the second order change level.

Apparently, often the attempted first-order solution to a problem is to do the opposite of what is happening (Watzlawick et al., 1974). So, for example, if a person is depressed, others try and cheer that person up, or, more appropriately to this research, if a person is angry and demanding, other people treat that person tentatively, with superficial kindness and a placating approach. Both these solutions may seem to be the logical solution to the problem, but they may in fact exacerbate it (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

According to Watzlawick et al. (1974), many difficulties do not remain the same for long but tend to escalate if no solution or a wrong solution is

attempted, especially if more of a wrong solution is applied. In such instances, the situation may remain structurally similar, but the intensity and suffering of the members of the group increases. It is at these points where mechanisms for maintaining equilibrium within a system may have the potential for disrupting it; in other words, if the escalation reaches a point where the system is unable to counteract the flood of positive feedback chains. Once a system has arrived at such a crossroads, it is difficult to predict whether the result will be the destruction of the social group or the leap to a new form.

This line of thinking may have some bearing on possible intervention strategies when dealing with indirect aggression and bullying. Rather than focusing on the perpetrator or victim and attempting to analyse and 'change' their approach, the focus of intervention should possibly be directed at the system as a whole and the rules that govern such a system.

## **2. A SHIFT IN THINKING**

As can be seen from the above discussion, systemic thinking lends itself very well to an analysis of the patterns, behaviours and interactions that drive and maintain an aggressive system. The central notions referred to in this chapter all stem from what is referred to as general systems theory. General systems theory laid the foundation for systemic thinking as a whole, as it provided the shift in focus from individuals and intrapsychic processes, to the 'patterns that connect' and the processes that occur when people are in relationships with each other.

Systems theory is closely linked with cybernetics, which is a science that has its roots in mathematics and focuses on the interaction between systems and subsystems (Fourie, 1998). Cybernetics complements and overlaps strongly with systems thinking, which is why the two approaches mutually influenced each other to the extent that they are often referred to as one and the same thing (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

As systemic and cybernetic theory developed and evolved, some adaptations were made to the original ideas and ways of thinking about systems, and particularly, the interaction between the observer of a system and the system itself. Second-order cybernetics was born and one of its most prominent contributions was the notion that it is impossible for the observer of a system to be objective and that the mere presence of such a person in relation to the system influences the behaviour of the people being observed (Fourie, 1998; Hoffman, 1981). This meant that, whilst it was previously thought that the dynamics of a system can be interpreted by observing interactional patterns between people and making relevant inferences, the observer was in fact as much a part of the system as the other members.

Whilst general systems theory laid the foundation in providing useful descriptions of a system's components, interaction patterns and mechanisms, second-order cybernetics allowed theorists and therapists to look at themselves and systems recursively and holistically. This shift is important when looking at research practices from a systemic perspective.



Constructivism is an epistemology that is highly compatible with second-order cybernetics, specifically with regards to its notions on how people generate meaning in relation to each other. It suggests that people's perceptions of reality are influenced by their conceptions about themselves, others and the world (Efran & Clarfield, 1992; Fourie, 1998). In other words, we colour our experiences with our own unique assortment of convictions and ideas, which are constantly shifting and changing as we come into contact with others and the world. Constructivism is particularly relevant when conducting research that incorporates systemic thinking, as it enhances our understanding of how experiences and perceptions are intertwined with systemic processes. This epistemological conception will be explained in more detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4

### RESEARCH PARADIGM AND DESIGN

Paradigms are all-encompassing systems of interrelated practice and thinking that can be considered along three dimensions: ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004). **Ontology** specifies the nature of reality that is to be studied and what can be known about it. **Epistemology** specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what can be known, and **methodology** specifies how the researcher may go about practically studying whatever he or she believes can be known (Auerswald, 1985; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004). These three dimensions are all nestled into each other in what can be likened to a Russian doll, with the research design representing the integration of the levels into a comprehensive workable paradigm.

When conducting research, all three dimensions need to be considered in terms of how they fit with each other, with the topic under discussion, and with the belief structures of the researcher. The purpose of this chapter is to lay bare the philosophical and theoretical framework upon which the current research design is based and to describe the subsequent approach that will be followed in order to gather and analyse the relevant data.

## **1. THE THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

In the previous chapter, indirect aggression was discussed by using a systemic backdrop. This approach obviously lends itself well to facilitating an understanding of the processes and dynamics that unfold within the context of indirect aggression, and therefore needed to be taken into consideration when selecting a suitable ontological and epistemological framework from which to formulate the present research design. For the current research, it was important to choose a research framework that fits well with the systemic backdrop laid out in the previous chapter, and which would shed some light on the systemic fibres that are woven into the canvas of aggressive contexts. Post-modernism and social constructionism seem to fit these criteria well and have therefore been selected to guide and represent the theoretical underpinnings of this research endeavour.

### **1.1. POST-MODERNISM**

Modernist philosophy informed most scientific investigation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to this paradigm, scientific research is an objective, logical and empirical activity and scientists should adhere to specific logical and empirical procedures (Neuman, 1999). Modernism supports the notion that we are surrounded by a stable and unchanging reality and that as researchers we can objectively come to know and measure this reality by employing scientific research strategies that control and manipulate variables found in this reality (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004). Furthermore, modernism assumes that the

world is controllable, understandable and predictable and that there can only be one 'truth', one reality, which can be generalised across contexts (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

Seeing that modernism was considered the most 'scientific' and accepted approach to conducting research, researchers in the human sciences attempted to incorporate the principles of logical and empirical methods into their work (Doan, 1997). Over time, however, it became apparent that people differed in their views of what the ultimate reality and truth is, and that many feasible interpretations could be arrived at, all of which were attained through scientific methods and empirical observation (Doan, 1997; Rapmund, 2005). Researchers were confronted with multiple truths, all of which had sufficient scientific basis for being accepted as *the* truth (Doan, 1997). This realisation brought about the birth of Post-modernism.

Post-modernism rejects the view that knowledge is universal and objective. Rather, it purports that the same event can bring about many different accounts, descriptions and meanings and that the explanation or interpretation of such an event is based on our subjective experience (Lynch, 1997). Post-modernism therefore negates the belief in an objective world and rejects the notion that knowledge can be generalised (Lynch, 1997; Neuman, 1999).

Post-modernists furthermore believe that when people are treated with the kind of objectivity endorsed by the modernist perspective, they are regarded

as objects, which dehumanises their experiences and ignores the specific meanings of the individual person (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). In post-modernism, both the research participant and the researcher are viewed as being subjectively involved in the process of searching for meaning and obtaining a greater understanding of experiences (Doan, 1997).

Post-modernism seeks to demystify the social world through infiltrating its surface appearances to reveal its internal hidden structure (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). The focus is on the interrelationship of context, linguistic and social constructions of reality, and the self in a network of relations (Neuman, 1999). Post-modern researchers work from a **context of discovery**, where the subjective and social worlds of scientists as human beings, with their own particular histories, values and beliefs, are also taken into account (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004). They attempt to gain insight into the interrelationships of individuals and their contexts by 'deconstructing' established notions, beliefs and experiences and reconstructing them in a new way. This is all done in the context of meaningful conversation where researcher and research participant share their understanding of experiences and knowledge (Rapmund, 2005).

When presenting research findings, post-modernists avoid communicating their results in a detached and neutral way (Lynch, 1997; Rapmund, 2005). On the contrary, the author of a report should never be hidden when someone reads it, as it forms part of that person's unique expression of his or her reality – similar to a work of art (Neuman, 1999; Rapmund, 2005). Post-modern research is

furthermore intended to inspire others, to evoke a response, and to arouse curiosity (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004). Its value lies in telling a story that may stimulate experiences within people who read or encounter it, thereby growing and building practical knowledge that is socially useful (Neuman, 1999)

Post-modernism is closely linked with the social constructionist epistemology. As mentioned above, an epistemology guides the researcher in terms of the nature of his or her relationship with others, and in terms of what can be known and understood. It is therefore imperative to have a sound epistemological understanding of one's own role in the research process when conducting research and formulating a research design. Part of our understanding at this point has been shaped by the previous chapter, which introduced some epistemological ideas in terms of systemic theory. The following section is intended to enhance our epistemological understanding by incorporating social constructionist principles into its framework.

## **1.2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM**

Social constructionism is an epistemology that concurs with post-modernism. It is concerned with the broader patterns of meaning encoded in language and therefore focuses on interpreting the social world as a kind of language – with a system of meanings and practices facilitating the construction of individual realities (Coale, 1994). As Terre Blanche & Durrheim (2004) explain, “Constructionism holds that the human life-world is fundamentally constituted in language and that language itself should therefore be the object of study.

Thus constructionism does not treat language as if it were neutral and transparent, or as a route to underlying realities, rather language helps to construct reality”.

The way in which a person perceives or makes sense of his or her world is informed by his or her interaction with the social and cultural context (Dean & Rhodes, 1998). The contexts we find ourselves in are filled with systems of signs and symbols in the form of representations of reality, practices, and physical arrangements. These systems provide a framework by which we understand objects and practices, as well as who we are and what we should do in relation to these systems (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004).

Our actions reproduce the ruling discourses of our time and re-enact established relational patterns and systemic frameworks (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004). It can therefore be assumed that discourses evolve over time, much like systems change and develop as time goes on and new rules and boundaries are established. When considering an individual’s account of his or her experiences, the researcher needs to be aware of the interconnectedness of that person with other people in increasingly more inclusive social and societal contexts, and how dominant discourses are a reflection of numerous levels of interaction within broader social contexts.

Social constructionism holds that human beings make sense of the world and generate meaning through the use of language. We live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and understand ourselves and others

through evolving stories and self descriptions (Hart, 1995). This is why social constructionist methods encourage individuals to tell their own stories while at the same time acknowledging the social nature of human life (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Social constructionists are interested in how individuals ascribe subjective understandings and meanings to grand narratives that are woven into discourses, and how these discourses appear to influence people's experiences and views of themselves and others, thereby giving voice to personal stories amidst dominant belief systems (Doan, 1997). By 'deconstructing' discourses and gaining insight into the meanings and perceptions attached to these, new realities can be 'reconstructed' by transforming the their meaning and actively exploring alternative choices, which could facilitate change (Coale, 1994; Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

With indirect aggression, the creation of meaning comes about in a context where various discourses and actions aimed at manipulating and hurting others are deeply rooted in 'grand narratives', or greater social 'truths'. These various larger, socially agreed upon belief systems have a huge impact on the individual experience of indirect aggression and are believed to play a large part in the perpetuation and maintenance thereof. The social constructionist epistemology lends itself well to the interpretation of these meaning systems and promotes a clearer understanding of individual experiences within the greater societal context.

The present study intends to illustrate the complexity of experiences within aggressive systems. The participants in this study were given the space to



explore the impact indirect aggression may have had on their lives and their perceptions. Since each context is distinctive to the individual and relationships cannot be alike, the meaning generated between the researcher and each participant is unique to that interaction. This meaning is co-constructed through the interchange of ideas, words and expressions within the context of the relationship. Hopefully, by being mindful of her own role in this meaning-generating process, the researcher can allow each unique story to resonate through the pages of this document as truthfully as possible; giving justice to each participant's voice and 'lived experience'.

As indicated in the beginning of this chapter, a research paradigm takes into consideration three intertwined dimensions, namely: ontology, epistemology and methodology. So far, the researcher has delved in the more theoretical aspects of post-modern ontology and social constructionist epistemology. Both these dimensions reflect the theoretical underpinnings of the qualitative research paradigm. The following section will explain the basic assumptions of a qualitative research paradigm and how the research approach and design can be seen as an extension of these assumptions.

### **1.3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Whilst the quantitative paradigm relies primarily on assumptions from the modernist approach to science, which emphasises universal laws of cause and effect and is grounded in the belief that reality consists of a world of objectively defined facts; qualitative research is based largely on the assumptions brought

forward by the post-modernist approach (Rapmund, 2005). This means that the central tenets of post-modernism, such as the notion of multiple realities and the subjective nature of all our experiences, have found their voice and expression in qualitative research endeavours.

With qualitative research, the researcher attempts to understand the meaning of naturally occurring events, actions and interactions, from the point of view of the participants involved (Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990). The researcher takes an active and participatory role in the research process by developing a relationship with the participants that fosters open communication and sharing (Rapmund, 2005). This is contrary to the quantitative approach, where the researcher is considered detached from the objects or variables being studied, thus allowing the results of the study to be objective and 'value-free' (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004).

Qualitative research argues against the reductionist tendency that quantitative research has towards human experience and emphasises the importance of expanding our field of observation by delving into the personal impressions and details relating to our experiences (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). It is through this inquisitive and curious approach that the human side of social life is allowed to come through in our research findings, rather than reducing people's worlds and experiences to statistical equations (Neuman, 1999). The qualitative approach lends itself well to the use of story telling in research and conducting unstructured discovery-oriented interviews, as these enable the

researcher to weave together a broad contextual understanding where events and actions are considered holistically (Rapmund, 2005).

A further defining feature of qualitative research is the relationship between researcher and participant. In order to gain a holistic understanding of the participant, the researcher must be considerably involved in the interactional process and have established good rapport with the participant. This seemingly leads to a blurring of boundaries with the researcher being involved in an inseparable relationship with the participant (Moon et al., 1990). However, the relative closeness between the researcher and participant is important, as they are both involved in the process of generating meaning and facilitating a greater understanding of the perspectives surrounding a particular experience. In a sense, the participant becomes a co-researcher of his/her own meaning.

When considering the main principles of qualitative research, it becomes evident that this paradigm lends itself well to serving as an extension of the ontological and epistemological principles of this study. The qualitative paradigm corresponds well with constructionism in the sense that the emphasis for both is on the creation of meanings in the context of relationships and lived experiences. Both approaches take into account the inter-subjectivity of the research process, where both the researcher and the participant influence each other and create meaning in combination. Furthermore, both qualitative research and constructionism acknowledge the importance of language in the process of generating meaning, which is why

much of the research endeavours guided by these principles make use of narrative techniques and semi-structured interviews, where both the researcher and participant are co-creators of meaning.

The reader may have noticed whilst reading Chapter 2: *Aggression in context*, that few studies on indirect and relational aggression have attempted to go beyond making inferences about this phenomenon and few have actually consulted adolescents in qualitative studies. This has resulted in much of the research failing to tap into the expert knowledge that these adolescents have regarding their own experiences and a certain richness and understanding of the topic having been left untouched. The use of a qualitative research approach for the current study is valuable in the sense that it provides insight into the actual feelings, experiences and perceptions of adolescent girls involved in peer conflicts, thereby enabling an understanding of what Van Manen (1990) describes as the 'lived experience'. The following section aims to explain how the qualitative research paradigm informed the research design and approach for the present research endeavour.

## **2. THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

The feeling amongst some researchers, particularly more quantitatively focused researchers, may be that the qualitative research paradigm lacks structure, focus, and guidelines in terms of how to design and approach the research process. Furthermore, the question of reliability and validity has come to the fore, with some researchers believing that qualitative research

has too few control structures in place to warrant any claims of obtaining reliable and valid findings. However, these criticisms have been found to be largely unwarranted, seeing as there are in fact certain characteristics that need to be present in a qualitative research design for it to subscribe to acceptable research practices and standards.

According to Moon et al. (1990, p. 359-362), the following characteristics need to be evident in a qualitative research design, in order to consider it a high-quality study.

### **2.1. RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

Past research practices have strongly emphasised that research findings have to be evaluated in terms of their ability to accurately reflect phenomena being studied. Particularly in social research, reliability and validity are important concepts to behold because the phenomena under study are ambiguous and not always directly observable (Neuman, 1999). What then happens to our understanding of reliability and validity when we take into consideration the central tenets of an epistemology such as constructionism – where it is believed that accurate reflections of reality are impossible to attain since reality is constructed, perspectival, and context-specific (Dean & Rhodes, 1998)? The temptation might be to discard all notions of reliability and validity when conducting research from a constructionist epistemology. However, there is an ethical responsibility at play when conducting qualitative

research, which is to afford people a glimpse into lived experiences of others, whilst acknowledging one's own contributions and impact on the findings.

In qualitative research, reliability refers to the trustworthiness of *observations* or data and validity refers to the trustworthiness of the *interpretations* or conclusions made by the researcher (Rapmund, 2005; Stiles, 1993). In order to establish good levels of reliability and validity, the researcher can follow various guidelines, as outlined by Stiles (1993, p. 602-607), some of which will be mentioned here.

It is useful for the researcher to disclose his or her expectations, preconceptions, values and orientation at the outset of the research process, and for him or her to reflect upon these throughout the process of documentation and interpretation. Furthermore, the internal processes of investigation are reflected upon throughout the research process, as the researcher cycles between interpretation and observation – a process that entails being a part of and apart from the process of interpretation (Stiles, 1993). Cross-referencing interpretations with previous theories as well as 'grounding' one's interpretations by linking the context and the content of the interviews to the interpretations are also means of enhancing the reliability and 'dependability' of the research findings (Stiles, 1993; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004).

Validity involves the processes of 'triangulation' and 'coherence'. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple information resources and perspectives against

which the researcher checks his or her own position (Kelly, 1999). Coherence relates to the quality of fit of the experiences of the participants with the interpretation made by the researcher, and the interpretations in relation to the intentions of the research. It can be very useful to obtain a participant's perspective on the researcher's interpretations, allowing for a renegotiation of the meaning ascribed to certain observations and an inclusion of different voices. The impact of the research on the participant (catalytic validity) and the researcher (reflexive validity) should be taken into consideration, as this can also yield useful insight into the meaningfulness of the research process and the ever-changing nature of our experiences (Rapmund, 2005; Stiles, 1993; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2004).

## **2.2. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Certain ethical guidelines need to be followed when conducting any type of research, be it quantitative or qualitative. These guidelines are intended to protect the research participants' physical and mental integrity. The three main aspects to consider are: consent, confidentiality, and competence (Rapmund, 2005).

*Informed consent* involves obtaining verbal and written approval from the participants to take part in the intended research. This ensures that they voluntarily participate in the study and that they make an informed choice following a clear explanation regarding the research process and requirements.

*Confidentiality* refers to respecting another's privacy and personal integrity by engaging in certain protective measures throughout the research process. Each participant has to have a clear understanding of who will have access to the information supplied, how the information will be used, and that his/her identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. Furthermore, the participants need to be informed about the purpose of the research being conducted, how the information will be recoded and stored, and the manner in which the final information will be presented.

*Competence* refers to the researcher's strict adherence to ethical guidelines throughout the research process. Furthermore, the researcher has to ensure that she has the abilities and capabilities needed for conducting research in the chosen domain. The role of the researcher needs to be well-defined and explained to each participant and professional conduct on the part of the researcher has to be maintained at all times during the research process. The researcher needs to be aware of her limitations and, should the need arise, would refer to more appropriate professionals for assistance, guidance, or intervention.

### **2.3. THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

In qualitative research, both the research participants and the researcher are actively involved in the research process, as they are co-creating meaning in relation to each other. Ideally, the partnership runs through the entire process,



with both parties exploring and sharing their respective meaning-systems from when the research process is initiated, at the first contact between researcher and participant, up to the conclusion of the study – following the circular process of obtaining feedback from the participant regarding the researcher's final interpretations. The following aspects outline the research process adhered to in the current study:

### **2.3.1. Selection and sampling**

With qualitative research, usually small samples are selected, as the researcher prefers to highlight individual differences and contexts (Rapmund, 2005). Brink (1999) emphasises that the intention of the sampling process in qualitative research is to identify participants who fit the requirements of a specific study, and who are able to give a rich and comprehensive description of the problem under study.

As discussed in Chapter 2, indirect aggression appears most prominent amongst adolescent females. It was therefore felt that it would be of benefit to consult adolescent girls individually in a type of unstructured interview. The girls had to be within the age range of 12 to 14 and articulate in the English language in order to facilitate greater understanding of their descriptions and experiences on the part of the researcher.

Most likely all girls in this age-range have come into contact with indirect aggression in some form or another and each girl will have some experience

to reflect back on or to speak of regarding her perception and understanding of this phenomenon. This is why this aspect was not made a selection criterion as such. Furthermore, it was thought to be beneficial to get dynamic and varied perspectives on indirect aggression and bullying, rather than to focus specifically on finding people who have either been bullied or who have bullied in the past.

The selection method used in this research was convenience selection. After identifying the above criteria, contact was made with people known to be in touch with adolescents who could possibly participate in the study. On receiving some referrals, the researcher contacted the parents of the adolescent girls telephonically to discuss her proposed study and obtain preliminary verbal consent from them. If the parents showed an interest in the study and were not adverse to the idea of their daughter's participating, the researcher asked to speak to their daughters briefly so as to introduce herself and set up a meeting to discuss the research in more detail. Following these meetings, there were four interested parties. To ensure voluntary participation, the researcher made it clear to the girls that they were not forced to take part in the study.

Issues of confidentiality and privacy were discussed in detail and the researcher made sure that the participants were aware of their basic rights before, during and after the research process. These rights, as indicated by Mouton (2001), include: the right to privacy (including the right to refuse to participate in the research), the right to anonymity and confidentiality, the right

to full disclosure about the research (participants were informed about what will happen and their signed consent was obtained), the right not to be harmed in any manner (physically, emotionally, or psychologically). Given the age of the participants, I also obtained the consent of their respective guardians prior to conducting any research.

### **2.3.2. Data collection**

The individual interviews were all conducted in a safe and quiet environment, where the participants felt relaxed and at ease. Their preferences in this regard were taken into account, and all four chose to be interviewed at home in their own rooms. This context provided added information and insights regarding each participant, as their rooms were all decorated in such unique and personalised styles, reflecting their character and preferences.

The interviews were fairly unstructured and in-depth, so as to allow the participants to express themselves spontaneously and to facilitate good rapport between the researcher and the participants. The researcher avoided using previously formulated questions and deliberately guiding the participants, as this would encroach on their own personal rendition of their stories. She also encouraged the participants to speak freely about their experiences, which meant that the participants occasionally deviated from the research topic. These deviations can be seen as an indication of the interconnectedness of our experiences across various facets of our lives and enhanced, rather than diluted, the researcher's understanding of the

participant's unique perceptions. Furthermore, the interviews highlighted how indirect aggression forms part of a larger system of interaction amongst adolescent girls, and that this phenomenon cannot be considered and interpreted in isolation.

A dictaphone was used to tape the interviews, which were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Following each interview, the researcher wrote down brief reflections regarding her own experience of the interviewing process and the impressions she may have been left with.

### **2.3.3. Data analysis**

Qualitative methods of analysis are strongly reflected in the interpretive method of *verstehen*, which refers to the understanding of a human phenomenon as it is lived in its context. This process can be likened to the way a reader attempts to understand an author's intention and context at the time of writing a text. However, as Ricoeur (1981) points out, when we view an experience from a distance we can say things about it that we could not say from within the situation. He refers to this process of understanding a context from outside the context as *distanciation* (Ricoeur, 1981).

According to Ricoeur (1981), the distancing which occurs when we look back on an experience is essential for the disclosure of meaning. As the reader is

drawn into the apprehension of meaning, which is now no longer the writer's domain, he or she is enabled to say more than can be known purely from within the author's original context.

**Hermeneutics** is a method of analysis that reflects the above-indicated process of 'distanciation' and meaning generation. It was developed to interpret experiences, texts and behaviours of people and groups so that an understanding can be found of the underlying meaning of their lived experiences (Addison, 1992; Kelly, 1999). It is based on the assumption that people attribute meaning to what happens in their lives by translating their experiences into words. These attributions of meaning can subsequently be explored through the systematic analysis of text, which sheds light on the individual as well as social context of the times (Rapmund, 2005; Neuman, 1999). Furthermore, researchers who conduct hermeneutic explorations are aware of their own contributions to the research process and see the final interpretation as a union of two perspectives (Addison, 1992).

The process of interpretation is informed by the interpreter's values and subjective experience. When studying the text, the researcher tries to absorb the viewpoint it presents as a whole, and then develops a deep understanding of how its parts relate to the larger context (Addison, 1992; Neuman, 1999). The significant parts are then organised into categories on the basis of themes and concepts or similar features (Neuman, 1999). As Neuman (1999, p. 71) indicates, "true meaning is rarely simple or obvious; one reaches it only

through a detailed study of the text, contemplating its many messages and seeking the connections among its parts”.

Hermeneutics does not have a set of prescribed techniques that need to be followed, and there are a number of variations in existence. The following steps of analysis, which were adapted from Addison (1992), Rapmund (2005), and Wilson and Hutchinson (1991), were applied to the present study (steps one to five were applied to each interview separately, and steps six and seven were applied to all four interviews in combination):

***Step 1: Familiarisation and immersion***

This step refers to the thorough and focused reading of the transcript so as to familiarise oneself with the world of the participant. In doing this, the researcher was confronted with a more holistic view of the material, which allowed her to perceive the themes within their overall context.

***Step 2: Thematising***

During this step the researcher revisited the text and inferred themes that stood out for her. She underlined certain phrases and words and noted corresponding themes and relevant comments in the margins of the transcript.

***Step 3: Coding***

This step entailed examining the text closely and grouping together related and similar instances under the same theme. It required the researcher to take on a ‘metaview’ of the themes, where various themes had to be clustered

together under larger thematic representations. For this the researcher used computer generated tables, where she worked through the themes in a parallel fashion, shifting them with regards to their relevant emphasis and inclusiveness.

#### ***Step 4: Elaboration***

Here, the researcher explored the generated themes more closely in an attempt to gain a fresh view of the material and the themes that were picked out. This allowed her to delve into the deeper meaning of what had been said and the coding system had to be altered in places to accommodate the new findings.

Tesch (in Rapmund, 2005) explains this step well by indicating that the researcher has to maintain a curious and questioning attitude, where he or she looks for possible misunderstandings, deeper and alternative meanings, and changes over time, as he or she moves back and forth between the individual elements of the text and the whole text in many cycles – a process referred to as the ‘hermeneutic spiral’. Addison (1992, p. 113) describes the hermeneutic spiral as a “circular progression between parts and whole, foreground and background, understanding and interpretation, and researcher and narrative account”.

#### ***Step 5: Interpretation***

This step entailed the final interpretation of the participant’s story, as seen from the researcher’s perspective, with certain predominant themes being

highlighted. Where appropriate, themes relating to past and present experiences were elaborated on separately, so as to indicate the personal journey of discovery and growth involved in each account. It is acknowledged that meaning evolves over time and is constantly being negotiated in different contexts and for different individuals (Rapmund, 2005). Furthermore, excerpts from the transcribed information were also woven into the interpretation in order to substantiate the identified themes and provide a clearer, more meaningful experience for the reader. This version was then shown to the participant, who was encouraged to give the researcher feedback on her interpretation. Although the final interpretation made by the researcher was conserved in its original form, the information obtained from this feedback process is referred to following the conclusion of each interpretation.

***Step 6: Comparative analysis and integration of findings***

The various themes and findings from each interview were correlated and compared with each other and similarities and differences between the accounts were highlighted. Relevant literature was also woven into the text, to allow for as many voices as possible to be included and considered.

Furthermore, Rapmund (2005) suggests that it is a good practice for the researcher to reflect on his or her role throughout the research process, which is something that the present researcher did at various stages during this study.



### ***Step 7: Evaluation of the study and recommendations***

The researcher then evaluated the study and discussed recommendations for future research endeavours. Furthermore, possible interventions strategies were then considered with particular reference to aspects that were highlighted in this study during the analysis of all four participants' accounts.

### **3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

This chapter attempted to illustrate and explain how research paradigms are guided by specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, and how the research process and design becomes an extension of the theoretical foundation ascribed to by the researcher. In this chapter, the researcher explained the theoretical underpinnings of post-modernism and social constructionism, the guiding principles of the qualitative research paradigm and the interpretive method of hermeneutics. All these levels of theory are interconnected and informed the researcher throughout the research process.

A consistent line of thinking needs to run through the research process and design in order to facilitate new insights and give justice to the unique experiences and stories of the participants involved in the study. It is hoped and anticipated that the following chapters will provide the reader with unique insights into the personal experiences of adolescents in the midst of intense social interactions and interpersonal struggles. The researcher will attempt to uncover prominent themes in the lives of four adolescent girls, particularly those revolving around experiences of indirect aggression. Some of these

themes may highlight the similarities of experiences; others may show how the experience of indirect aggression is uniquely personal.

The next chapter delves into the predominant themes that came to light during the analysis of each interview. Hopefully it provides the reader with new insights regarding indirect aggression practices, the experiences surrounding this phenomenon, and the intricacy with which this phenomenon links to overall social processes and contexts.

## Chapter 5

### **THROUGH THE EYES OF ADOLESCENTS**

This chapter delves into the experiences of four girls with regard to their friendships and social environment, and their respective experiences of indirect aggression. Two of the girls were 12 years old at the time of the interview and attending Grade six at a primary school in Johannesburg. The other two respondents were 14 years old and attending Grade eight at different high schools in Johannesburg.

Considering the interviews were unstructured and open, they yielded a wealth of information regarding the nature of social interactions and patterns of involvement amongst adolescent girls, and not merely their experiences of indirect aggression per se. This highlights the fact that indirect aggression cannot be seen in isolation from the larger discourses and interactions that take place in the social context these girls find themselves in. What comes to light is how indirect aggression is an offshoot of social negotiation practices, rather than a phenomenon that stands on its own. Furthermore, the girls did not necessarily see elements of indirect aggression in some of their interactions, but rather considered these to be normal aspects of their social interactions that form an integral part of the social dynamics within their groups. This meant that the researcher had to make certain inferences regarding their statements and descriptions and that she had to draw

information together from various parts of the interviews to gain a better sense of how indirect aggressive practices contribute to each girl's experience.

That being said, it is important to emphasise my own role in the interviewing and interpretation process. As discussed in the previous chapter, this type of research approach does not deny or exclude the influence the researcher has on the data gathering and interpretation process. Seeing as the qualitative researcher uses herself as an interpretive tool, I have to acknowledge that my frame of reference and personal limitations are interwoven with the following analyses (In the interest of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, the names of the participants, as well as other persons mentioned in their respective accounts, have been changed):

### **MANDY**

Mandy was enthusiastic about being interviewed for this research and readily agreed to participate. She comes across as quite a bubbly and talkative 12-year-old girl, who spontaneously answered the questions posed to her. At the outset of the interview, Mandy expressed feeling a bit nervous, but she relaxed after a few minutes of conversation. Generally I got the sense that she was fairly forthcoming with information, but I noticed that she was most comfortable speaking about certain scenarios and situations from a more descriptive, observer perspective and that she sometimes struggled to elaborate on the emotional and personal impact certain situations may have had on her or others. I believe that this made her feel safer and less exposed

than speaking specifically about herself all the time. Nonetheless, Mandy's account provided me with an intimate glance into her world of social connections and friendships, and how indirect aggression is subtly woven into the interactions and ways of communicating with one another.

Although there were many more aspects that could have been highlighted in the following interpretation, the themes discussed below were the most prominent from the researcher's point of view:

### ***INCLUSION VERSUS EXCLUSION***

It appears as though most indirect aggression tactics employed by girls Mandy's age are geared at making others feel excluded and unsupported. To be part of a group provides girls with a sense of belonging and protection. Therefore, if a girl stands on her own without the backing of friends, she becomes an easy target for provocation by other girls that find themselves in a more fortunate position, surrounded by friends.

Mandy regularly highlighted the importance of belonging to a group, and how this enforces a person's status amongst one's peers. If a girl does not belong to a specific group, there seems to be a tendency to ascribe certain undesirable characteristics to her. For instance, she may be viewed as an "irritating" person, or someone whom "nobody likes" and nobody wants to spend time with, which often makes it difficult for her to find some meaningful connection with others.

Mandy is part of a group of six girls. She describes her group as very close and maintains they all “get on well with each other most of the time”. I got the sense that the group provides her with feelings of safety and security, but that it can also be the source of great anxiety and concern, particularly when there is conflict in the group. It seems as though indirect aggression forms a large part of the communication practices during times of conflict in Mandy’s group and that the tactics employed often play on a person’s feelings of belonging and inclusion.

When tensions arise between individual members of a group, the other girls are forced to take sides with whomever they feel more connected to and the group goes through a process of rearranging itself. In Mandy’s group there seems to be a tendency for the entire group to gang up on one girl who is then indirectly forced to leave, as she has no support. This is illustrated in the following:

“... we were all fighting with Abbey, so then, we... like none of us... we all hated Abbey... I don’t know why [...] and then we were all like sitting in a line and Abbey would be like here and I don’t know who came up with it but then we were like, ‘Ok Abbey, we really don’t want you to be in our group’ and then she took it so personally and then she went to go tell the teacher [...] I think we did leave her out on purpose... I don’t know why actually but we were all leaving her out.”

The girl that is being excluded is gradually rejected by all the group members she turns to for support. Mandy mentioned how her group will try to exclude others from activities by walking off when they approach the group or turning their backs on them and whispering about something. The group members will ignore her and spread rumours about her so that others refuse to even engage with her. She used an example of when she and a friend of hers were being excluded from the group:

“... they were like all talking and me and Lee-Anne were just standing there watching them and everything and then they would look at us and then look away or whisper to each other and stop when we arrive...”.

Such interactions can be very confusing to the person who is being excluded because they often seem to arise spontaneously. In a sense, the reasons for exclusion seem to be enveloped in a shroud of secrecy where the isolated girl is left to her own devices to find out why she is being rejected. This seems to be purposefully enforced with the intent of hurting and confusing the other person. Mandy reflected on how bewildering it feels to be left out, especially if you don't know why, and that this makes it difficult to resolve problems. It seems as though this very ambiguity as to why one is being excluded makes it a frustrating and harsh experience.

Moments of exclusion seem to have a significant emotional impact on the person who is being excluded. Mandy recalled her fears of going to school following various altercations she had with members of her group. She was

afraid of being alone and having “no one to play with”. The next day she quickly apologised to the relevant people in her group, even though she was unsure what she was apologising for. This speedy resolve seems to be largely motivated by her fear of being alone and appears to be a primary means of conflict resolution within Mandy’s group. Although she claims that the friendships are “fine” afterwards and that everything is back to normal, it seems as though there is some lingering frustration and resentment harboured by the parties involved. For instance, the girls will still gossip about the other person to fellow group members and there is an undercurrent of tension and indirect aggression in their interactions with each other.

The excluded girl is then forced to look outside of her group for acceptance and belonging. This brings with it further problems, as other groups may be quite rigid and closed to new people joining them. There seems to be a frantic search to find someone to spend time with and Mandy explained how she will often play with girls that are also alone, rather than try joining another group, as this seems to be more complicated and potentially volatile.

According to Mandy’s account, a person who is not bound to a specific group is seen as a threat to one’s own group arrangement and setup. The inclusion or addition of a new person requires that the system rearrange itself and that a form of change needs to be entered into, which some of the members of the existing group may find threatening or uncomfortable. With this discomfort, the potential for indirect aggression practices seems to flare up again, as attempts to resist such change may be made by some of the group members. They



may, for instance, gang up against the new person by excluding her from group discussions or make her feel uncomfortable by acting like they are talking about her behind her back. Mandy recalled a situation where, when a specific girl talked, “we would look away or talk to another friend” to make her feel left out. It seems as though the individual members of a group may fear engaging with a newcomer too readily, as they are at risk of being excluded from the group themselves.

Mandy indicated how she refrains from playing with a friend of hers who is not part of her group because she knows the other girls in her group don't really like her. Apparently they speak badly about her when she is not around and thereby force Mandy to be secretive about her connection to her. In the event of this girl wanting to join Mandy's group, she would turn her back on her to show her allegiance to the group consensus. This indirect aggressive behaviour is probably quite confusing and hurtful for Mandy's friend, as she does not know where she stands with Mandy and whether she can trust the connection they seem to have with each other in private.

Mandy explained that girls tend to check on their and others' status of acceptance by sending each other notes and asking each other's opinions regarding certain people. As Mandy explained quite effectively in the interview, the notes are structured in a certain way where each person lets the other know what they think of the people in their immediate circle of friends and group. This apparently affords the girls the opportunity to structure their interactions appropriately and in accordance with who likes whom and who

one can combine in certain activities and invite to parties together. This process seems to connect the two people that are writing to each other and provides them with a feeling of inclusion and belonging, whilst it can also serve as the impetus for others to be excluded and an indirect aggressive onslaught to be planned.

### ***EXPOSURE VERSUS PRIVACY AND SELF-PROTECTION***

Feelings of exclusion and inclusion appear to go hand in hand with the amount of sharing and exposure that takes place amongst friends and group members. In a sense, secrets appear to be the currency by which young girls connect with each other, but also harm each other. Sharing secrets appears to bind girls to each other, creating a space of exclusivity and intimacy. To be let in on a secret seems to bestow a feeling of inclusion and privilege on the person being told, whereas, if a secret is withheld or exposed, it might come across as an intentional attempt at excluding or hurting others.

Mandy mentioned how her group made a deal that “if we tell secrets or something, we have to tell the other people or we have to go out of the group”. Mandy recalled an incident where she was telling two of her friends about a dream that she had the night before. When the rest of the group realised that she had shared a personal experience with the others and not with them, they reacted harshly to her perceived exclusion of them. She recalls the situation as follows:

“...So they all thought this was a secret and were like shouting at me saying ‘no, you can’t do that, ‘cos it’s a secret!’ and everything... I was trying to tell them that ‘it’s a dream’, and... so they said ‘well why don’t you tell us if it’s a dream’ and then I tried to explain that it’s a personal dream. So then [...] they all got mad with me, so then I was like ‘ok guys, I don’t want to cause any more problems, so I just left the group...”

The manner in which her group reacted seemed quite intense and aggressive, and made Mandy feel confused and guilty as she had obviously upset her other friends. Thereafter she was forced to tell them about her personal experience, as she would have otherwise run the risk of losing their friendship. It appears as though people are held hostage by the threat of losing their friendship and thereby manipulated into self-disclosure.

The extent to which one can trust others to respect one’s feelings and the sensitivities surrounding what one shares appears to be difficult to gauge for some girls, particularly because exposure seems to be a means of testing such trust and gaining such trust. Either way there seems to be a subtle paradox at play here where failing to expose oneself and sharing personal experiences leads to an exclusion of a person, whilst actively sharing one’s deepest feelings can either lead to feelings of closeness and inclusion or alternatively, feelings of vulnerability, where the secrets shared can be used to manipulate the person who told the secret.

Mandy explained how important it is to have a best friend, as the exclusivity of this type of relationship is intended to provide each member with a trusting space to share secrets. The more open each member is in this friendship, the more intimate and close the connection between the two people is perceived to be. Others seem to respect this closeness and to not feel excluded by the secrecy shared amongst best friends. In other words, this closeness is expected from best friends and the exclusivity of the bond between them appears to be respected by others in the surrounding context.

Nonetheless, there are certain risks involved in having a very close friend, and Mandy alluded to the fact that these friendships are not always as private as one would hope. When best friends fight, they often expose the secrets that were shared during their interactions. The extent of exposure seems to rely on how angry or upset the previous best friend is and how much she wants to hurt the other after their break up. Sometimes it may even go as far as spreading rumours about the other person so as to make her feel even more vulnerable and exposed. A 'burnt' friend can turn into one's worst enemy, seeing as they know the details of one's sensitivities and weaknesses and can use this information when plotting their revenge. Even though a potential fall-out is often anticipated by both parties, it appears as that they would rather deny that this is so in the interest of bonding and being included for a short space of time – in a sense they are engaging in blind faith. Possibly, the very risk involved in such an act shows others the genuineness with which a girl may want to connect with them and be closer to them.

## ***EMOTIONAL INTENSITY AND CONFUSION***

Mandy's account of her group's dynamics brought to the fore the emotional intensity with which she and her friends interact with each other. The moment there is some tension or conflict between two members in the group, there is a chain reaction of emotional responses that moves through the entire group. It appears as though not much time is spent on thinking about how to interpret a situation or how to respond appropriately and reactions are impulsive and on the spur of the moment. It seems as though this uncontained emotion forms part of the confusion associated with indirect aggression, where girls are unsure of where they stand in relation to others, why others respond to them in a certain way, and how they should go about resolving a situation.

It seems that girls have strong, clear-cut opinions and feelings about each other, be it that they "hate" the one girl and "really like" the other, or that the one girl is a "racist" and another is a "slut". Mandy spoke of a class-room colleague of hers whom "nobody likes" because she is a racist. She apparently told another girl in her class that "if I were you I would stop acting white and start acting Indian". This direct insult sparked an intense emotional reaction from all the other girls, who turned on the girl who had said this. According to Mandy, girls in her class often insult each other and call each other names. These labels carry strong emotional connotations, which seem to be difficult to shrug off or change by the person they are ascribed to.

Girls seem to categorise each other along rigid lines and the labels they are given can taint their reputations for a considerable period of time, leading to others rejecting them and treating them badly. Some girls seem to make sure that others don't forget about who did what in the past. Mandy mentioned how one girl in her group continues to mention past conflicts between others in the group the moment they seem to get close to each other. She'll say things like "remember that time when you and Mandy fought, oh, that was so funny!". It seems as though she wants to stir up problems so that two people that may have a difficult past relationship don't resolve their differences. Mandy finds this very irritating and frustrating and it seems she feels threatened by this indirect provocation.

I get the impression that there is a struggle to make sense of all the feelings brought up in social interactions and that, in Mandy's situation, she feels overwhelmed when confronted with too much emotional stimuli and then reacts with the first response that comes to mind, which is usually to illustrate her frustration or irritation and walk off. This makes it difficult when it comes to resolving problems, as she attempts to subdue the emotional intensity of an experience by pushing it aside and apologising to the person that was frustrating or irritating her. The apology in itself can sometimes be seen as indirectly aggressive, depending on the manner in which it is said and whether it is in fact sincere or not. If it is merely used to stop another person from talking, it could be perceived as discrediting the other person's opinion and denying that person the opportunity to bring their point across. An apology can therefore serve to immobilise another.

In a sense there appears to be a difficulty in holding the emotion and working through it with one another to find a more workable solution. The girls tend to bicker and fight with each other by using indirect means of aggression like talking behind each other's backs and ignoring each other. This is when escalations seem to appear, where the girls struggle to communicate with each other about how they feel and they react to each other's responses in an equally erratic and impulsive manner. Mandy illustrated how such a situation can escalate and how subtle aggressive interactions contribute to the intensity of the situation:

"... so I was friends with Candice again and when I arrived at camp out, Candice was already there and when I arrived there Candice just ignores me, and I don't know what I did to Candice and then Abbey arrives and Candice tells Abbey something and then Abbey comes to me and Abbey tells me that Candice calls me a pig and then I say to Abbey, 'Abbey, I thought you were my friend' and then Abbey says, 'yeah, but I'm also Candice's friend'" and then I walked off and everything [...] and then Beatrice said something that Candice had said to her and then I'm like, 'Beatrice, you're supposed to be my friend but you always take Candice's side' and Beatrice's like 'you don't always have to assume things' and then Reece just butted in and so then they go [...] the next day I was so scared because I wasn't going to be friends with any of them and I wouldn't have anyone to play with [...] I was so scared and everything and I told my mother... I think I was crying in the car..."

Considering the above, there are various aspects of indirect aggression that can be highlighted. For instance, Mandy indicated how people are talking badly about her behind her back and how she thought that they were her friends, but that this did not seem to be the case. She felt isolated and confused, not understanding why she was being treated in this way and what she had done wrong. She was being excluded by the very system she thought she belonged to and by people whom she thought were her friends.

Mandy mentioned how people seem to “take things so personally”, and how that is the cause of much conflict in the group. Taking things personally seems to be frowned upon by Mandy’s group, particularly when feedback is being given to group members and they struggle to accept the feedback. When they don’t accept the feedback, they are shunned by the rest of the group and subsequently feel isolated and excluded. Mandy mentioned the following scenario:

“[Lee-Anne] does sometimes ignore people and she... we find it very irritating when she goes from group to group, and she... uhmm... we were all fighting with her once and [...] we would tell her how we feel about her and then she took it so personally... we said to her first of all, ‘Lee-Anne, you can’t get irritated or sad or anything’, but then she goes and does it.”

It appears as though feedback can be used as a another form of indirect aggression, particularly when it takes place in a context where people are forced to give it and struggle to do so in a constructive manner. Mandy



explained how her circle of friends was confronted by a teacher, following a complaint by one of the girls that she was being bullied. The teacher arranged for the group of girls to sit in a circle and speak about their feelings to each other. They were also asked to give feedback to each other in the process. Mandy recalls how this exercise became the catalyst for more conflict within her group, with certain vulnerabilities having been laid bare that the group struggled to contain adequately. This exercise seemed to provide a further platform for group members to expose and hurt each other, as they could openly state their gripes with each other, without fearing adverse consequences or repercussions, as such responses would not have been considered appropriate in that context. After these meeting, the girls were left with the exposure of what had transpired during the exercises, but without the safety of a mediator to protect them from retaliations. The following situation unfolded during and after one such meeting:

“... we all had chances to speak and it was Abbey’s turn and she just kept on crying, so we thought ‘ok she doesn’t want to talk’ and so we went on again and we said something else. Later she says ‘no, you guys never give me a chance’, and before that she said that ‘you guys are driving me insane! I’m going to leave the school because of you guys’ ... and then we took it so personally [...] so we all went to the sick room ... and then Abbey came in and Lee-Anne’s like ‘so Abbey why did you call us insane’ and then Abbey stomped off [...] so then Lee-Anne and Abbey were fighting with each other...”

It seems that a way of dealing with the heightened emotionality amongst Mandy's group members is to enforce a strict system of inherent rules to which they must all abide. These rules entail restrictions on who plays with whom and the exposure of secrets, retaliations and resolutions. Group members are in a sense reprimanded by – or threatened with – exclusion from the group if they step out of line. Subsequently they need to absolve themselves through apologizing and taking necessary steps to reintegrate with the group. Whilst rules seem to provide the group with a sense of conformity and unity, they also seem to create a structure that enables indirect aggression practices to come to the surface.

### ***TRUST AND MANIPULATION***

Mandy referred to some of her friendships as being friendships of convenience and necessity, when neither party has another to play with. She explained that some people are viewed as “replacements” by others until someone better comes along or old friendships are rebuilt, and other friendships are more important and significant. Mandy was in a friendship for three years, where the break up did seem to affect her considerably. This was noted when she spoke of the ways of relating to others following the break up and how she disliked the one girl because she “took [her] away from me”. When she had the opportunity to rekindle her friendship with her previous friend, she “didn't want to get involved with her again or anything” out of fear of losing her again. It appears that the trust between these two friends had

been broken and that Mandy did not feel safe, exposing herself to anticipated feelings of abandonment and hurt again.

This lack of confidence or trust in others' commitment seems to stem in part from the manner in which two people commence the actual friendship (i.e., was it a friendship of convenience or one of necessity?), previous hurtful experiences that a person may have had in terms of friendships, or possibly the quality or nature of the interactions, where certain rules and stressors brought forward by the larger group of friends impact on how people relate to each other. The latter point is of significance, since it brings into consideration the larger context these girls find themselves in. If they are trying to establish a sense of security and stability in a system that is volatile and emotionally charged, where members of the group constantly move around amongst each other and the group itself vacillates between closeness and openness, honesty and manipulation, they are bound to feel anxious and apprehensive when connecting with others. It is this very system that is often used to hurt or deceive and manipulate others in an attempt to establish oneself within the group. Mandy spoke of a situation where she broke up with a best friend of hers by using another girl as a messenger:

"I was usually best friends with Kyra, but then I was best friends with her for so long and then, uhmm, so I'm like, 'no Kyra, I don't want to be your best friend anymore... [...] like, Kyra was sitting over here, and I was standing over here, like... around the corner... and then someone... I think, Lee-Anne... Lee-Anne came up to me and then I'm like, "Lee-Anne come here quickly!"

and then I told her to go tell Kyra and then Kyra told Lee-Anne to tell me and everything, so we like passed the message on that way”.

This is a good example of how the system can be used to manipulate others and how easily another person is triangulated into one’s interactions. By involving a third person, Mandy created distance between herself and the person she was actively hurting. In a sense it was “safer” for her to approach the situation in this manner, as her friend could not respond directly to her, but it also turned the situation into an indirect act of aggression which left her friend hurt and confused.

This manner of using the system to hurt someone indirectly or to break up with them seems to be regularly employed by the girls in Mandy’s group. Rather than speaking to someone directly and sorting problems out like that, the girls manoeuvre around each other and exclude each other by means of involving others in their arguments and fights. This seems to be a safer option for the person wanting to bring a point across, but it can also be perceived as mean and underhanded by the person who is targeted. In a sense, indirect interactions illustrate how the system can backfire on the individual and how vulnerabilities and feelings of distrust can come to the fore. It is no surprise that Mandy spends much of her time wondering about the quality of her friendships, the trustworthiness of her friends and her standing within the larger group.

## **CAROLINE**

Caroline readily participated in this research. She is 12 years old and attends Grade six at a primary school in Johannesburg. She seems to be a relatively quiet and calm girl who comes across as self-assured and grounded. During the interview she tended to pause before answering, lending much contemplation to the questions posed to her, and she seemed to choose her words carefully. This was not perceived as being guarded or reserved, but rather that she wanted to be clear in her description of her experiences and observations. Similar to Mandy's account, Caroline also spoke mostly from a descriptive, observer point of view and largely discussed scenarios or situations she had observed amongst her group of friends and acquaintances, rather than her own. Nonetheless, her account afforded me the opportunity to gain some understanding of how she perceives the social dynamics amongst her peers and how indirect aggression, in its subtlety, appears to form part of these experiences.

The following themes emerged from the interview with Caroline:

### ***GROUP STRUCTURE, ALLEGIANCE, AND MANIPULATION***

The structure and size of a group seems to have a considerable impact on the manner and intensity with which people interact with each other. It also has an impact on the methods of indirect aggression employed, seeing as these are

largely linked with the way people are arranged and affiliated to each other in the larger social context.

Caroline spends most of her time with two other girls. According to her, a small group of friends has benefits because one can have a best friend whereas a bigger group might make it difficult for people to engage on such a personal level. However, being in a group with only three people seems to come with its own problems, as Caroline illustrated when she explained how there's always one girl that is the odd one out with the other two ganging up on her. Caroline admitted that she sometimes feels manipulated by the one girl in her group, Candy, who she thinks is trying to break up her friendship with her best friend, Jennifer. The following account illustrates the complexity of the situation and the subtle indirect tactics that are used in manipulating the system:

“... Sometimes I feel like she is using us... especially when she plays with Jennifer, ‘cos she’s with Jennifer most of the time and she’ll like say ‘Jennifer come... I want to tell you something!’ and I’ll like just stand there and wait and ... feel like she’s using me [...] ‘cos she wants to be my best friend and... uhmm... when me and Jennifer were playing together we left Candy out because we couldn’t get along with her and she’s always saying Jennifer took me away from her as a best friend and because of what happened, she’s going to try act like she wants to be Jennifer’s best friend and then break me and Jennifer up and become my best friend again...”

The above illustrates how girls sometimes use each other as pawns in a manipulative game whereby they break up friendships and play with the dynamics of the system. Sometimes they will gossip about a girl that is perceived as a threat to their friendships, or they spread rumours to taint a girl's reputation. These are subtle tactics of aggression aimed at manipulating people's feelings about each other and their social standing in relation to each other for one's own personal gain.

A means of manipulating and shifting group structures, particularly in larger groups, seems to be by stirring up trouble and starting fights, as well as intentionally breaking people up. This is when many indirect aggression practices seem to come to the fore. According to Caroline, groups seem to indulge in activities whereby they purposefully make others feel isolated, usually by making use of the social/group structure the targeted person finds herself in. Methods include ignoring them, talking to others about them in their presence, and "making it look like you're telling secrets about that person". Another popular method of exclusion that is geared at making people feel vulnerable is by spreading rumours about girls, thereby altering other's perceptions of them without them being aware of this happening at first.

Rumours can be a great source of conflict, particularly when they do the rounds and end up with the person the rumour is about. This usually results in open conflict between the people involved, which eventually ripples through most of the social network, as people are called to take sides and pledge their allegiance to the individual participants. Rumours, as Caroline explains, are

“intended to hurt people”, or in some way damage the support network that the targeted girl enjoys, however, “you do not want [rumours] do the full round”. Other methods of exclusion and indirect provocation entail talking behind someone’s back and gossiping, as well as tempting a good friend to move over to one’s side and abandon their friend, who is being targeted.

Conflict, according to Caroline, is often motivated by jealousy and a fear of losing people. Often people will purposefully ignore others who they feel threatened by or who they think their best friend might move over to. Caroline’s peers seem to regularly change their friends and she herself mentioned that she has moved between friendships extensively in the past. This pattern appears to make girls feel vulnerable and sensitive and seems to serve as an impetus for many of them to lash out or avoid each other in defence of their friendships and connections, or as a way of protecting themselves, as is illustrated in the following:

“...I can’t remember why me and Jennifer fought now, but... I think it’s because she knew I was sort of friends with Maggie... and she doesn’t... see, Maggie and Jennifer don’t like each other... and that’s why me and her fought because she though I was best friends with Maggie... and then we just grew apart [...] Me and Maggie fought because of the same reason as me and Jennifer [...] she knew I was friends with Jennifer and she doesn’t like Jennifer... that’s why me and Maggie fought.”



It get the sense that, with the constant changing of friends, girls are being played up against each other and, whilst it is difficult to be trapped between two people who want to be one's closest friend, it is also a position of great power with much manipulative potential. When other girls feel jealous and possessive about a friendship they have with someone, it seems to provide the person whose friendship is being fought over with a sense of reassurance and even flattery. Some girls may even purposefully make others feel jealous by means of indirect acts of aggression and manipulation, so as to feel important and wanted.

### ***PEER STATUS AND CONFLICT***

Although fights occur on many different levels (individuals, groups) and for different reasons, Caroline alluded to the fact that it is mostly the popular people that pick fights with others. According to her it seems as though popular people believe they can get away with stirring up trouble "because they think they've got more friends and that more friends will gang up on their side" and that "they won't get hurt". They also seem to think that they are "better than everyone else" and that they can therefore establish their authority by undermining other people. Interestingly, Caroline also explained that some people will start fights in an attempt to become popular.

According to Caroline, other people seem to be weary and distrustful of popular people's intentions. Often the people surrounding popular girls are in fact only spending time with them because they want to be popular by

association or because they are fearful of the repercussions a difference of opinion may have on their social life and popularity status. Within these groups, the members seem unable to trust each other, as there is a lot of talking behind people's backs and some girls merely act as though they like one another to remain popular. If a girl leaves the group the chances are good that the group will spread rumours about her and make it difficult for her to integrate with other groups.

Furthermore, popular girls seem to engage in indirect aggression practices within the larger context. Caroline speculated whether this is not sometimes as a result of boredom. She spoke of one particular girl, who comes across as quite 'edgy' and who uses intimidation and forcefulness to maintain her popularity status:

"She always has something on her mind... I think sometimes she stirs things up because she is bored [...] I think because she is with all her friends and everything she gets sort of offensive and wants to start a fight..."

Caroline emphasised that not all popular people are the same. Some are well liked and kind and others are not really liked and tend to be nasty. This difference in popularity seems to be quite prominent. Caroline referred to two girls in her grade who are both considered popular, but who are very different. The one girl believes she is well-liked but most of her 'friends' are merely with her to be popular by association and don't even like the girl. The other popular girl is popular but also well liked by everyone in the grade. According to

Caroline, this girl seems to never be involved in fights and comes across as a kind and generous person.

Amidst the seemingly regular fighting that occurs at school, Caroline indicated that she tends to remain quiet when other girls talk, so as to not get involved in potentially conflictual situations. It seems as though the more vocal girls are, the more they open themselves up to scrutiny, by exposing their own viewpoints and beliefs. Other girls might reject them based on their views, or they might gossip about them, telling others what so-and-so said. Information appears to form the backbone of many indirect aggression practices, whether the information shared is true or not. Caroline explains how her peers fight:

“... like saying secrets in their face, sort of like torture other people... they don't talk to them out aloud, they like talk in their ears, make it look like you're telling secrets about that person [...] also swearing at other people... or with rumours you like tell one person, they tell another person and then eventually it gets to someone [...] you don't want it to got he full round, but you do want to hurt the other person...”

Alternatively, non-verbal information can also be perceived as indirectly aggressive, such as rolling one's eyes while someone is talking or walking off and ignoring someone.

Caroline explained that she is able to defend herself effectively if she is involved in a fight, but only if she is not alone. This emphasises how important

it is to have a supportive network of people to stand up for one during these times. She claims: "I can defend myself well, but only when my friends are around me, because if I try to fight against other people [...] especially when other people are talking for that person... then I don't know what to say...".

What Caroline refers to in the latter part of this statement, is the immobilizing impact indirect methods of aggression can have on a person. In a sense, if other people are triangulated into a conflict situation, where they become the mouthpiece for one of the warring parties, it is difficult for the other person to bring their point across and to negotiate effectively.

Caroline explained that when someone talks behind her back or spreads a rumour about her, she usually just leaves it. However, if the rumour is extremely nasty, she might consider retaliating with a counter-rumour, which can sometimes lead to an escalation and a greater conflict to develop. This is then intended to hurt the other girl who started the rumour and works through the social network.

Following a fight or a break up, Caroline mentioned that she needs to take some time off to re-evaluate her situation and come to some inner resolution about where she stands in relation to the other person. She indicated that some groups seem to have a pattern whereby they fight over small things and then apologise to each other after which time everything is fine again. She is of the opinion that "if you're in a fight with someone its not exactly like you can

have a fight with them and can make friends with them... if I fight with someone, we have a fight and then leave each other alone...”.

### ***THREAT AND POSSESSIVENESS***

Caroline mentioned that she is best friends with the one girl in her group and that the other girl, Candy, is “just a friend”. Interestingly, she used to be best friends with Candy, but they had a big fall-out a while ago and since then she seems somewhat reluctant to fully accept her again – “She used to gang up on me that’s why I can’t... I don’t know with her...”. Caroline is definitely wary and distrusting of Candy due to their shared history and the way she used to treat her.

It seems that there is an element of possessiveness that runs through most friendships at this stage, where the need to be connected to someone is so great that girls view other girls as competitors who could rob them of their friends. Caroline explained how difficult and threatening it is when “you know your friend likes another person as well and it’s a person that you don’t like”. When friendships do break up, the wounds are difficult to mend, particularly if the friendship was perceived as strong and sincere.

Many of the indirect aggression practices Caroline mentioned seem to be linked to feelings of resentment and hurt that arose from previous disappointments. In a sense, girls might question whether it is worthwhile to become friends with someone who previously hurt them, or what is to stop the

person from hurting or using them again? Caroline indicated how some girls play with other girls and purposefully avoid a previous friend if they know that that person might be “interested in someone else”. This seems to be an attempt at self-protection through avoidance, but may also be perceived as a strategy for getting back at someone and indirectly hurting them. In a sense it sends a message of ‘if I can’t have all of you, then I move on’ and ‘in the event that this was maybe not the case, then I am at least not hurt in the process’.

Caroline mentioned that she sometimes spends time with girls to whom she is not necessarily close when she is not involved in a special friendship or when she has had a fight with one of her good friends. These friendships are in a sense substitutes until someone better comes around. Caroline even mentioned that some girls are more “replaceable” than others. This type of engagement can be double-edged and can only work if both parties agree that they are substitutes to each other and don’t have a lasting connection. If this is not the case and the other girl possibly perceives the friendship as more sincere and genuine rather than merely as a replacement, and she might feel used and manipulated when Caroline leaves to reconnect with another friend. Such a manoeuvre could be seen as an indirect aggressive act, where feeling snubbed, excluded or sidelined could have a considerable impact on the girl’s feelings of self-worth and her capacity to trust others in future.

## ***LARGER SYSTEM INFLUENCES***

It seems as though most fights and conflicts seem to be resolved within the smaller system, be it within the group or between individuals. The influences from the larger system can, however, not be ignored in this instance. Caroline mentioned how her mother disapproves of her friend's mother and the manner in which this woman is raising her children. Even though Caroline's mother obviously wants to protect her daughter from possibly being negatively influenced by this other girl, this seems to cause Caroline some frustration when relating to her friend and has a considerable impact on her interactions with her.

Caroline seems to be influenced by her mother's perceptions of her friend and views her in a more negative light. She avoids interacting with her on occasion, does not invite her to her house, and seems not to respect her very much. It seems that she is being indirectly aggressive towards her at times by excluding her from activities and talking badly about her behind her back. Caroline seems to be sending this girl mixed messages as she is struggling to negotiate between what her mother suggests and her own need to be accepted and befriended with this other girl. In some way, there is a conflict that unfolds and she is caught in a paradox.

Differences in parenting style and level of involvement by parents appear to have an impact on a girl's social acceptability and inclusion in a group. Some girls may be given more freedom in terms of going out and who they

associate with whilst others are more restricted. This difference can cause tension between certain friends and seems to infringe on the acceptability of some girls by others. Some girls might tease their friends about how restrictive their parents are, thereby making them angry and frustrated and possibly left out. Some might be flatly rejected by others when they cannot partake in certain activities, possibly resulting in much internal conflict and resentment being directed towards one's parents or peers.

Caroline furthermore mentioned how the teachers at her school are quite involved in the resolution of conflict and how they sometimes embarrass people implicated in bullying others, which seems to have a big emotional impact on the person being accused. One girl in particular, whom she used as an example, wanted to leave the school because the other children would not leave her alone and carried on teasing her following an enquiry into her conduct. This is interesting, as it highlights how indirect aggression can continue even after an intervention and how such an intervention can provide further ammunition for indirect aggression practices.

Furthermore, teacher involvement is sometimes regarded as unfair by the scholars, because occasionally people who were accomplices to the bullying go undetected, leaving one person to take the fall for all of them. This then makes it very difficult for that person to reintegrate with her group and breeds resentment for those that were unscathed. Often the conflict continues after such interventions have taken place and rarely do others come forward to help the person in the firing line.



## **TRACY**

Tracy seemed intrigued to take part in an interview when she heard about the focus of my research. She is 14 years old and attends Grade eight at a high school in Johannesburg. Although she is articulate and well-spoken, Tracy came across as somewhat shy and unsure of herself in our meeting initially. Nonetheless, once she relaxed during the interview, she was quite forthcoming with information and readily spoke about her experiences. Her account provided me with a good sense of her current social system, her experiences with indirect aggression practices, and how these are interlinked with each other.

The following themes appeared to be the most prominent within the transcribed interview and chose them for their relative impact and significance to Tracy's experience:

### ***INCLUSION AND BELONGING VERSUS EXCLUSION AND DIFFERENTIATION***

The need for inclusion and belonging seems to be a strong theme in Tracy's story. It became apparent how the exclusion from a group or the break up of a friendship can make girls question themselves, their values and ideals, and how indirect aggression can play a part in bringing about feelings of exclusion, loneliness and frustration. Tracy's account seems to highlight the importance of feeling connected to other people and the drastic measures some people may take to be included in a group or be part of a friendship. This strong need

for inclusion and belonging seems to make it very difficult for some girls to deal with conflict situations and still retain their confidence and sense of who they are.

Tracy explained how some girls are in larger groups of friends and others tend to have one or two good friends rather than a bigger circle of friends. These social arrangements seem to shape themselves over time and continually change as new people join groups and other groups break up. Some groups seem to be more stable and consistent whilst others come across as rather volatile and unstable. Some are more 'loosely associated' and allow for members to move in and out of the friendship or group, whilst others seem to be more intense and rigid, where the threat of losing a friend or group member seems to effect a clinginess and possessiveness. Indirect aggression appears to play a role in all these dynamics and seems to be woven into much of the interactions that occur between individuals and groups.

Tracy is currently in a situation where she is "between groups". She does not really belong to a specific group of friends, which seems to be a difficult position to be in, as she reflected on feelings of loneliness and confusion. She explained that she was best friends with another girl in her class, Tammy, and that they have apparently been friends since Grade three. Recently, Tracy has felt somewhat distant from her friend and, although she is trying to come across as unconcerned about this, she seemed to be deeply affected by the tension between her and Tammy. She indicated the following:

“She is my best friend but lately I spend a lot of time with the other girls in my class as well, its just that Tammy is the friend I’ve kept the longest... but she’s not my only friend... she also has other friends and... well, when she wants to spend time with other girls then I spend time the other girls in my class too.”

It appears as though Tracy is trying to compensate for her loss by connecting with other people, but that she struggles to move away from Tammy and to deal with the manner in which Tammy isolates and excludes her. Tammy seems to employ various indirect aggressive tactics in her attempt at pushing Tracy away. This seems to be the most hurtful part of her experience – not the fact that Tammy leaves her, but that she purposefully makes her feel unwelcome when interacting with others. Tracy explained how she thinks Tammy talks badly about her behind her back and that when they are friends again, she acts as though nothing bad ever happened between them:

“It’s like she transforms into a different person. She acts differently and becomes mean towards me [...] they aren’t nice to be around... it’s strange... I like always feel like I’m doing something wrong or upsetting her and then I end up apologizing to her for something that I don’t even know what I did wrong [...] when I apologise she becomes friends with me again [...] anyways, so lately I’ve decided that I also need to spend time with other people ... I’m forced to look around...”.

Tracy mentioned an incident where she was off sick from school for one day and when she came back, Tammy was playing with someone else and

ignoring her. Tracy was confused by this because she did not know what she did wrong. She explains how “one day everything is fine and you get on well with everyone and the next day people talk behind your back and make life difficult for you...”. This unpredictability about where one stands with others and whether one is included or excluded, seems to be a regular occurrence when indirect aggression practices are at play. Tracy mentioned that this confusion sometimes makes her feel like escaping the system and “never go[ing] back to school”.

In addition to the tension Tracy is experiencing with her friendship to Tammy, she is also confronted with the difficulty of making new friends and connecting with new people, which seems to make her feel considerably anxious and uneasy. She seems to struggle to connect with others and explained that this is difficult because “they all have their groups of friends and I sometimes feel like I don’t fit in anywhere”. Furthermore, the fact that other girls are in established groups makes it difficult to approach them, as they become rather protective and possessive over their existing friendships, often becoming mean and aggressive towards any person who poses a threat to their unity.

Tracy mentioned how most groups are very cliquey and unapproachable. She recalls being flatly ignored by the girls from a group she wanted to join, when they purposefully started speaking about shared experiences that Tracy could not contribute to in conversation. Tracy explained how “you feel pushed out... it’s like they don’t really seem interested in making new friends”. Furthermore, she indicated that “the people will act like they like you and speak to you and

then the moment you turn your back on them, they bitch about you to someone else...”.

This cycle of uncertainty, non-acceptance and indirect aggression seems to have an overwhelming impact on Tracy, to the extent that she wanted to leave school so that she could start over, “with new people and new friends... somewhere where nobody knows [her]”. On the one hand, this seems to be an attempt at escaping the current social volatility at her school, and on the other hand, this could be seen as a move towards achieving greater self-reliance and independence. It shows how far reaching the effects of indirect aggression and isolation can be, that a person would rather start afresh in another context than be entrapped in a system where there seems to be no way of resolving problems and finding containment.

### ***THREAT, TRUST AND DISTRUST***

Tracy spoke of a number of situations and experiences that illustrate how threat and distrust play a significant role in the manner with which girls interact with each other. Indirect aggression seems to feed off the vulnerabilities girls have in relation to their friendships, with feelings of threat and distrust forming an integral part in the facilitation and consequences of indirect aggression.

Feelings of threat and distrust can be perceived on many levels, such as the threat to one’s personal integrity and self-esteem, one’s friendships with others, as well as the threat to group cohesion and structure. Similarly,

indirect aggression seems to work on various levels, where manipulative tactics are targeted at breaking down feelings of security, containment and trust amongst individuals, friendships and groups.

Tracy explained how everyone seems to want to be involved with the 'cool crowd' but that they tend to be "nasty" to other people. They apparently tease other people and "seem to think it's funny to make others feel bad". They seem to manipulate others into a false sense of security and trust and then use this against them. Tracy illustrated a situation where indirect aggression was strategically used to purposefully embarrass and hurt another girl:

"The one time a girl called Annie and her little sidekick, Tanja, ...ach gosh... Tanja always runs after Annie... she like doesn't have a personality of her own, she just always does what Annie asks her to do... Anyways, ...so Annie tells Tanja to tell this one girl, Sandy, that Andrew,... this guy that Annie is sort of seeing, has a crush on her... So Sandy thinks Andrew has a crush on her and... so she thinks he likes her and then she like writes him a note telling him how much she likes him and gives it to Tanja to give to him, 'cos Tanja like said that she will give it to him... and then... but then Tanja takes the note to Annie who then shows it to everyone in the group and everyone teases Sandy and makes her feel really bad, and then she just ran off and started crying and she just went home early..."

It seems strange that girls will act as though they like someone, when in fact they don't really like that person. This seems to bring about much of the

confusion that Tracy has experienced in the past, which appears to be directly linked to indirect aggression. On the one hand there is this desire to trust people and to believe that one can find a special connection with people where one feels contained and a sense of belonging, on the other hand, it is so risky to open up to other people and to trust them, because it's almost a given that they will hurt one in some way.

I asked Tracy why she thinks this girl Annie would purposefully hurt and embarrass Sandy, as was illustrated above, and she explained that "it's just something she does... it actually happens all the time. It's like she's addicted to being nasty... she just thinks it's funny and everyone else laughs at her jokes... she really picks on others and makes them feel terrible. I'm just glad when she's not picking on me or teasing me... but I felt really sorry for Sandy that day... she was all alone with people laughing at her. She gets picked on quite a lot by Annie..."

The above scenario illustrates how passive aggression is in a sense rewarded by the rest of the group. Onlookers either laugh and share in the "joke", making the instigator feel accepted and appreciated, thereby promoting such behaviour, or alternatively they avoid getting involved and stopping the proceedings thereby making allowances for such an act of aggression. Tracy also indicated how relieved she feels when she is not on the receiving end of indirect aggression, which suggests how intimidating and anxiety-provoking it can be to be bullied in such a manner. In a sense, some onlookers may genuinely feel empathic towards the victim, as Tracy indicated, and yet, out of

fear for their own safety, they steer clear of any active involvement in the matter. It seems as though the moment girls open themselves up to others by showing their feelings and being honest, they provide them with leverage that can be used against them.

The manner in which indirect aggression practices infiltrate and make use of the social network girls find themselves in, makes it difficult for them to trust anyone in their immediate surroundings. Tracy indicated that she is trying to meet people outside of school, whom she perceives as more trustworthy and 'safe', as they are unaware of the social dynamics at school. However, it seems that indirect aggression can even seep into one's personal life outside of school, as Tracy explained to me with the following story:

"There was one thing that happened to me that made me very angry. It happened when I met this one guy who wasn't in my school and then Karin, a girl from the cool crowd in my school, found out about him and she like told him that 'Tracy's such a loser and nobody really likes her at school' and stuff... and he obviously told me what she said... and it was like impossible!"

This attempt at harming Tracy's endeavours to branch out and meet new people seems malicious and cruel, and begs the question of why others would go to such extremes to hurt her and make it difficult for her to engage with others. It could be seen as an attempt to curb someone's attempts at differentiating, or possibly it is purely maliciously motivated. Tracy recalls her feelings after this incident happened:



“...It hurt me because, if you think about it... here I am trying to move away from the people at school and then they still haunt me... it's like you can't escape them! I was thinking like 'why don't you guys just leave me alone ...it's as if they have nothing better to do than to do than make other people's lives a misery...”

Tracy explained how she cannot trust anyone and how she never feels completely safe because there always seem to be problems or issues with someone at school. She even indicated that “you're lucky if there's no problems during the day when school ends and you go home”. Considering this, it seems that it's very difficult to relax and feel comfortable at any time, because there is the constant threat of something going wrong in future. This also seems to be part of the reason why Tracy is feeling so abandoned and threatened by the strained friendship between her and Tammy. In the past this was the only friendship she had where she felt fairly safe and contained. When the friendship ceased to be as solid and exclusive as she perceived it to be previously, it was as if the rug had been pulled out from under her and she found herself in unsafe territory. Now, whenever she does spend time with Tammy, she is wary of getting too close to her, because the thought of losing her is so threatening that she would rather protect herself from such hurt by almost pre-empting that this might happen.

In response to the feelings of distrust and confusion that she has been experiencing lately, Tracy seems to be separating herself from other girls in

her grade. She spends much of her time in the school library, reading and writing poetry. She claims that disconnecting and attending to activities that by their very nature are self-isolating, she has an “excuse to not walk around alone during breaks”. This illustrates how aggressive interactions can serve to detach people from their social network in an attempt to preserve their feelings and create a safer environment for themselves. Whilst Tracy might be feeling more protected at present, I get the sense that she does feel very lonely and isolated at the moment.

### ***PROVOCATION AND ESCALATION***

Many of the conflict situations Tracy refers to seem to be focused on excluding and *intentionally* hurting the feelings of another. In a sense, girls seem to provoke others constantly in an attempt to test their boundaries and gauge a better understanding of where they stand in relation to others. Furthermore, there seems to be a power struggle at play, where the person who manages to inflict the most pain on someone wins. Although the methods of indirect provocation are often viewed to be subtle or under cover, it seems as though they are often openly displayed and in a sense dramatised for added effect. Tracy relates how this type of provocation occurs:

“...I can see them doing it. It’s actually quite in your face! Like when I walk up to them during break, they will like look at me and be talking and then... like they’ll all be in a circle talking during break and then... when I’m close enough to hear what they say they shut up. Obviously they are saying something I

mustn't hear or something,... because ... they just whisper [...] or sometimes they will point at you and talk and laugh ... and then when you ask them why they are laughing they say 'nothing' and when you walk off, they like carry on laughing and talking..."

The girls don't seem to fear any repercussions from their actions and in some instances seem to thrive on the risk involved in being found out or having to defend themselves if others fight back. It appears as though indirect aggression practices promote feelings of unity and group cohesion amongst perpetrators and that most conflict situations seem to escalate, particularly if an attempt at diffusing the situation is being made. Tracy spoke of a situation where a girl was talking behind her back and trying to stir things up for her. She confronted this girl to ask her why she did it and apparently the other girl apologized to her. Following the conversation she overheard the girl speaking to another group of people about the incident and how she thought it was so funny. Tracy recalls her feelings at the time:

"I felt so angry and hurt, I just wanted to punch and strangle her! It's like you can't get through to these people and make them understand how it feels for them to do that kind of thing... but if you think about it, that's probably what they want anyway... to see how far they can push you! And then, when you want to sort things out... and you like go talk to them like a human being, that just makes matters worse 'cos they know they are getting to you!" [...] it's as if you are screwed either way... a uhhh... catch 22? Because the more you try to explain yourself the more ammunition they have to hurt you!

Resolving problems seems to become such a sticky situation, because, as illustrated in the above, situations seem to become worse if one responds to them at all. Tracy explained that another alternative would be to go speak to one's parents or to the teachers, but there seems to be a fear of doing that, because this might escalate the situation even more. Tracy explained how any type of involvement from external forces is frowned upon and that one would then expose oneself to more attacks of indirect aggression, as the perpetrators become angry and resentful. This suggests that most of the time, girls turn a blind eye to indirect aggression practices and hope that the situation diffuses on its own, which in a sense allows these means of attack to continue and demonstrates their efficacy.

### ***LOYALTY, DISILLUSIONMENT AND INDIVIDUATION***

As indicated above, Tracy feels very hurt and disappointed by the deterioration of her friendship with Tammy and struggles to let go of her completely. This shows how loyal she is to Tammy and how dependent she is on the friendship as a whole. Tracy mentioned that Tammy wants to become part of the popular crowd in their grade and that in her attempts at getting accepted by them, she is getting into a lot of trouble. Tracy illustrated the situation with the following:

“...she'll like try everything to get invited to their parties. She'll like buy them things and tell them how nice they are and she'll lie for them. It's like she's

being all self-destructive and ruining her life... I think she's even started smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol to impress them because they all do it... and she is rude to the teachers sometimes and does not listen to them. Recently she actually swore at a teacher in class [...] I feel bad watching her throw her life away like that... but the popular girls thought it was really funny and congratulated her later”.

The above indicates how, in an attempt to feel accepted and included in a group, Tracy's friend Tammy is becoming progressively more aggressive and self-destructive and how this is reaffirmed and promoted by the people she is trying to connect with. In a sense indirect aggression seems to be a prerequisite for some girls to find acceptance by others and can be likened to a test of their commitment and dedication to the group. Indirect aggression therefore can become the vehicle by which some girls attempt to find affiliations and friends at the exclusion and disregard of others.

Tracy seems to feel frustrated and helpless whilst watching Tammy “ruining her life”. In an attempt to help her friend, she tried to speak to her and show her that she wants to support her, but her attempts were met with rejection and the accusation that she was “just jealous”. Tracy's loyalty to her friend appears to expose her to onslaughts of indirect aggression and further hurt. She is torn between maintaining her loyalty to her friend and doing what would probably be in her own best interest.

Tracy appears to be struggling to come to terms with the fact that not everyone attaches as much prominence and meaningfulness to their friendships as she does and that others may not be as reliable and dependable as she is. This confusion seems to be an offshoot of indirect aggression practices, where people's loyalties are being tested and the worthwhileness of their emotional investments is verified. In a sense, indirect aggression can serve to disillusion some girls, presenting them with the raw emotions of what it is like to be rejected and disappointed by people they previously considered trustworthy and dependable.

As can be seen in Tracy's account, there seems to be an element of naïveté at play in the way she conceptualized the world around her and the manner in which she viewed her friendships. This appears to be a learning process for her, where she is coming to realize that she needs to move beyond the conflicts around her and focus on her own goals and needs. There still appears to be a great deal of confusion and hurt wrapped up in this process of individuation and growth, which she needs to work through. Indirect aggression may be the catalyst for girls to test, learn, explore and grow from their experiences.

## **MAY**

May was very keen to participate in the research. She is 14 years old and currently attending Grade 6 at a school in Johannesburg. May is a very outgoing and talkative girl, who is able to articulate herself very well. She comes across as honest and perceptive and spoke freely of her experiences.

The following themes illustrate May's experiences regarding her social system as a whole and the role of indirect aggression in these experiences:

### ***ACCEPTANCE AND INCLUSION VERSUS REJECTION AND EXCLUSION***

Throughout the interview, May spoke about her need for acceptance and belonging. She emphasised how important it is to belong to a circle of friends and to be seen as someone who has friends. Not to have friends seems to be viewed as unacceptable and is a source of great distress and despair for the person who is alone. May went as far as to say that "without friends you are nothing". Similarly, the more friends one has, the more positively one is viewed by others. One gets the sense of 'the more the better', even if the friendships are not as solid and accepting as one might hope they would be. Interestingly, acceptance in this instance does not seem to equate with trust and security, in the sense that one is accepted for who one is; rather, acceptance seems to be the observable inclusion into a group. This inclusion, it appears, is of a temporary nature and relies heavily on one's involvement in

the various activities performed by the group, such as engaging in certain rebellious acts or engaging in manipulative, indirect aggressive behaviour.

In May's situation, she was rejected by the 'popular' group, largely because her mother did not allow her to participate in many of their activities, such as late-night parties, smoking, drinking and dating. Her enforced non-involvement resulted in her being teased and harassed by the children from the popular group. She recalled how her life was purposefully made difficult through the spreading of rumours about her and gossiping by the popular crowd:

"...Kate and Judy were against me and there were these two guys swooning all over them and they used to tease me because I was like a goody-goody, you know,... 'cos I wouldn't go with them and smoke and stuff! So there I am, ...I have no friends, I've just lost a good friend, and I have people teasing me! [...] it was Kate's influence, she would like make up rumours and then they would tease me about them, I don't know what they said about me [...] and I think it was also because they knew that I would not crush under peer pressure so they wanted to crush me in other ways... like teasing me and stuff..."

Considering the above, it becomes clear what peer pressure adolescents are under. If one does not conform one will be rejected and the consequences can be detrimental. May recalled how isolated and hurt she felt at losing her 'best' friend to the popular group, as well as being excluded and teased when



she was unable to join her due to her parents limiting her involvement in the group activities. This highlights the depth of frustration and despair when girls are confronted with being alone and how immobilising indirect aggression tactics can be:

“There is a time where you are numb ... there is like nothing ... it is actually unreal because you have nowhere to go [...] I knew that everything bad was going to happen and I didn't want to get involved in that kind of situation. So I was torn and I was numb and I didn't know what to do. You know... it was like... you can't describe it with words, it is so... you are so alone, you are so alone and you are blank. And you just sit there and you're like: 'What now? What?' it is hard to describe. Actually, you can't think because there is nothing to think about. And sometimes you don't want to think because you don't want to know what's coming ahead of you because you know something bad is going to happen. You have this sense of foreboding always, and you're expecting the worst to happen...”

This further illustrates how May used to anticipate that something bad was going to happen, and how she would fear any type of interactions and going to school because of the uncertainty of what others might say or do to her to make her life difficult. It is at this point where some girls seem to see no way out of the situation and are tempted to give up. May's account highlights how hopeless she felt when she was the target of indirect aggression and how entrapping this seemingly endless cycle can be. She was alone throughout most of this experience, with no friends supporting her, which also made it

inconceivable for her to fight back and stand up for herself. In a sense, indirect aggression strips people of their sense of belonging and self-esteem, thereby disempowering them to fight back, which in turn makes them an easy target for further abuse.

May's situation improved when she was accepted into the 'nerd'-group at school. She explained that she was at a stage where it did not matter who her friends were but rather that she was not alone. She recalled how she used to look down at the nerd group when she was popular, and how she was indirectly aggressive towards them, teasing them and gossiping about them behind their backs. It was only later, when she had no one to support her that she realised how accommodating and friendly this group of people was. This illustrates how blindly some girls engage in provoking and hurting others, without even knowing much about whom they are targeting and why.

I get the sense that the groupings in school are vastly segregated and cliquey. If a girl belongs to a group, she seems to be forced to pledge her allegiance to that group by rejecting and excluding others in a type of 'us versus them' stance. May explained that "the groups are very segregated." When a girl decides to leave a specific group or is unable to engage in group-specific activities, such as what happened with May, there seem to be drastic repercussions. On some level, it seems as though by leaving the popular group, May rejected its members and threatened the group unity, which then resulted in them lashing out at her and also responding with indirect aggression.

The theme of revenge and manipulation comes out strongly in May's story and it seems that there is struggle for acceptance and inclusion on many levels amidst peer relationships during adolescence. Due to the very intensity of this desire to be included and fear of being rejected and excluded, adolescents go to drastic measures to feel part of something and protect the friendships they have.

### ***GENUINE VERSUS SUPERFICIAL INTERACTIONS AND FRIENDSHIPS***

May voiced her desire to have genuine and trustworthy friendships. She considered her friend Judy, whom she had lost to the popular crowd, to be her 'best friend', whom she trusted and cared for deeply. Part of her struggle with the way the situation unfolded was that she held Judy in high esteem and felt that she had a unique and true friendship with her, which had the capacity to transcend adversity. However, this friendship was torn apart when Judy 'chose' a popular girl, Kate, to be her friend. In addition to feeling rejected, May's ideals of what a genuine and trusting friendship entails were quashed and she was severely hurt and disillusioned. It seems she is still confused about how to approach and perceive her previous best friend, and there seems to be some indirect aggression in her manner of conceptualising the whole situation, which highlights her defensiveness and self-protective stance. She had the following to say regarding Judy:

“...If she missed me then I would have missed her, but she doesn’t and she didn’t. She didn’t care about me and she didn’t care what it was doing to me... she didn’t care, so I don’t miss her!” [...] “I was hurt by her and now that I am with my new friends I don’t need her... and her smoking and her wrong things... yeah, I don’t miss her... I have better things... I have better friendships and more promising things in my life than to have to worry about that and to miss people and that... I don’t need that, especially with my schedule...”

May’s new group of friends seemed to support her through her difficult time when a lot of teasing and gossiping was aimed at her. They were sympathetic to her situation and gave her the security, which allowed her to re-evaluate her position as well as regain her confidence. In her new group, May feels safe to confide in others and she emphasised how she can “talk things through” when there is a disagreement. The conflict resolution strategies seem different in that there is an openness to tackling difficulties. In her previous friendships, it seems that May was never certain as to where she stood with her other friends and she realised how replaceable friends are, as she indicated in the following:

“... that’s how she [Kate] works... you know, she takes people, she makes them smoke and then she ditches them”...“everything just revolves around her and then she takes you and then she just throws you away... you never become her true friend.”

May furthermore explained that some of the popular people talk to others that are not in their group, but they would never admit to that, as it might affect their social standing and open them up to scrutiny and indirect aggression from other members of the popular group. This brings into question the genuineness and sincerity with which some people approach others, as well as their own feelings of safety and acceptance by their fellow group members, as is indicated below:

“They only have friends that they think are popular because it would damage their reputation if they were friends with people that were getting nineties. If they were friends with those people, they would almost hide it. If they were found talking to them, the people would be like ‘what are you doing talking to them!’”

May criticises the popular group extensively, and it seems that that group embodies many attributes or characteristics with which she does not agree, such as superficiality and fakeness. I sensed her frustration with this group, which may partly have had something to do with her not being accepted into the group and therefore harbouring some resentment and hurt. However, when she realised how unreasonable and superficial the popular group could be, she was in some sense relieved that she was no longer taking part in their ‘superficial games’. The popular group, it appears, invest more time and effort in indirect aggressive measures, such as talking behind people’s backs and gossiping, as a way of dealing with conflict. May explains:

“Like, if I have a fight with one of my friends, one of us always says sorry and we apologise. One of us would come to our senses because we have good heads on our shoulders. Maybe with the more popular people, they don’t have that maturity... or they probably do have that maturity but they don’t exercise it. So they don’t solve problems easily. When they do have a problem with someone they might talk about them behind their backs and then eventually the other person will find out and confront the one that was talking behind the back... And then the other will explain to her what she had been doing wrong and then the girl will disagree and then you have a fight and then that’s where everything goes mad! That is when you have your true point of tension. And then it is where you come to the more serious things where they get emotionally depressed and stuff [...] You have to worry about stuff that you don’t want to worry about when you are studying for your final exams, you don’t want to worry about that kind of stuff... I just think that it wouldn’t be needed... I don’t need that in my life... I’d rather just be comfortable with my friends.”

Whilst May criticised the popular girls for their lack of constructive conflict resolution skills, she did also admit how girls in general – herself included – seem to fight in very much an indirect and underhanded manner and how genuineness and trustworthiness often falls to the wayside during times of conflict:

“With girls you always get that yakking behind each others’ back. You cannot tell girls something without them going to somebody else and telling them,

and that happens with everybody... I mean, I do it, my friends do it, all the other people do it... because it is a mannerism that we cannot say what we want to the people's faces. With guys, they beat each other up and that's it. I had to stop fights with guys... they jump at each other and punch each other and then like it's all great after that. [...] With girls, you think that you are so much better than everybody else and that when you talk about people, be it in their face or behind their back, you can't be genuine. You can't be genuine because how can you say to somebody's face [...] that they didn't like the way somebody was behaving and that they find them annoying and whatever [...] I would applaud them for that. Now... it is being horrible... uhmmm yeah, I wouldn't applaud them for that, but it is better than talking behind somebody's back. You know... and that's why we get so angry with people... with girls. That is why we have such huge fights when we ignore each other and you have this grudge against somebody until one person is mature enough to say sorry. Or they just don't say sorry and it just goes on forever until you leave school and you just don't care. But that's how bad it gets. That's why guys would rather just swing a fist and get it over with."

The above shows May's awareness of the indirect and manipulative strategies girls employ when interacting and negotiating with each other. She seems to express some frustration with this 'typical' manner of communicating and the complications attached to this means of fighting. However, even though she appears bothered by this approach, she feels forced to engage with other girls in this way, as it seems to be the only acceptable means of communicating and arguing, save they should start throwing fists at each other.

## ***INDEPENDENCE VERSUS DEPENDENCE AND VULNERABILITY***

Previously, May, was wrapped up in a world where acceptance into any group, preferably the popular group, was essential. It did not matter whether she liked the people she was with, as long as she was part of a group. Her happiness depended on whether she was accepted or not. Furthermore, she was extremely dependent on her previous friend, Judy, whom she cared for a lot and felt a genuine connection to. Presently, May relies heavily on the support of her family and current group of friends. She expressed her fear of possibly being moved to another class next year and what that would do to her:

“It would definitely not be enjoyable, not being in the same class as all my friends. And it would also be irritating, because now I’ve made friends with all these other people, if they took me out of that class I would be destroyed because now you are moving me from my comfort zone. You can’t make me unhappy by moving me... it wouldn’t be fair, you know! It just wouldn’t be fair! ... To separate me and make me unhappy! ... I don’t want to be separated from my friends that I’ve worked so hard to get and that I’d bonded with and that we’ve made such a close relationship and now I don’t know what I’d do without them. I would be destroyed if I were without them!”

The above illustrates how vulnerable May feels without the presence and support of her current friends and how she still has this fear of being confronted with people whom she has a tainted history with. It shows how



deeply rooted the pain from her previous experience with indirect aggression is and how she still does not feel freed from its clutches. To be placed in another class, separate from her friends, would seemingly transport her back to the emotional state and vulnerability she experienced before and expose her again to the possibility of being excluded, harassed and manipulated by others.

Although May openly expressed her own dependence on her friends and family throughout the interview, she also indicated that she has become much more independent and mature in the past year. May seems to equate a move away from dependence as maturity and a sign of strength and dependence as a sign of immaturity and weakness. Her growth, it appears, has come from focusing on her own strengths and interests and taking ownership of the situation, thereby moving more towards independence. May reflected on how she pulled herself out of her situation:

“It is like a stage where you don’t want to do anything but you know that you need to do something because you cannot stay like this forever... you won’t survive. It takes time to get over that stage ... you need to open yourself ... it is very difficult ... You need to go out and try and help yourself instead of waiting for the help to come to you. [...] There was no way I was going to sit there all alone and beg somebody to come talk to me”

Through being forced to spend time with herself when she was excluded from her group of friends, May managed to discover her inner strength and self-

worth. It seems as though she has gained more confidence in her abilities and more self-respect through this period of struggle and introspection than she would have, had her social situation not turned sour. May admits that her experience was a “blessing in disguise”, as she has grown and learnt so much from working through her difficulties. This period of growth seems to represent a move away from others towards independence, where May’s focus shifted from friendships and social confusion, to herself and her own interests and needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The four accounts represented in this chapter all reflect different perspectives and experiences regarding the social dynamics at play in adolescent peer groups and friendships. Furthermore, they provide us with some insight regarding the experience of indirect aggression and what impact this mode of communication can have on one’s interactions, emotions, and friendships.

There are also considerable similarities that can be highlighted across all accounts in terms of certain themes and experiences. The next chapter provides a discussion of the aspects and themes highlighted in this chapter and how these relate to the relevant literature and research that exists on the topic. Particular reference is also made to systems theory, and how this can provide a framework for understanding indirect aggression processes. The discussion is followed by concluding thoughts and recommendations arrived at via this research endeavour.

## Chapter 6

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This chapter aims to link the research findings and experiences of indirect aggression referred to in the previous chapter with the existing literature relating to this topic. I have attempted to illustrate how the social dynamics of adolescent girls are interwoven with indirect aggression practices, and how these have a particular function when looking at the systemic processes that take place within the larger system.

Many previous research endeavours on this topic have focused on specific aspects that play a role in indirect aggression practices, rather than looking at indirect aggression more holistically. In other words, some researchers may have only focused on the possible reasons for the implementation of indirect aggression practices, whilst others may have looked at the effects of this type of interaction on the victim, or how certain characteristics or attributes that the victim and perpetrator possess contribute to the perpetuation of indirect aggression. In this chapter, I have attempted to look at the various dimensions at play when considering the phenomenon of indirect aggression systemically and how these tie in with the literature referred to in the previous chapters.

## **THE FUNCTIONALITY OF INDIRECT AGGRESSION**

There is consensus amongst researchers that there is a purpose or goal attached to aggressive practices (Parens, 1993). As indicated in Chapter 2 of the present study, aggression is primarily intended to hurt or injure another person, either physically or psychologically (Colman, 2003). In addition to this intent to hurt, aggression seems to fulfil other functions when presented in the larger system. Indirect aggression in particular seems to provide a means for adolescent girls to negotiate their social standing in a group, to negotiate power dynamics, as well as to enforce control and dominance over each other. Furthermore, it was noted how indirect aggression practices are often implemented for the purposes of gaining social approval and acceptance by a particular group and fostering a reputation, or alternatively, as a means of excluding some members of the group who are unwanted or 'irritating', and thereby seen as threatening to the group cohesion and structure (Crain et al., 2005; James & Owens, 2005).

All four accounts illustrated in the present research reflected on the predominant theme of inclusion and exclusion. If one considers the literature on indirect aggression and bullying, it becomes apparent that the need to belong to a group and to be connected with others is of primary importance for girls, particularly during their adolescent years (Hadley, 2004; Parker et al., 1995; Prinstein et al., 2001). Feldman et al. (1995) referred to adolescent girls' peer culture as one of compliance and conformity, where girls form exclusive friendships and hold great concerns about their connectedness to

others. The emotional intensity generated by this need to be connected and to belong, seems to play a role in the effectiveness and perpetuation of indirect aggression practices. The very emotional closeness of these tight and dense social networks is believed to create a social context suitable for the exhibition of indirect aggression (Green et al., 1996).

As was reflected in all four interviews, girls manipulate each other's feelings of inclusion and exclusion by threatening the withdrawal of a friendship or actively pushing someone out of the group by indirect means of aggression. These means include ignoring another person, talking badly behind that person's back, spreading rumours, as well as laughing and insulting another in their presence. Some tactics are more subtle and take place without the targeted girl being present, whilst others take place when the 'victim' is in fact witnessing others' rejecting of her and forcing her out of the group. These tactics are explicitly explained by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) and Galen and Underwood (1997) who furthermore described how activities such as spreading rumours and manipulating the peer group through social exclusion are hurtful to girls and perceived as aggressive by them.

Whilst indirect aggression appears to take place in most groups referred to by the girls interviewed for this research, people and groups that are considered popular seem to be the most common perpetrators of indirect aggression. All four personal accounts spoke of the prevalence of indirect aggression amongst popular groups and how the desire to be popular generates leverage for popular girls to manipulate and bully others. This shows how aggressive

behaviour can be aimed at preserving and enhancing the aggressor's power and dominance and how it appears to arise from the struggle for control and influence between two or more people (Berkowitz, 1993; Gelles, 1983). Furthermore, indirect aggression seems to be used as a means of impression management and for gaining social approval. Some girls seem to feel that they need to act in an aggressive or domineering way to gain acceptance and approval from a specific group they want to join, such as the popular group. All four girls who took part in this research frequently spoke of some girls being 'nasty' and 'mean' to others and how this gained them acceptance into certain groups.

Indirect aggression is also used for the purposes of excluding girls from the group who are disliked or perceived as threatening to group harmony. For instance, if a girl is perceived as untrustworthy or has been identified as a loner who could possibly break up existing friendships, she is likely to be rejected and excluded from group activities through indirect aggressive means. This indicates how indirect aggression plays a large role in the social arrangement and organisation of groups, and how it generates movement amongst group members, creating diversity of interactions, whilst enhancing group cohesion (James & Owens, 2005). Indirect aggression is in a sense used to promote the status quo of a group whilst at the same time it can serve as the impetus for new arrangements and changes to be made. Much of the relevant research literature reflects the notion that indirect aggression plays a predominant role in the manipulation and maintenance of friendships and that it therefore has a large role to play in the relational domain adolescent girls

find themselves in (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997; James & Owens, 2005).

## **THE RELATIONAL DOMAIN**

All four girls whose experiences are reflected in this research highlight the existence of indirect aggression within their own friendships and groups. As is suggested in the literature, bullying regularly occurs within friendship circles where the perpetrator is considered a friend and where there is a shared history between victim and perpetrator (Baron, 1977; Mishna, 2004). The strategies of indirect aggression and manipulation are targeted specifically at nodal points identified during prior interactions and exchanges (Sutton et al., 1999).

All accounts referred to friendships that had turned sour, where the most hurtful and manipulative strategies of indirect aggression were imparted by a former best friend. This is when indirect aggression seems to be particularly painful and effective in isolating another and generating feelings of distrust, rejection and self-doubt. The importance of having a best friend was emphasised by all four girls interviewed. They indicated how a friend becomes the keeper of one's secrets and the primary source of containment, connectivity, and belonging (Brown, 1989; Rice, 1996). As Adler et al. (1992) pointed out, girls invest highly in their close relationships in the hope that they can turn to their friends for advice and help when coping with problems. The intimacy shared amongst best friends is exclusive and intense, allowing them

to gather vast amounts of sensitive information that can be used to develop intense and hurtful strategies of manipulation (Green et al., 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001; Rice, 1996).

The paradox that unfolds when considering self-disclosure as a means of connecting and being accepted, versus retaining information about oneself and protecting oneself from over-exposure and feelings of vulnerability became largely evident in all four accounts. To be secretive and withholding of information is perceived as threatening and tends to be suggestive of someone being untrustworthy and insincere, whilst the very exposure of one's personal feelings tends to form the ammunition used when indirect aggression practices come into play (Adler et al., 1992; Talbot, 2002). This suggests that girls are vulnerable to indirect aggression practices whether they actively self-disclose or withhold information (Haley, 1963).

All four girls in this research referred to their fears of being alone and being rejected by a close friend or an entire group. They reflected on feelings of isolation and betrayal and the loneliness and hurt attached to being excluded. The effectiveness of indirect aggression is such, that the girls are uncertain as to their social standing and acceptance by others and experience feelings of distrust and insecurity in their dealings with each other. Similar findings were shown by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) and Olweus (1993b), where it was indicated that the break up of friendships, bullying, and indirect aggression can lead to elevated levels of social anxiety, social avoidance, loneliness, and unhappiness, as well as to low self-esteem and depression.



A further point to consider is how indirect aggression takes place within a larger system rather than merely between two people. All four accounts reflected on group processes where indirect aggression is woven into most interactions amongst group members, and where chain reactions seemingly ripple through the larger system in ever-present cycles (Watzlawick et al., 1974). The interviews indicated that group compositions and friendships are constantly in flux, with members shifting their alliances and changing their coalitions, as well as leaving the system and entering new systems. These systemic adjustments seem to be spurred on and facilitated by the implementation of indirect aggressive practices, suggesting that these forms of manipulation become part of the typical means of interaction and negotiation amongst girls at all relational levels (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Osterman et al., 1994). This line of reasoning brings into question the usefulness of viewing indirect aggression on an individual (aggressor – victim) level of interaction, and whether it would not be more fruitful to see it as a systemic phenomenon where indirect aggression forms part of the strategies are needed for social organisation, maintenance and change. In light of this, it is suggested that indirect aggression practices exist in all systems at some point in their evolution, but that there are differences in the extent to which such practices are implemented, with some systems being more aggressive than others (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Similarly, it is difficult to speak of the particular characteristics and attributes of the aggressor and victim in isolation, as all girls seem to engage in indirect

aggressive practices at some point (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000a, 2000b). All respondents in the present research attempted to portray themselves as either observers of indirect aggression or alternatively as victims thereof. However, it became apparent that each girl has also taken part in the perpetuation of indirect aggression during the course of their experiences. That being said, it cannot be denied that some girls seem to make use of such manipulative tactics more readily than others, whilst others appear to be more frequently aggressed against (Adler et al., 1992; James & Owens, 2005). However, none of my findings were conclusive as to what would be typical of aggressors and victims in terms of their behaviours, attributes, and characteristics.

In this regard, it needs to be mentioned that whilst indirect aggression tactics are prevalent in all systems, it appears that emotional bullying is not. As was described in Chapter 2: *Aggression in Context*, bullying is systematic and not merely occasional, spontaneous aggression (Rigby & Slee, 1999). Bullying therefore incorporates purposeful harmful actions (such as indirect aggressive tactics) that are repeatedly targeted at specific individuals in what appears to be a strategic onslaught over time (Mishna, 2004).

In the current research, three of the respondents spoke of various indirect aggression tactics that they had observed, experienced and at times engaged in, however, they did not speak of the type of strategic and consistent aggressive onslaughts typical of bullying. May, the last girl presented in the previous chapter, spoke of a phase in her life where she felt 'haunted' by a

group of girls. They seemingly attempted to break down her defences systematically and purposefully tried to make her feel excluded and rejected. May's experience of this time was deeply emotional and impactful and provides a glimpse of what it can be like to be on the receiving end of a strategic onslaught of indirect aggression, reminiscent of emotional bullying. This observation highlights the difference between the terms indirect aggression and bullying and how they function on different levels of involvement. Systemically speaking, indirect aggression appears to be a prevalent phenomenon in most adolescent girls' interactions at some stage, whilst emotional bullying is a more selective, manipulative, and strategic onslaught that takes place over time, and that involves specific people. It appears that in analysing instances of emotional bullying more closely, one might find more conclusive indications of the behaviours, attributes, and characteristics typical of aggressors and victims (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Owens et al., 2000c; Sutton et al., 1999). These aspects would probably be more defined and pronounced, given that they form part of a more entrenched, consistent way of interacting between two or more people.

Salmivalli et al. (1997) highlighted five different roles that form part of the typical pattern found in indirect aggression practices. They suggest that each participant engages in certain behaviours, such as for instance, some girls are observers, whilst others encourage the aggressor and some may defend the victim. All these roles illustrate how the aggressive system operates by means of incorporating the functions of various participants. The current research findings also suggested this pattern of role taking and how, depending on the

context or the situation, girls fulfil and take on different roles. Looking at the more recent literature on indirect aggression, it becomes apparent that roles are not static and that girls move from one role to another, depending on the situation and the individuals involved in the interpersonal exchange (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000b). However, as alluded to in the previous paragraph, when considering the phenomenon of emotional bullying, these roles may be more entrenched and consistent over time, with less changing and role shifting taking place amongst participants.

The respondents in the current research regularly spoke of taking sides when one of their friends is in trouble and how the entire group is mobilised into action when there is tension in the system. Sometimes, the group becomes imbalanced and certain girls, who are lacking the support from fellow group members, are excluded. Other times, the group struggles to put up a united front and the fighting progresses through the entire system with the members dispersing into smaller groups. It was noted that there is often an escalation in the intensity of the fights, with indirect aggression practices becoming more refined and prevalent, as the group members' sense of trust, loyalty, and affiliation deteriorates. Indirect aggression tactics are often met with revenge tactics that are equally indirectly aggressive and there is a dynamic interplay amongst the members of the system, where everyone is affected in some way or another and the system is forced to reassemble and possibly change. James and Owens (2005) reflected on how attempts to resolve an aggressive situation often reflect further indirect aggressive practices. They indicate how girls tend to retaliate by using their friendships to seek revenge, or how they

alternatively confront the perpetrators in an attempt to resolve the situation. These responses can often lead to further escalations, as was often highlighted in the findings of the current research. Eventually, the girls would find themselves in positions where it was unclear as to who started the argument and what the initial disagreement was about. This suggests the recursiveness of the process of indirect aggression, whereby people and events are in a context of mutual interaction and influence (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

When an aggressive system is in a state of growing intensity and confusion, with the group members being at loggerheads with one another, it may be difficult to envisage an end or resolution to the conflict situation. This phenomenon, according to general systems theory, is referred to as a runaway, a seeming 'game without end' (Watzlawick et al., 1974). However, runaways are considered to be useful and necessary positive feedback processes whereby times of upheaval and disarray allow the members of a group to negotiate and establish new meanings and ways of relating.

## **RESOLUTION AND INDIVIDUATION PROCESSES**

As was explained in Chapter 3: *The systemic backdrop*, feedback forms part of a circular process by which members of a system adjust and alter their behaviour in relation to each other. The sequences of adjustments made by the members can either lead to the status quo being maintained, or to a process of escalation unfolding that moves away from the status quo and only

finds resolution once a new way of relating is arrived at (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Hoffman, 1981). Considering this, it becomes clear how the escalations and runaways found in indirect aggressive systems are a reflection of the system changing and the members renegotiating the rules and boundaries of the group. Possibly, the accelerated developmental and psychological changes that take place during adolescence, and the growing awareness of one's preferences, needs, ideals, and evolving individuality serve as the impetus for adolescent girls to explore, provoke, test, and re-evaluate themselves in relation to others (Rice, 1996).

All four accounts provided by the girls indicated how indirect aggression often arises within their respective friendships and groups, and how there is a strong desire to curb such interactions when they occur. Frequently, the first attempt at resolution entails an apology to the girl who is upset or angry. This means that one person is taking a 'one-down' position, thereby establishing a complementary relationship where one person is more dominant and the other submissive (Hoffman, 1981). The girls mentioned how such apologies are often provided in an attempt to diffuse the situation, rather than for the purposes of acknowledging some wrongdoing on the part of the one who apologises. It was found that these apologies form part of a strategic approach enforced to reduce the tension and awkwardness that arises during times of conflict. If this approach is effective, then the system returns to its previous arrangement. This is a typical example of homeostasis being achieved and retained, where the system is in a sense rigid and resilient,

refusing to deviate from its status quo (Hoffman, 1981; Watzlawick et al., 1974).

Attempts at resolving problems with friends and group members are often experienced as frantic and desperate. All four girls spoke of their fears of being alone and being excluded during times of crises, and they admitted to trying numerous ways of re-engaging and connecting with others, often overriding their own opinions, values, or sense of integrity. Their need to belong to a group sometimes seems to take precedence over their personal sense of what is right or wrong.

Depending on the intensity of the relationship, the extent of indirect aggression tactics applied, or the nature of the conflict at hand, certain resolution tactics may be ineffective when attempting to resolve the conflict. As mentioned previously, revenge is often a main response to indirect aggression tactics, which tends to spur on further conflict and indirect aggression tactics rather than resolve it. Haley (1963) spoke of paradoxical relationships, where the person who is posing the paradox wins control of a particular area of behaviour, but in doing so the other person is required to respond in a similar way and the conflictual relationship is perpetuated. In terms of the current research, indirect aggression practices can be seen as presenting someone with a paradoxical message. This message is often confusing and the targeted girl tends to be uncertain as to what line of reasoning the aggression is coming from. In response, she may implement a strategy of revenge which often entails an equally ambiguous retaliation.

Furthermore, some girls attempt to escape the situation by indulging in thoughts of changing schools or classrooms or staying away from school by acting sick. The girls in the current research alluded to this means of avoiding conflict, however neither of them followed through with such plans. Caroline, spoke of her desire to find new friends outside of school and carving a new reputation for herself. This can also be viewed as an attempt to escape the social difficulties and conflicts at school. Some of the existing research (Olweus, 1993a; Owens et al., 2000a; Rigby & Slee, 1991) even found that girls consider suicide as a means of escaping indirect aggressive practices and conflictual peer relations. Whilst some of the abovementioned solutions may seem quite desperate and extreme, the mere fact that girls are thinking about such drastic measures illustrates how helpless experiences with indirect aggression can make them feel.

Haley (1963) indicates that the receiver of a paradoxical message can respond by either providing an equally paradoxical retaliation, terminating the relationship (leaving the system), or commenting on the impossible situation he/she is being placed in. The first two responses have been discussed in the previous paragraphs, in terms of plotting revenge strategies or escaping the system, the latter will be discussed below.

The tendency to avoid conflictual situations through ignoring or escaping situations where indirect aggression occurs seems to be a prominent response amongst the girls interviewed in this research. This reaction to



indirect aggression seems to allow room for it to continue, as the aggressor generally need not fear any direct repercussions or confrontations by the person being targeted. On the other hand, Tracy spoke of her fears of confronting a girl who was being indirectly aggressive towards her, as she felt that this would merely give her more ammunition to continue her onslaught and bring the focus back on her. All four girls in this research viewed direct confrontation and open discussion with the aggressor as largely ineffective, as this would make them feel more vulnerable and exposed. Most of them hoped that by ignoring the situation, the conflict would eventually 'blow over'. This suggests that indirect aggression practices are perceived as unresolvable by the girls interviewed and that they need these to in a sense 'run their course' to come to some conclusion. Possibly, the concept of confronting the difficulty is inconceivable because the girls themselves are not fully aware of the paradoxical nature of indirect aggression and therefore feel immobilised. Furthermore, because they are emotionally provoked during these instances, they may not be able to see the situation from a more analytical, observer perspective, which would allow them a clearer understanding of the dynamics at play.

When conflict gets to a level where both parties are seemingly trapped in a never ending circle of reactivity, the larger social system tends to come into play. The mediating role parents and teachers take during times of conflict and aggression appears to be controversial (James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al, 2000b; Smith, 1991). It was noted that the two younger girls spoke of their teachers being considerably involved in conflict resolution at their school

and that teachers regularly attempt to diffuse indirect aggression practices by means of making these practices overt. These interventions were found to be comforting on some level, yet also destructive and uncontainable on another. It was found that much of the raw emotions and information uncovered in these resolution strategies were channelled back into the group and used as fuel for further indirect aggression practices to take place. This brings into question the usefulness of such interventions.

Parental support was another aspect that came up in the interviews, largely by the older girls. May spoke of the important role her parents had in helping her through a difficult phase in her life, where she was being emotionally bullied and aggressed against by a group of girls. Her parents restricted her movements significantly during this time, attempting to guide and support her when she felt confused and frustrated about her social circumstances. This influence allowed her to transcend the difficult situation she found herself and provided her with the impetus to move on and find meaning with a new circle of friends. Tracy mentioned how she has no confidence in her parents or teachers helping her cope with indirect aggression, adding that their involvement could in fact worsen the situation, promoting further reasons for indirect aggression practices to take place. This refusal to involve parents and teachers was also reflected in research by Owens et al. (2000a) and James and Owens (2005), where girls were generally not positive about appealing to teachers to assist in resolving their conflicts and that their involvement could actually make matters worse. James and Owens (2005) speculate that the solutions to such conflicts might be more readily found in peer relationship

strategies, including peer support and peer mediation, rather than top-down teacher student interventions. In a sense, the system itself should be used to resolve its conflicts from within.

As previously indicated, conflict seems to have a purpose in the social arrangement processes of adolescent girls. Whilst one may still beg the question why such conflict tends to take on the form of indirect aggression practices rather than a more direct and open approach, it nonetheless promotes a movement towards change within the system and amongst its members. Particularly the older girls interviewed for this research seemed to have considerable insight into the subtle inner working of their social systems and it appears as though indirect aggression plays a role in them learning about their own and others' sensitivities and boundaries. In other words, the confusion that seems to arise from indirect aggression practices seems to promote a process of self-reflection and a re-evaluation of one's group dynamics. Some girls may choose to look for other friends, whilst others will eventually negotiate new ways of dealing with their existing friendships and approach situations differently. Either way, there are certain shifts that take place within the system and it seems that this movement is important for growth to take place (Watzlawick et al., 1974).

Much of the relevant research tends to focus on the negative impact indirect aggression has on girls and the destructive effects these means of interaction have on their psychological wellbeing. Whilst I am certainly not condoning such aggressive practices, and am well aware of the significant psychological

repercussions such interactions can have on the individual and the system, I feel it is important to look at the role they play in the generation of new meaning and growth for the girls that were interviewed in this study. All four accounts illustrated how each girl struggled to make sense of the subtle dynamics at play in their social networks and how they should position themselves in relation to others. They all reflected on a process of self-discovery and re-negotiation, which appears to have been spurred on by their experiences with indirect aggression. Considering that each girl is still confronted with indirect aggression practices in social situations, highlights the fact that this dynamic possibly never disappears completely, but rather, that the attitude each person has in relation to this phenomenon shifts and changes over time. Possibly, in overcoming the impact of indirect aggression, girls gradually move towards a more grounded, consolidated sense of who they are in themselves and in relation to others. Essentially, this appears to form part of the initial stages of the individuation process typically found during adolescence (Rice, 1996).

## **CONCLUSION**

The above discussion merely scrapes the surface with regard to uncovering the intricacies involved in indirect aggression practices and how these are linked to systemic processes. In a sense, this is the very nature of systems. Systems are layered in terms of complexity, depending on the level one chooses to observe. Furthermore, every system is distinctly unique and perceived differently by each person involved. It would therefore be untenable

for me to suggest that the above discussion holds the key to understanding adolescent girls' experiences of indirect aggression. What the above discussion does provide, is an alternate perspective on indirect aggression and how this research should be seen as an extension of preceding research endeavours, thereby adding to a host of useful insights brought to the fore previously.

This research highlights the fact that indirect aggression forms part of the typical interactions that take place in the social systems adolescent girls find themselves in. As with all communicative behaviour, certain meaning is ascribed to the various interactions that take place between people and thereby learning and growth takes place. Adolescent girls continuously negotiate new ways of relating to each other and rehash their perceptions and views of the world in the process. Indirect aggression seems to form a part of this development and therefore has a significant role to play in the individuation process of adolescent girls.

The girls that took part in this research were not chosen specifically with regard to particular difficulties or struggles they may have encountered with indirect aggression, but rather they were selected to provide a more general understanding of their perceptions of their social systems and how indirect aggression may form part of these systemic interactions. It is understood that a clearer picture of the *impact* of indirect aggression could have been obtained if the respondents had been chosen specifically with this aspect in mind. However, the purpose of this research was not so much gaining insight

into the impact of indirect aggression, as much as it was to provide a greater understanding of how indirect aggression can be understood from a systemic perspective. Future research endeavours could possibly limit sample selection to girls who have experienced indirect aggression as a predominant aspect of their interactions. Such research could still be conducted, bearing in mind the systemic processes at play in the relationships of adolescent girls, and could enhance the present research findings.

In terms of possible insights regarding intervention strategies, it was found that the interference of the larger system was mostly considered intrusive and ineffective by the respondents in this research. When considering indirect aggression from the systemic perspective, it becomes apparent that it forms part of the renegotiation process of the system's rules and boundaries. Intervention strategies should possibly focus on the level of the system rather than that of the individual, thereby considering what rules need to be targeted to prevent or to curb indirect aggressive practices. Possibly, by merely making the overt rules of a system covert, and assisting social groups in redefining their rule system, indirect aggression practices could be reduced. Such interventions could possibly also empower the individuals within a system to establish better coping and prevention strategies, as they would become more aware of the systemic dynamics at play in their own system. Future research could possibly focus on group intervention strategies, where the rules of a system are brought to the fore and analysed and each member is provided with a greater understanding of the systemic processes at play in her group.

Furthermore, it may be useful to conduct further research to establish when indirect aggression practices form part of a bullying strategy, and when they are part of a typical process of social negotiation. Intervention should certainly take place in situations where there is a systematic breaking down of a person's defences by another and where the psychological impact could be considerable. Teachers and parents should be sensitised to this difference in level of assault and certain therapeutic measures, in the form of psychological services, should be accessible to the individuals involved.

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## APPENDIX I

### INTERVIEW WITH MANDY

*Tess: I don't have specific questions, I guess my first questions would be... you are obviously in a circle of friend, you said you were seven in the group?*

**Mandy:** Yeah, there's Abbey, Kaitlin, Bronwyn, Sarah, me, Kyra, there's six actually... and Lee-Anne doesn't really play with us anymore... she comes in and goes out and has different friends.

*Tess: Is that alright that she comes in and out or...*

**Mandy:** Yeah well I think we're all friends with her, except Sarah and Lee-Anne are fighting, so...

*Tess: And they are in your normal circle?*

**Mandy:** Uhummm...

*Tess: So what does that do to the group?*

**Mandy:** Well, they're all in our group, but Lee-Anne's the one that comes in and out, is fighting with Sarah.

*Tess: So she comes in and stirs things up and then she leaves?*

**Mandy:** Yeah...

*Tess: Ok, and how do you feel about Lee-Anne?*

**Mandy:** She's one of my best friends, but yeah... they are fighting with each other, so we all just stay out of it.

**Tess:** *So, if she is your friend, are you worried to be too close to her because it might cause more trouble for you?*

**Mandy:** Yeah... in a way...

**Tess:** *So tell me what happens when she enters the group, how does that affect the group?*

**Mandy:** When Lee-Anne comes into the group, then... she comes and then they like ignore each other and then like Sarah comes to us and then Lee-Anne like stays out and feels left out and then she goes again.

**Tess:** *Is there anybody else in your group who will then go with Lee-Anne and support her? Or does she stand on her own?*

**Mandy:** Yeah, then she goes and plays with other girls... I think her best friend is Abbey and then she plays with her.

**Tess:** *So, is she like a go-between, moving between groups of friends?*

**Mandy:** Yeah, we are like her replacements.

**Tess:** *What do you mean by that?*

**Mandy:** Well, when she is bored by the one group she then moves over to the other. She is very... like... she's sometimes very mean.

**Tess:** *What does she do when she is mean?*

**Mandy:** She does sometimes ignore people and she... we find it very irritating when she goes from group to group, and she... uhmmm... we were all fighting with her once and... uhmmm, we would tell her how we feel about her and then she took it so personally... we said to her first of all, "Lee-Anne, you can't get irritated or sad or anything", but then she goes and does it...

**Tess:** *Maybe it was very difficult for her to hear those things..?*

**Mandy:** Yeah... I guess... Well, before this happened, Lee-Anne was friends with everyone and we were all fighting with Abbey, so then, we... like none of us... we all hated Abbey... I don't know why... it's like... and then, we were all like sitting in a line and Abbey would be like here and I don't know who came up with this but then we were like, "Ok Abbey, we really don't want you to be in our group and then she took it so personally and then she went to go tell the teacher... Ms Andrews... so then Ms Andrews spoke to us all and sorted it all out and then we were friends... So then the next day we go to her class and we're like all fighting with each other again...

**Tess:** *Why did you all fight with each other again?*

**Mandy:** I don't know... maybe we were getting restless with each other... or boredom... So then we walked into Ms Andrews's class and we were like all crying because we had to say stuff about what was going on at home and if things were troubling us... So we all started crying because we were like saying lots of sad stuff. Like Kyra mentioned how her dad goes into hospital every month because he has something wrong with his foot and has operations every month. And if they have to operate one more time, they may have to amputate his leg... So we were all crying about that. Someone else had someone die in their family recently... and then Abbey, she... we never knew, because we all had chances to speak and it was Abbey's turn and she just kept on crying, so we thought ok she doesn't want to talk and so we went on again and we said something else. Later she says, "No, you guys never give me chance", and before she said that she said "you guys are driving me insane! I'm going to leave the school because of you guys"... and everything. And then like we took it personally so then Ms Andrews came in again and Ms Andrews's like, "go to the sick-room", ... like the sick room is like with beds and...

**Tess:** *Hmmm...*

**Mandy:** So then we all wanted to go to the sick room except Abbey, because we were like all crying and hysterical and everything,... so we all wanted to go there, and sit on the bed and we had like rescue tablets. And then... so we went there and then Abbey came in and Lee-Anne's like, uhmmm,... to Abbey, she's like, "So Abbey, why did you call us insane and then Abbey stomped off and is like "ach, whatever, Lee-Anne!" and then, so, uhmm... then Lee-Anne and Abbey were fighting and then all of us had to go out and then I said... Abbey, no... Abbey stayed there and then we all went out and Abbey was still in the sick room, and then when Abbey came out, then she was all fighting with the group... So then, Lee-Anne and Abbey were fighting with each other.

...So then the next day Mr Grey, he's the leader of the aftercare, heard about it and spoke to Ms Drake and then Ms Drake took us and everything and then we had to go do that thing with Ms Drake where we had to sit in a circle and talk about each others feelings and stuff, and... Uhmm... and like, we did... well she just asked us questions like, "how do you think Abbey feels", and how... what have we done to Abbey and everything, and then we said that and everything and then we were all friends with Abbey and then the next thing, me and Kyra started fighting, I don't know what about actually, and the whole group went to Cirara's side and everything and like I was like alone and everything, but then an hour later we were like all friends again. I don't know how.

**Tess:** *But, how does that feel when you are excluded that quickly and then... how much trust do you have in the other people, if that can happen so quickly? Do you trust your friends completely, for them not to turn their backs on you suddenly?*

**Mandy:** Yeah, well, 'cos Kyra was crying so they obviously went to her... because I don't know what we were fighting over...

**Tess:** *How did you feel then, when that happened?*

**Mandy:** Uhmmm, well it started because earlier on, because we were all fighting, we were in the quad, which is like a grassy area where we all sit, and then I had a dream and I only told Sarah and Beatrice... so then I told them and then everyone was like looking at me, like... because we made deal that if we tell secrets or something, we have to tell the other people or we have to go out of the group. So they all thought this was a secret and were like shouting at me saying "no, you can't do that, 'cos it's a secret!" and everything... I was trying to tell them then that "It's a dream and..."so they said, "well why don't you tell us if it's a dream" and then I tried to explain that it's a personal dream. So then, uhmmm, they got all mad on me,... they got all mad with me, so then I was like "ok, guys, I don't want to cause any more problems so I just left the group... uhmm, for like a day or something..."

**Tess:** *What did you do in that time?*

**Mandy:** Uhmm, well Sarah, Beatrice and Reece came with me and then like we formed a group for the rest of the day and they were still in the other group, and then, I think by the next day, we all got together and everything and said sorry to each other and then we were like all friends again.

**Tess:** *Ok, how often does that happen that there is friction, that there are these arguments?*

**Mandy:** Ughhh, it happens like once a week or something.

**Tess:** *And is it always the same people? Or...*

**Mandy:** No, recently, me and Andrea started fighting... I actually don't know... I can't remember why we started fighting... It was... [pause]

**Tess:** *How do you girls fight? How do you know that you are involved in an argument?*

**Mandy:** Well, we like... we don't particularly shout at them, but we like raise our voice at them and then, like, we ignore each other and walk away from each other and then we know that we are fighting. We then just say to the other people who are with us that uhmm... ach, when this person does this then that irritates me... so that they know where we are coming from... [pause]

**Tess:** *Is there somebody in your group that tends to be more involved in these disagreements than the rest?*

**Mandy:** Uhmmm... no not really... no, we're all good friends now, so...

**Tess:** *Who is your best friend? Do you have a best friend?*

**Mandy:** Well, in the group now, i think Sarah and Kyra are always together, so they are probably best friends. Bronwyn and Andrea are best friends, and then it's only me and Abbey, so... Andrea was saying to me, cos at aftercare we were all writing letters to each other, so Caitlin was saying that why don't I be best friends with Abbey? So I'm like, "Yeah... that's a good idea, uhmm, but I don't think Abbey wants to be best friends with me". So then like we were having a discussion and everything, so... it would be good if like all of us have best friends... so Kyra and Sarah, me and Abbey and Bronwyn and Andrea... so then it would all work out perfectly, but I don't know...

**Tess:** *Is that a problem for you that you don't have a best friend?*

**Mandy:** I was usually best friends with Kyra, but then I was best friends with her for so long and then, uhmmm, so I'm like, "no Kyra, I don't want to be your best friend anymore, but I want to be one of your closest friends". So she's like, "ok" and then she left me alone.

**Tess:** *Wow, it all sounds so disciplined and as though you are all so good and proper with each other... is that how it works? Is it that easy to just discuss things?... I mean, how did Kyra take when you said to her you don't want to be best friends with her anymore?*

**Mandy:** Well she did at first start crying and everything... and then like, everyone told her that she is still gonna be your closest friend and everything and then she got over it and now she's been spending time with Sarah...

**Tess:** *Was she in any way mean to you afterwards or did she show you that she was hurt by comments or any remarks or anything like the that?*

**Mandy:** No, not really...

**Tess:** *Was it difficult for you to tell her that?*

**Mandy:** No, because like Kyra was sitting over here, and I was standing over here, like... around the corner [indicates that she was standing around the corner from where Kyra was sitting]... and then someone... I think, Lee-Anne... Lee-Anne came up to me and then I'm like, Lee-Anne come here quickly and then I told Lee-Anne to go tell Kyra and then Kyra told Lee-Anne to tell me and everything, so we like passed the message on that way...

**Tess:** *So Lee-Anne was the person that was in between...*

**Mandy:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *So you and Kyra didn't even talk to each other face to face... why is that?*

**Mandy:** I don't know... probably scared or something...

**Tess:** *Was it easier to go through another person?*

**Mandy:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *How did you think she might react?*

**Mandy:** Uhmmm, well, I knew she was going to cry, but... yeah, she got over it very quickly... like by the end of break she stopped.

**Tess:** *Is there anyone in your group that you find can be quite mean or even bitchy at times?*

**Mandy:** Well, Abbey is like the leader of the group, so she does get... not mean or anything, but she like sometimes bosses everyone around and everything... but she only does this like once a week or everything... but, yeah, so... she... everyone is good friends with her, but sometimes she can be a bit bossy and like tell you what to do or something.

**Tess:** *Why would you say she is the leader? What makes her the leader and not you for example?*

**Mandy:** I don't know. Like... everyone looks up to her and... I used to be the leader and then... I think because I had a fight with someone or someone had a fight with me or something, then... so then, everyone just moved on to Abbey... I think we all take turns... so like next will be Sarah or Kyra or something like that... 'Cos we had FamSA – we have FamSA every Thursday... I don't know what it stands for but... they talk about what happens in your life and everything and were talking about our hormones and everything and they were like saying that your hormones are starting now... so you do get really moody and like Abbey does get really moody. She has severe mood swing. Like one minute she's happy and the next minute she's very grumpy. So they were talking about how your hormones are going to cause mood swings and how you are going to be quite angry and sad and everything, so...

**Tess:** *Did it make sense to you? Did that put things into perspective for you as well?*

**Mandy:** Yeah... that... 'cos when the lady like said that, I like looked at Abbey and I'm like, wow... Abbey she means you, 'cos that's like what she does.



**Tess:** *And do you feel like that sometimes? Do you feel quite moody?*

**Mandy:** Yeah... sometimes, but I don't take it out on the other people, I just like turn red and go somewhere alone.

**Tess:** *What do you do when you are alone? 'Cos you said there was one day where you had fights and everybody went with the other girl... how does that feel for you when you are on your own?*

**Mandy:** Well when I was fighting with Andrea, it was me and Lee-Anne and all of the other group. 'Cos is was friends with Lee-Anne and all of the other people hated Lee-Anne. So I was friends with Lee-Anne, cos I had no one else to play with. So I played with Lee-Anne and everything and then I went up to Andrea and I said like "hey Andrea, you know why I am fighting with you, it's because you always leave us out and everything" because we were like playing this game... it was almost like touches where she touched a tree that wasn't a tree and if you touch a tree, you're like 'on'. That wasn't a proper tree. So she touched it I'm like, "Andrea, you're on" and she's like "no I'm not! You didn't touch me!" so then I'm like, "ok, nevermind, I'll be on". And then she got all "no it's fine, I'll be on" and so I'm like "No, Andrea, I'll be on". So we started this whole fight about who's on and everything. So then she walked away and the rest of the group walked off and then I walked away and then Lee-Anne followed me. Then they went down to the field. So then me and Lee-Anne went up to Andrea and I was like "look Andrea, I'm really sorry and everything, but uhmm... look... we don't know why we started fighting and everything, it's probably because you guys all leave me and Lee-Anne out"... because they do, they were like all talking and me and Lee-Anne were just standing there watching them and everything and then they would like look at us and then look away or whisper too each other and stop when we arrive...

**Tess:** *Do they do that on purpose? What do they do to make you really feel as tough you are not part of the group?*

**Mandy:** Well they ignore us and everything... and they leave us out... 'cos like... they were sitting over there and me and Lee-Anne were sitting over here [indicating some separation in the group with space between her and Lee-Anne and the rest of the group]... and then they kept on talking and everything...

**Tess:** *Do they make it quite obvious that they are not wanting to include you or...*

**Mandy:** No... I don't think so... I don't think they do it on purpose. I think it happens by accident or something... I don't think they do it on purpose.

**Tess:** *Has it ever happened to you where you felt somebody did want to make you feel hurt on purpose?*

**Mandy:** Uhhh... no I don't think so... but when we were all fighting with Abbey, uhhh... I think we did leave her out on purpose... I don't know why actually, but we were all leaving her out and everything. And then when Ms Drake came, she's like... "so did you purposefully leave Abbey out?" and we were like "Yeah" and everything... and she's like "why?" and then we like "we don't actually know", so she's like "uh... ok", and then like... so then like we all had to say sorry to each other and then we were friends again.

**Tess:** *So the teachers really seem quite involved in resolving issues amongst your group.*

**Mandy:** Yeah, because there's a lot of bullying going on at our school, and like we have a bully box, so if you like bully someone verbally or physically or emotionally, or whatever... then your name gets put in the box and then if its put in there more than three times then you have to tell the teacher and it's like... you have to phone your parents and you have to do, uhhh... what's that thing called... uhhh... it's almost like detention, but we have to go to a different school that's like for people with disabilities... and I don't know what its called, but we have to do community service and we... if it doesn't get fixed

in like two weeks then we have to go to a psychologist and we have to go to the principal.

**Tess:** *Wow, so no wonder in your group it seems like there is not much bullying going on...*

**Mandy:** Uhum...

**Tess:** *Do you know anything about bullying? Not necessarily only physical, but maybe something less obvious...? What's happened in your school that you can think of that would be called bullying?*

**Mandy:** Hmmm...

**Tess:** *...Because there must have been a reason why that bully box was put there?*

**Mandy:** No, it's because like lots of other people are getting bullied, because there's this gang in our grade with Tracy and all these popular people. And they always like gang up on all the other people and everything... and so we went into one of the teacher's rooms... all of us, like all the Grade sixes and seven girls and we were all speaking about it there and so they asked us like who has all been bullied by these people and two or three people put up their hands... so like... it's mostly to do with the boys and the girls and... I think it's like for the whole school, you know, like, if somebody bullies you verbally or physically...

**Tess:** *Well, explain to me what groups do you have in your grade, because you say you've got the popular girls and that... explain to me what groups do you have?*

**Mandy:** Uhhh... well... like Tracy and Coenie are like the popular, very popular people...

**Tess:** *Why are they popular?*

**Mandy:** I don't know, like everyone just says that they are the popular girls. They hang around boys most of the time and then like... 'cos, then all of my friends are like library monitors so they're like... they're not goody-two-shoes, but they're like a little better at their school work than the popular people... those are the only groups I know of, I don't know of any other groups actually.

**Tess:** *And in your class,... are all of the girls from your group in the same class?*

**Mandy:** No, I'm the only one in my class. Andrea, Kyra, and Abbey and Lee-Anne are in the same class. Then Bronwyn and Sarah are in the same class... so I'm the only one in my class.

**Tess:** *Does that make it difficult for you sometimes?*

**Mandy:** No, because I've got Nomsa and Nicole and Ashika and all these other people in my class that are my class friends.

**Tess:** *So you've got class friends and you've got break friends?*

**Mandy:** I guess so... 'cos they are the only people in my class that I get on well with. Like there's Tanjica who nobody really gets on well with.

**Tess:** *Why does nobody get on with Tanjica...*

**Mandy:** I don't know... 'cos her and Ashika had a fight and everything and Tanjica was so racist she was like, "Ashika, if I were you I would like stop acting white and start acting like an Indian", so then Ashika took that like really personally and then they were calling each other sluts and everything and then they took it to the teacher who then shouted at them and then for the rest of the day they had to like say nice things to each other otherwise they like

had to be quiet. So they aren't friends now... they're only hello and good-bye friends.

**Tess:** *Is it still going on now? Do they still fight?*

**Mandy:** I don't know. I think they just ignore each other or they're totally not friends... I don't think they'll ever be friends.

**Tess:** *So do you think they are trying to make people take sides?*

**Mandy:** No I don't think so... [pause]

**Tess:** *So, Megs, you are in Grade 6 now... are you friends with any of the older girls in your school?*

**Mandy:** Uhmmm, I stick more to the people in my grade...

**Tess:** *How many people are there in your grade?*

**Mandy:** About 200. there's about 800 in our school.

**Tess:** *Oh alright... so it seems like a fairly big school... have you ever been friends with anyone whom you are no longer friends with?*

**Mandy:** Uhmm...[pause]

**Tess:** *Did you ever have a bad experience when it comes to friendships?*

**Mandy:** With Candice, Cass and Joanne. 'cos they're very pretty and everything, so they like hang out with Alex, Matthew, Ernest, and Bradley,... so they hang out at break with each other and the... I was best friends with Candice for like three years and then we like had a fight when we were playing cards and she was like cheating or something so then Joanne and her went and then I stayed with the group. So I asked if I could play with the cards,

so we played with the cards...so then she comes and everything and she was just standing there, so me and Beatrice were like... while she was coming, just pretending to play, because we had just started, so we quickly laid the cards out and we're like going hmmm... and we started playing and comes and she just stands there like this [arms crossed], so then I just said to her "jeez Candice, you're so irritating!" and then I just gave her the cards and then she wasn't my friend. Like, because she was just standing there... she stood there for like ten minutes without saying anything... she was really irritating me and Beatrice by just standing there and not saying anything, and she wanted her cards... you could see she wanted cards but she didn't want to say anything! So I gave her her cards back and for the rest of the week she like wasn't my friend anymore. And then she and Joanne became best friend and they were like best friends for a year... and her and Joanne had a big like fight and then she went to Florence and then like her and Florence were best friends and then they invited Joanne back into the group again, but when Joanne went back into the group Candice and Florence had become best friends and Joanne was just there.

**Tess:** *It seems like you're not allowed to have more than one best friend...*

**Mandy:** You are, but there's like always one person in your group that you trust the most... so they fought with Joanne and then Joanne went out of the group... I don't know why actually, so, I was in the group again and then like... 'cos I was still friends with Abbey and all of them and then I told Abbey this is my first time I'm going to be friends with Candice again in a long time, so I'm just going to play with her. So, they had said "Ok, that's fine" and everything. So I played with Candice for like two weeks and then uhmmm... they just went... when Joanne came into the group, I really didn't like Joanne, 'cos she like took Candice away from me and everything.

**Tess:** *Did you feel threatened by her when she came back into the group?... that she might take your friend away from you again?*

**Mandy:** Yeah... that's why I just left the group... like... I didn't... I don't want to get involved with her again or anything...

**Tess:** *And where did you go to then?*

**Mandy:** Abbey's group again...

**Tess:** *You seem to be moving around between groups quite a bit, is that something that every girl does?*

**Mandy:** Pretty much...

**Tess:** *So friendships are not completely stable?*

**Mandy:** No... not at all... [pause]

**Tess:** *But it sound like you girls really manage to talk to each other quite openly... or is there stuff that happens beneath the surface that you don't speak about?*

**Mandy:** No, not really... it's just like... you don't tell anybody who you truly like... because, I don't tell anyone who I like... I've only told Candice and me and Candice signed a deal and we had a witness, Shawn, and it said that if she tells anyone who I like, she owes me R300.00 and, uhmm... so then at camp out they were all sitting there and when I got there Bronwyn and Sarah were like "please tell me who Mandy likes, please"and Candice's like, "no I can't, otherwise I owe Mandy R300.00". So they were like "please, please, please, she won't know", so Candice said, "well, unless you have R300.00 all of you, then I'll tell you, otherwise I can't tell you". So like I was really surprised by her when she didn't tell them. So that's the only person I've told.

**Tess:** *What are you afraid people will do if they knew who you like?*

**Mandy:** I don't know... I'd be scared that they would tell someone...

**Tess:** *Tell the guy you like?*

**Mandy:** Yeah... or tell any other person...

**Tess:** *Why, are secrets difficult to keep in school?*

**Mandy:** No... it's just... I don't know actually... I just don't tell anyone about my secrets...

**Tess:** *Megs, are there ever days where you feel angry or frustrated or hurt when you come home from school... if there's something that has happened at school that has really bothered you?*

**Mandy:** No, not really...

**Tess:** *So you all treat each other quite well?*

**Mandy:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *Have there been times when you didn't?*

**Mandy:** Yeah it was at the time when we were all fighting with Abbey, where we were all like, being mean to her and making her cry...

**Tess:** *Give me an image, because I'm struggling to imagine what really happened... what went down?... I mean, things have obviously changed since then, but, what happened there?*

**Mandy:** Like... uhmmm, we ignored her and left her out and everything...

**Tess:** *How did you ignore her... I mean, how do you show a person that you are ignoring them?*



**Mandy:** Like, when she talked we would look away and talk to another friend or something... I don't know... that's basically all, and then she got fed up with it and then she went to go tell the teacher and then she sorted it all out.

**Tess:** *How long did that last?*

**Mandy:** Uhmmm, only for like a day and then the teacher sorted it out... She [Abbey] used to like bring up the past and everything... like... say me and Andrea fought and then she would say like "oh Andrea, remember the time when you and Mandy fought, oh, that was so funny!" and stuff. And then me and Andrea would look at each other and go like "Ok, Abbey, whatever...". So she like really irritated us. Or when something good would happen then she would say "oh, that's so bad" or something. Or when she like got a good mark, like 85% or something she's like "oh that's so bad", whilst the others got like 60%. And then the other person feels so bad 'cos she got like 85% and says that's bad.

**Tess:** *Why do you think she does that?*

**Mandy:** Ms Vorster said she probably does that because that is her way of living and that she probably has to get like 92% to think that that's good. Or like, even though she gets like 80% or something, she like tries to get higher marks because that is like her standard of living basically. Or like her mom makes her get 90% otherwise she's grounded or something. So that's probably what happens...

**Tess:** *And why do you think she brings up the past or tries to stir up stuff between you and your other friends?*

**Mandy:** It's probably a habit.

**Tess:** *Is she a nice girl to be around?*

**Mandy:** She's a very nice girl to be around.

**Tess:** *So if you had to describe her, how would you describe her?*

**Mandy:** She's friendly, she's quite noisy... she like when you're fighting or you've had a bad day, she's always there to help you... so yeah...

**Tess:** *Ok, so she's got good qualities as well.*

**Mandy:** Yeah.

**Tess:** *Megs, I was wondering if we can do a little drawing. What I sometimes ask people to do is to represent their family or people close to them by drawing circles on a page. What then happens is that people draw these circles in such a way where one can see who is close to who and who speaks to whom. That usually gives me a better idea about how each person is seen in the group.*

**Mandy:** Ok... so do you want me to draw circles and write their names in them?

**Tess:** *Yeah, and then later I will maybe ask you how you would describe them and what stands out about each particular person according to you.*

**Mandy:** Like you asked me about Abbey?

**Tess:** *Yes, pretty much...*

**Mandy:** Ok.

**Tess:** *You can also play around with the sizes of each circle, like, if a person maybe features more strongly in the group or is more dominant, you can make their circle bigger.*

[Starts drawing]

**Mandy:** Can I draw arrows?

**Tess:** *Yeah... you can draw arrows, you can draw whatever highlights what is happening between the people...*

**Mandy:** Like that!?

**Tess:** *Uhhh... good.*

**Mandy:** ...'cos like... these will always stick together and like, here's the circle of friends [drew new image where a larger circle is in the centre with a smaller circle 'orbiting' around it]... you could say this is where we are... like Mandy... me, Andrea, Bronwyn and Abbey are always over here [big circle] and then they are like either two steps in front or two steps behind [smaller circles].

**Tess:** *Why does that happen?*

**Mandy:** I don't know...

**Tess:** *Would you say that you are closer [pointing at her, Bronwyn, Andrea and Abbey's combined circles]*

**Mandy:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *Ok... and is it these two that were saying that you should become best friends with Abbey [pointing at the four combined circles, specifically Andrea and Bronwyn].*

**Mandy:** Yup...

**Tess:** *So why don't you become best friends with Abbey?*

**Mandy:** Uhmm... [smiles nervously], well I don't mind being best friends with her...'cos I did ask her one day like, five days ago if she wants a best friend and she said, no, I don't want a best friend I just want a close friend... like lots of close friends and not a best friend.

**Tess:** *What does it mean to be a best friend to someone?*

**Mandy:** Look,... to have a best friend you have to like trust the person, like if there's something top, top secret then you would only tell your best friend or something... like, if your best friend tells you something, then you can't tell anyone else.

**Tess:** *So it's a very special, exclusive bond almost... so how do these bonds break?*

**Mandy:** Uhmmm... like maybe if like say... Kyra tells Sarah something and Sarah goes and tells Lee-Anne what she said. So then Kyra and Sarah can no longer be best friends and they just become normal friends.

**Tess:** *Do they sometimes become enemies... people that break up like that?*

**Mandy:** Not really because, like, maybe either Sarah or Kyra would go out of the group for just like an hour or something and then like they would come back again and say sorry to each other and then they would be friends again.

**Tess:** *Is it that easy?*

**Mandy:** That's what happens with me.

**Tess:** *Now, you have put Lee-Anne in this picture as well [pointing at the kinetic drawing – she was added last]... Lee-Anne was the one fighting with Sarah, is that right?*

**Mandy:** Uhumm...

**Tess:** *So, you are also friends with Lee-Anne?*

**Mandy:** Yeah, so it would be like this,... but when Lee-Anne joins the group she would then fit in over here [placing Lee-Anne next to her circle with a connecting line]... but not... well I'm sure she would fit in with Bronwyn and Abbey, but not as much with me.

**Tess:** *But you just put her there with you [referring to the connection between her and Lee-Anne]? Why would she not fit with you when you are in the group but she would fit if you are on your own?*

**Mandy:** Uhhmm...

**Tess:** *Am I understanding you right... it seems you would be happier being with her on your own but not when you are in the group with other people.*

**Mandy:** No... well, I get on well with Lee-Anne, it's just that I don't think the rest of the group is that close to her.

**Tess:** *What would happen to you if you brought her into the group?*

**Mandy:** I don't think anything would happen?

**Tess:** *Would anyone have an issue with you if you brought Lee-Anne in the group?*

**Mandy:** No, even today at aftercare, we like played together and everyone else said it's fine, it's fine, so there wasn't really a problem and then she left about ten minutes later.

**Tess:** *So are you ever worried about your friendships?*

**Mandy:** Uhmm... no, not really... well the other day at camp out... so I was friends with Candice again and then when I arrived at camp out, Candice was already there and when I arrive there Candice just ignores me. And I don't know what I did to Candice and then Abbey arrives and Candice tells Abbey something and then Abbey comes to me and Abbey tells me that Candice calls me a pig and then... I say to Abbey, "Abbey, I thought you were my friend" and then Abbey says "ja, but I'm also Candice's friend" and then I walked off and everything and then like I walked along with Andrea and Nomsa and then we were walking around the school and everything and then Beatrice and Candice just came and Beatrice and Reece... and then Beatrice said something that Candice had said to her and then I'm like, "Beatrice, you're supposed to be my friend also but you always take Candice's side" and Beatrice's like "you don't always have to just assume things" and then Reece just butted in and so then they go and then it was only me and Nomsa because Andrea went up to Candice now and... then it was only me and Nomsa walking around the school... and then the next day I was so scared because I wasn't going to be friends with any of them and that I wouldn't have anyone to play with. And then Abbey, Andrea... No, the next day, sorry... I said sorry to Abbey, Bronwyn...

**Tess:** *What did you apologise for?*

**Mandy:** I don't know... for like, blaming them for going to Candice or something, and then we go and sit down and we all apologise to each other and then... I wasn't friends with two of them or something, with Beatrice and Reece... and I was so scared and everything and I told my mother... I think I was crying in the car... because I've like known Beatrice since like nursery school and I don't want to fight with her or anything...

**Tess:** *What were you worried about or scared about?*

**Mandy:** Well, I don't know, cos I was like scared that they would go and play with Candice again...

**Tess:** *It sounds like, and correct me if I'm wrong, that there's a lot of replacement of people... like, if you can't be with this one, then that one will do, but you'd rather be with the other one. Does that happen?*

**Mandy:** I guess so...

**Tess:** *Who would be the person you would want to be best friends with?*

**Mandy:** Uhhmm... I do want to be best friends with Abbey. Like, yesterday at aftercare we spend some times together, writing notes to each other.

**Tess:** *So what do you write to each other?*

[pulls out a note]

**Mandy:** Well, here I was sending this to Andrea, "so how's life?" and she wrote "cool", so I said, "Cool, mine's hundreds" and then I wrote "sorry about the other day", - because we were fighting - and she wrote back "cool, it's fine, me too". So I wrote, " do you like: Me? -Yes, Abbey? -Yes, Kyra?- Yes; Sarah? -Yes; Bronwyn? -Yes, Lee-Anne? -Yes, Reece? -Yes, Candice? -Sort of, Joanne? -Sort of; Florence? -No, - and then she asked "and you?" and I wrote "all the same!". Then she asked, "Who do you like, be honest!" and I'm like, "I really can't tell you, sorry!" she replied "That's alright, well I like Joss" so I write back "Oh cutiepie!" and then she wrote "oh shut up man, but you can't tell no one!" So then she's like "Who's your BFF [best friends forever] and I wrote back "no one and you?" so she wrote "correct me if I'm wrong, but you and Abbey get on well so you guys could be best friends" so I'm like, "yeah, I know, cos Kyra and Sarah are best friends I think, you and Bronwyn are best friends, so me and Abbey could be best friends". So she replied "exactly"... and ja... that's all.

**Tess:** *So is that how notes or letters are written usually... is it almost a way of figuring out where everybody is at. Like how you are in relation to the other people.*

**Mandy:** Yes...

**Tess:** *And how often does that happen, every day?*

**Mandy:** No, I don't think so...

**Tess:** *When do you feel the need to check how other feel about each other?*

**Mandy:** Uhhh, you can do it whenever you want actually... like, say I write a letter to Abbey, then it would be like this [writes a format on a piece of paper]:

To: Abbey

From: Megs

Time:

Place: ... "like home or something"

Mood: "Happy or sad or whatever"

MESSAGE

"And then you just write..."

**Tess:** *And what would you write in the letter?*

**Mandy:** Ach, like who's your best friend? Who do you like? And what do you think of this person, that person...

**Tess:** *It seems quite important, like how you feel about other people and that everyone seems to check where they're at?*

**Mandy:** Uhummm...

**Tess:** *... do you like that or do you sometimes feel it is quite invasive or nosey?*



**Mandy:** Uhhmm, no...

**Tess:** *Do you think it is necessary or important to write notes to each other?*

**Mandy:** No, it's not necessary as such, but like say me and Lee-Anne are best friends and say I wrote a letter to Sarah saying "do you like Lee-Anne?" and Sarah says "no", then I'll just know that I wouldn't take Lee-Anne near Sarah.

**Tess:** *So it gives you an idea of who you can combine with whom...*

**Mandy:** ... and who you can invite to a party together.

**Tess:** *So when did you start writing messages to each other?*

**Mandy:** Oh, its something we've started doing probably last year... but we've always written stuff to each other.

**Tess:** *So how long has this group been going?*

**Mandy:** I think like since the beginning of the term...

**Tess:** *Ok, so its not that old... and before then? What was your group like?*

**Mandy:** I was in a group with really Candice and then Florence came and Joanne came and then I left and made a group with Abbey and uhhmm...

**Tess:** *How did you feel then? When this whole friendship with Candice broke down? Describe to me how you felt...*

**Mandy:** Sad... I mean, we were friends for three years and then all of a sudden we weren't friends anymore... we still like say hello and goodbye and things like that to each other, but were not like play friends...

**Tess:** *And were you mainly sad or were there also other feelings? Were you worried at times that you may not find another friend?...*

**Mandy:** No, not really... I knew the other girls already... it's just that we weren't play friends yet, so I still had to approach them [pause].

**Tess:** *So, if you don't mind, can we maybe look at the people in your group again and can you write down next to their names the main descriptions that come to mind for each of them [wrote out a list of the names and the descriptions for each next to them] ...Is there anything else you can think of for any of them?*

**Mandy:** Those are the main ones.

**Tess:** *Ok...now... if all these people were in different positions, like either sitting, standing, or lying down, what positions would they be in*

[allocating positions to each name]

*... That was quick!... and you seem to be quite sure of who's doing what... what made you so sure about it?*

**Mandy:** 'Cos that's what they always do...

**Tess:** *Is it what they physically seem to do with their bodies?... some lie, some sit...*

**Mandy:** That's just what came to mind first.

**Tess:** *Ok Megs, I think that's it... is there anything you would still like to add or to say about what we've spoken about. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?*

**Mandy:** No... can't think of anything else.

**Tess:** *Well, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you and for being so honest and open about your experience.*

## **APPENDIX II**

### **INTERVIEW WITH CAROLINE**

*Tess: Thank you for doing this interview with me, Caroline. As I mentioned previously this is not a structured interview as such, so we're just going to see where it takes us. So, Caroline... tell me a bit about what happens at school... Are there lots of fights at school?*

**Caroline:** Uhmm there's a little bit of fights... we have like about once a week sort of... but it's not fights where I'm usually involved. It's like mainly grade sevens against grade sixes or grade sixes with grade sixes... yeah...

*Tess: So it's bigger groups rather than one or two people...?*

**Caroline:** Well like one person will fight with another person and their group and their friends and everything will like come to each side...

*Tess: Ok... so people will take sides...*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

*Tess: So what happens if you're like friends with both people involved? Does that ever happen?*

**Caroline:** Uhmm... see... my friends often have fights with people I don't like...so I'll take their side, not the other person's side... I'll take their side...

*Tess: Ok,... but what do they fights about?*

**Caroline:** They either fight over guys or if other people are calling them names... or yeah... if other people spread rumours about them...

*Tess: Spreading rumours...like what happens then?*

**Caroline:** Other people... they're like... I think there was a fight like last week or the week before where there was a girl in grade seven like spreading rumours about a girl in grade six, saying that she's like a bitch and everything and then they had a fight and then,... her name's Kate... not the one that was spreading rumours but the one she was fighting against, and then they had to write letters to their moms and then they had to come in for a meeting and everything...

**Tess:** *Letter to their moms- saying what?*

**Caroline:** Saying..., that we go around calling people names and having guy... what do you call them...telling guys to go and beat the girls up and... yeah... that's what they had to write...

**Tess:** *Tell me more about what they actually do, because telling guys to beat girls up and... like what other tactics do they use because that's quite... that's the first time I've heard about something like that actually...*

**Caroline:** They call them names and then go and spread rumours about them and that's like how they fight... that's like how the fight begins... especially if the other person finds out...

**Tess:** *Yeah...*

**Caroline:** Like if I had to like spread a rumour about Maggie and she had to find out... then that's how we would start a fight

**Tess:** *What would the person that you are spreading rumours about do then... would they retaliate? Would they do something pretty much at the same level... like spread rumours about the other person then... or how would they fight against that?*

**Caroline:** No... they'll come up to you and say like... "why did you say this about me" and like talk to you... not talk to you, more like fight with you sort of... and... yeah...

**Tess:** *Do they resolve problems that way?*

**Caroline:** Well... mainly the teachers get involved... the teachers come and like, either you've got to go to counselling...I've never been to counselling... uhhh... yeah... they get sent to counselling...

**Tess:** *What would happen if the teacher's didn't get involved?*

**Caroline:** It would probably just carry on...

**Tess:** *And is there an example that you can... you gave me a good example with Kate for example where the other girl was spreading the rumours and that...*

**Caroline:** Well there was another fight last year... actually one girl hit another girl, Candy... I think she was also in grade six... she hit Candy and they both had to go to the principal's office... and... yeah.. I don't know what they did after that 'cos Candy wasn't really my friend... so, can't tell you the end of the story...

**Tess:** *Do you have a big circle of friends? Small circle of friends?*

**Caroline:** Uhhh... small circle of friends...

**Tess:** *Do you like it that way... why..?*

**Caroline:** Well... if you have a big group of friends you can't really have a best friend. So... I've only got two friends... I've got Candy and Jennifer...Jennifer's my best friend though.

**Tess:** *And Candy? Who's best friend is she?*

**Caroline:** Candy doesn't have a best friend... she's just our friend.

**Tess:** *Three people together can sometimes be quite difficult...*

**Caroline:** Sometimes... because say now me and Jennifer gang up on Candy, or they gang up on me... then we'll fight...

**Tess:** *So there's always one person out almost... like the odd one out?*

**Caroline:** Yes... yeah, but with me and Candy and Jennifer, we don't often fight...

**Tess:** *And how long have you been friends for?*

**Caroline:** Quite a long time... well see...me and Jennifer had a fight and then we became friends again... when me and Jennifer were fighting I played with Maggie... now me and Jennifer are friends again... but yeah... we don't really fight much.

**Tess:** *And is there a lot of trust in that friendship... because if you fight and then become friends again, is there still a bit of a feeling of uncertainty sometime?*

**Caroline:** Yes... sometimes... see I used to be best friends with Candy but then I don't know what happened... we just grew apart sort of...

**Tess:** *Ok... I guess that happens as well... in a way it's also a very mature attitude to have, that this is just what happens... I guess sometimes people really want to cling to another person and uhmm... does that happen sometimes? Where people are either very clingy or quite jealous of others?*

**Caroline:** Not often... you see... the one time my other friend Bonny... I went to go with her to get something out of her bag and told Jennifer... Jennifer and Candy to come with us, now Candy doesn't like Bonny, so got all cross because Jennifer was coming along... so Candy was all by herself and got all cross...

**Tess:** *Ok... that in a way is a protectiveness or a clinginess... and Uhhh... is there somebody who is more dominant... or more like a leader in your group?*

**Caroline:** No not really... we're just like... all more equals...

**Tess:** *And in the other groups... do you know whether there are more dominant people in those groups?*

**Caroline:** Well, Maggie has a big group...she's got Constance, Sarah, lots of other girls...and she... none of them have best friends really, except for Connie and Martina, they're best friends... Constance wants to be Martina's best friend, so they... Constance gets jealous sometimes... but... yeah... I don't often like hang with them...they generally stay there up by the library because most of them are like library prefects.

**Tess:** *What does it mean to have a best friend?*

**Caroline:** Uhhh... sort of spend more time with them...not... I would say that I don't ... no, I probably do... but I spend more time with Jennifer... Uhhh, I don't know... she's easier to get along with than Candy... because Candy had a sister and she was also at our school and she was very popular, and Candy became popular and she always used to gang up on me and that's why I can't... I don't really know with her...

**Tess:** *So you guys have a history...*

**Caroline:** Yeah...



**Tess:** *And it wasn't such a nice history...*

**Caroline:** Yeah... not really.

**Tess:** *Why...it's interesting, because it's not the first time I've heard that popular girls have a tendency of being more like bullies... or more like bossy...*

**Caroline:** Yes... Kate's very bossy...

**Tess:** *Why do you think that is?... Is that what makes them popular?...*

**Caroline:** I don't know... I think it's because they think they've got more friends and more friends will gang up on their side, like on their side or be on their side... and that they won't get hurt... sort of.

**Tess:** *Alright... so they've got the numbers and they've got the security in numbers...that's interesting... is there anything else that makes them popular do you think?*

**Caroline:** They hang with the guys I think....

**Tess:** *Does that mean that they are more mature or that they are just more talkative...*

**Caroline:** I think they're a bit more mature... a little bit

**Tess:** *Ok... do they do other stuff as well that seems to make them more popular...? So they have more parties, or do they smoke or drink, or*

**Caroline:** ...one guy in grade six smokes... and he's sort of a popular guy... see, I'm popular like... not on their side, I'm popular, like... Like Maggie and her whole gang say me Jennifer and Candy are popular... Kate says that we're not popular...'cos Kate's got her side that is popular and we've got our

side that's... like not... popular to other people but not to Kate, 'cos she's popular.

**Tess:** *Ok, would you say you're almost in between?*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *...That there's maybe other popular people but in a different way?*

**Caroline:** Yeah... in a different way... and then there's the really not so popular people...

**Tess:** *What groups do you get... if you say you've got the popular groups...what other groups do you get?*

**Caroline:** I don't know really... we don't like have names really for other groups...

**Tess:** *How do you identify who belongs to what group?*

**Caroline:** I don't know you'll probably see them hanging out or something... like Maggie and her friends you'll always see together and like me, Candy and Jennifer are always together... Kate and her whole group is always together... like, I don't know all the other people really... Bonny and Deborah are best friends... and they like spend all their time together because they're in the same class... see like last year Deborah and Lindie were best friends... Lindie now plays with Maggie and Deborah and Bonny are now best friends... Lindie got jealous and went and played with Maggie...

**Tess:** *Ok...*

**Caroline:** They became best friends because they were in the same class...

**Tess:** *I get the sense that there's a lot of swapping around...*

**Caroline:** Yes, swapping of friends...

*Tess: What does that then say about the friendships then... are people replaceable?*

**Caroline:** Some of them...

*Tess: Some of them... and others are definitely for keeps..?*

**Caroline:** Yes,.. like I'm sure if I play with Maggie and she's clear, I don't think I could replace Maggie or Jennifer... but I could replace Bonny... I don't know... Bonny, she like swaps her friends all the time... yeah...

*Tess: And it sounds like Candy, she's not such a close friend to you...*

**Caroline:** No, she's not... we were very close friends and then we grew apart... I don't know why...

*Tess: You don't know why... was there no possible reason you can think of for you to drift apart...?*

**Caroline:** I think because I became best friends with Jennifer again... she didn't want me to become best friends with her again... I think she knew we would become best friends and I think that's why she didn't like... I don't know... because when me and Jennifer are together she just walks away...I don't think she likes Jennifer... and that's why we have become... well, we're still friends but we're not best friends anymore because... because...I think... I don't know why...

*Tess: How does it feel to have two people want to be your best friend?*

**Caroline:** It's hard... because it's hard to choose, especially if you're like both close...

**Tess:** ... And you don't want to disappoint one or the other...

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** ...but you were able to make the decision anyway...

**Caroline:** Uhummm... well Jennifer and I have been best friends for a long time... before we fought we were best friends for a very long time, since the beginning of the year...

**Tess:** Is that a long time...

**Caroline:** Yeah... sort of... it's a long time to have a best friend.

**Tess:** Ok...uhmmm... you said that sometimes the Grade sevens fight with the Grade sixes, does that change the dynamics very much... is there a different style of fighting?

**Caroline:** No, the fighting's the same... it's mostly the same, because most of the Grade sixes are friends with the Grade sevens...

**Tess:** Are you friends with the Grade sevens?

**Caroline:** Ach... some of them but not all of them... like the girls that fought with Kate I've made friends with now...

**Tess:** Interesting... how did that happen?

**Caroline:** [smiles]... uhh, I don't know... we aren't like close friends, we just like say hello to each other when we see each other.

**Tess:** Is there anybody that you're fighting with at the moment or is there anybody that you like have issues with?

**Caroline:** No, not really...

**Tess:** *So you manage to get on well with most people?*

**Caroline:** There's some people I don't even talk to... like some people that Maggie hangs out with I don't talk to, like Lindie, she's so rude to Maggie sometimes that I don't even know why she still spends time with her...

**Tess:** *Tell me a bit more about that... like what do you observe?*

**Caroline:** Because... Maggie... she's quite different to Lindie and they fight over very small things... like the one time we were playing 'four square'... you know what four square is?

**Tess:** *Uhhh, no...*

**Caroline:** It's like where you're standing in like a block sort of thing, you make like a block, and you've got four squares and you play with a ball... and like... the whole gang they weren't playing with Lindie, they always used to gang up on Lindie and try and get Lindie out and that's when they started fighting and throwing the ball at each other... I don't know, they... [pause]

**Tess:** *How do they do that? How do they force people out, or make them feel out?*

**Caroline:** Uhhh, like saying secrets in their face, sort of like torture other people... they don't talk to them out aloud, they like talk in their ears, make it look like you're telling secrets about that person... they do that... or, I don't know...

**Tess:** *Can you think of something else?... like another thing you said before was spreading rumours about other people... what else?*

**Caroline:** Uhhh...I don't know... also swearing at other people... or with rumours you like tell one person, they tell another person and then eventually it gets to someone...

**Tess:** *Do you think the people want the rumour to come out...*

**Caroline:** Like the one's that told the rumour in the first place?

**Tess:** Yes...

**Caroline:** No... you don't want it to go the full round, but you do want to hurt the other person...

**Tess:** *Ok, so it is intended to hurt the other person... why else do people spread rumours? Or why did that group for example want to push Lindie out?*

**Caroline:** Lindie was probably irritating them... so I don't know 'cos I don't play with them... but maybe Lindie was irritating them... or maybe she was trying to take someone out of the group... it's hard to explain...like... say they fight with Lindie and then take someone out of the group for Lindie to play with... like two people gang up on the whole group, sort of...

**Tess:** *Do you think people have a chance against such a big group really?... like what do they do...*

**Caroline:** See now, say Lindie started to fight with them and then some of them might move over to Lindie's side... but they're all friends nowadays...

**Tess:** *Do they become friends really quickly again?*

**Caroline:** Yes, in Maggie's group they do... they become friends quite quickly... Like the other day, Maggie, herself, had a fight with Maggie's whole group, and then she went and then she went up to them and like said, "why

are you guys like ganging up on me” and so then they became friends again...

**Tess:** *Ok... so it's quite... you fight and then you're fine again and... with you, is that similar? Do you have a fight and then...*

**Caroline:** I need some time... if I have a fight with someone... and before I became friends with them again I wait a bit and play with someone else... like when me and Jennifer had a fight, I played with Maggie for like two months or one month or so and then I became friends with Jennifer again...

**Tess:** *Why do you need that break... how does it help you?*

**Caroline:** I don't know,... I can't remember why me and Jennifer fought now, but... I think it's because she knew I was sort of friends with Maggie... and she doesn't... see, Maggie and Jennifer don't like each other... and that's why me and her fought because she thought I was best friends with Maggie and... then we just grew apart...

**Tess:** *And then what happened is you fought with her and spent much more time with Maggie...*

**Caroline:** Yes...

**Tess:** *So it actually backfired on her...?*

**Caroline:** Uhummm...

**Tess:** *Does that give you the space to almost re-evaluate your friendships, like if you're moving away from Jennifer for example, it allow you to think about whether you actually want to be friends with her again... like why do you need that break?*

**Caroline:** I don't know... I think just to think about whether you want to be friends with them or, or maybe if we've been spending too much time with each other, and then we get on each others nerves or something... I don't know...

**Tess:** *That sounds like a valid point, sometimes if you see someone for too long or too often they can get up your nose... in some way... And then after these breaks, when you become friends with people again, is it back to how it used to be, is it better?*

**Caroline:** It's back to how it used to be...

**Tess:** *So it's almost like taking a break from the friendship and then getting back together again... [pause]... You don't believe in quick making up and apologizing...*

**Caroline:** Not really...

**Tess:** *...why don't you think that that's right?*

**Caroline:** Well, if you're in a fight with someone it's not exactly like you can have a fight with them and can make friends with them... if I fight with someone, we have a fight and then leave each other alone, and... yeah...

**Tess:** *Do you fight for small reasons or for big reasons?*

**Caroline:** Mainly for big reasons... me and Maggie fought because, same reason as Jennifer... she thought... she knew I was friends with Jennifer and she doesn't like Jennifer... that's why me and Maggie fought...

**Tess:** *Ok... is the reason for fighting usually because of other friends or the threat of losing a friend*



**Caroline:** Yes... it's usually like... 'cos you know your friend likes another person as well and it's a person that you don't like...

**Tess:** *Ok... so that actually at this point in life seems to be the main thing... friendships... whether you're in or you're out...*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *Is that what you think of most of the time...*

**Caroline:** Yeah... that and school work... and that's all really

**Tess:** *Can that affect your school work?*

**Caroline:** No... - sometimes it does... if I fight with Maggie, that day I might be like... I don't know... not so stable in school, and if I say now... break up with someone then I might also... don't know...

**Tess:** *So it does take an emotional strain on you in some way...*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *Has it ever happened to you that you are alone... friendless?*

**Caroline:** No... there's always someone there to support me.

**Tess:** *That's a good position to be in... are there some people that are on their own pretty much?*

**Caroline:** Not anyone that I know... there's one girl in my class, she's friends with everyone... I don't think she's got any enemies... she's friends with all the Grade seven girls...

**Tess:** *How does she do it?*

**Caroline:** I don't know...

**Tess:** *Describe her to me a bit...*

**Caroline:** She's... she's very like...she's got good school marks, very good... she was our class captain this year for two terms... I don't know... she like plays with different people during break and her friends are very kind... I was her friend...one of her closest friends... like kind...so she'll say to them "hey, I'll just quickly go say hello to those people" or maybe play with them and her friends won't just say to her "oh, you're just going to leave us out!"... That's also depending on her friends sort of... yeah... she's just got a good personality I think... and she doesn't fight a lot 'cos her mom works at the school...

**Tess:** *Ok... bonus! [laughing] ... what else makes her stand out for you?*

**Caroline:** [giggling] ...She's also quite pretty...

**Tess:** *Ok...*

**Caroline:** Uhhh...I don't know... She's in my class... I don't know...

**Tess:** *Do you think some girls are maybe jealous of her... it seems like she's quite popular, hey?*

**Caroline:** Uhum...

**Tess:** *Do you think some girls are maybe jealous of that or get irritated with her seemingly having everything... friends...*

**Caroline:** No, I don't think so... she's like got a very good personality... She's kind.

**Tess:** *So what in an ideal situation is the perfect life for a twelve-year-old, friendship-wise... what's the perfect set-up?*

**Caroline:** Probably like Faye, she's like friends with everyone... probably like that... or like me Jennifer and Candy... but probably with like a bigger group... like Maggie's group... either like Faye or like Maggie's group... uhmm, but I'm quite happy with me, Jennifer and Candy at the moment... 'cos we don't really fight often...

**Tess:** *And when you do fight, how does that usually go down?*

**Caroline:** Well we haven't fought in a long time... uhmm...

**Tess:** *If you guys spend time on weekends together, for example, or you spend a lot of time with Jennifer for instance... what happens then to Candy?*

**Caroline:** She might get a little bit angry, but she doesn't really mind... she also spends a lot of time with Jennifer, so if she does get jealous, there's no reason for me now to get jealous when she is with Jennifer, so she can't blame me for anything...

**Tess:** *Ok... so in a way you're covered because she also spends a lot of time with Jennifer...*

**Caroline:** Yes...

**Tess:** *And you and Candy?*

**Caroline:** See my mom doesn't like Candy's mom... she comes from a very different background to me, because of her sister... her sister's very like a popular person... very popular, and she... learns a lot from her sister...

**Tess:** *Like what?*

**Caroline:** She... she's like... her sisters go out like all the time, like on Friday nights they go to the ice-rink... like her mom just drops her off there on a Friday night and then... I don't know, she hangs around with all the guys...

**Tess:** *So your mom's a bit weary about that...*

**Caroline:** Yeah... and like Jennifer's mom also... and yeah... I'm also... I feel that my mom's a bit hard on me... but I think I will live with it... but Jennifer's mom is also... not as hard as my mom, but she also doesn't like Candy's mom, because she does sort of those things... she's very easy on her children... so when Candy's got a problem, 'cos she's got a lot of money, she'll like give her money and tell her to sort it out and she doesn't like really sort of... Candy's mom... she... I don't know...

**Tess:** *Do you think that makes it easier for Candy sometimes...you say your mom is sometimes quite hard on you, are you...*

**Caroline:** ...I think its because I'm with Candy most of the time and I see how Candy gets treated, and I feel sort of like... jealous... because Candy gets more than I do... and I think that's why is say sometimes my mom's a but hard on me...

**Tess:** *She's got the ropes a bit tighter around you whereas I'm hearing from you that it would be nice to have a bit of freedom and space... and Candy seems to have that...*

**Caroline:** Yes...

**Tess:** *How does she use that though... does she use it wisely or...*

**Caroline:** She takes advantage of it... she like... she's a very lonely person sort of... and she, she like learns a lot from her sister, a very, very lot... and she's most of the time with her sister... and her sisters is very like... I don't

know but like bitchy sort of...and she gets influenced from her sister. I think that's why me and her don't get along...

**Tess:** *And what are the signs of bitchiness?*

**Caroline:** I don't know... it's like... she also starts a lot of fights at school – Candy's sister, she starts a lot of fights and... I don't know...

**Tess:** *Why do you think people are bitchy...*

**Caroline:** Because sometimes they get jealous I think... or they think they're not popular and they want to become popular...

**Tess:** *Does bitchiness go with popularity?*

**Caroline:** In a way...

**Tess:** *Why is that?*

**Caroline:** I don't know... it's... I don't know

**Tess:** *Well looking at the two people you mentioned before, being... Kate? I think... and Faye... both are seemingly popular, but they seem so different... how does that work?*

**Caroline:** Well Kate is the type of person that's not really liked, some people don't like her, in fact a lot of people don't like her, but she thinks people like her and there's always people around her...and Faye is the person that is liked... it's like in a way they're popular for different reasons maybe.

**Tess:** *Would you say that Candy is on her way to being popular in a similar way to Kate or to Faye...*

**Caroline:** Yes... in high school she will be... because she'll be with her sister... she will be very popular, but no one's going to like her sort of...

**Tess:** *So can you be popular and lonely at the same time?... is that how you see Candy almost?*

**Caroline:** Not really... she's popular because she plays with us... Candy... she plays with me and Jennifer and that's why she's popular.

**Tess:** *If she had the choice of playing with Kate, who sounds like she's quite popular... do you think she would trade you in for Kate or somebody else... do you think you are replaceable for Candy?*

**Caroline:** ...uhmm, I don't know... sometimes I feel like she is using us... especially when she plays with Jennifer, 'cos she's with Jennifer most of the time and she'll like say "Jennifer come... I want to tell you something" and I'll like just stand there and wait and yeah... feel like she's using me...

**Tess:** *Do you think sometimes she tries to break you and Jennifer up in some way?*

**Caroline:** Yes... 'cos she wants to be my best friend and... uhmm... when me and Jennifer were playing together we left Candy out because we couldn't get along with her and she's always saying Jennifer took me away from her as a best friend and because of what happened and she... I think that's what's going to happen, she's going to try act like she wants to be Jennifer's best friend and then break me and Jennifer up and become my best friend again...

**Tess:** *Wow... why that... why not just say how it is?*

**Caroline:** I don't know... she's scared because, she scared because she thinks I'll take Jennifer's side and then she's got no friends... because Kate doesn't really like her and Maggie's whole gang doesn't really like her... and as I said Bonny also doesn't really like her...

**Tess:** *You said you are friends with Bonny as well... how does she then fit in, why is she not part of your bigger group?*

**Caroline:** She's just like... she's not like my close friend, but like if me and her both have no one to play with then we will like play with each other... like I wouldn't exactly go and do that with someone else... but if we both have no friends then we'll play with each other...

**Tess:** *Do you think... that she is trustworthy?*

**Caroline:** Ach... I'm sure she'll like go and tell a secret that I've told her or something but she is quite trustworthy.

**Tess:** *Do you think people ever talk badly behind your back?*

**Caroline:** Yes.

**Tess:** *Does that happen often?*

**Caroline:** No, not really...

**Tess:** *And what do you do when you find out...*

**Caroline:** I just leave it or maybe I'll retaliate... if it's bad... really bad

**Tess:** *In what way?*

**Caroline:** Well... if they spread a rumour... say they spread a rumour then I might go spread a rumour about them...

**Tess:** *And if it's not so bad then you'll just leave it...*

**Caroline:** Yeah... I'll probably go and tell a teacher...

**Tess:** *Do they sometimes... these situations, do they sometimes resolve themselves if you sit it out and let it be it just dies down eventually... is that the attitude that you sometimes have...*

**Caroline:** Yeah... like me and Lindie... Lindie and Deborah were best friends... now in Grade five, Lindie and Deborah were in the same class as me and Maggie... and we used to gang upon each other, us... we used to have big fights in class especially... and it got quite bad one day and Maggie and Lindie had this big fight... then we all became friends again... after a long time though...

**Tess:** *What was happening there?*

**Caroline:** I don't know... she... Lindie had a problem with me and Maggie... I don't know why... and like me and Deborah were like friends with all of them and then because Maggie started fighting with Lindie, I had to take Maggie's side 'cos I was like best friends with Maggie, and that's how I started being against Lindie sort of... but I didn't really get involved, it was Maggie and Lindie that were fighting a lot... I don't think they liked each other...

**Tess:** *Just a different personality... so it wasn't really for gaining anything, or...*

**Caroline:** No...

**Tess:** *And then they became friends... are they friends now?*

**Caroline:** I think so... yeah...

**Tess:** *And you're still not keen on Lindie...*



**Caroline:** Uhmm, I'm still friends with Lindie, I'm not like... I'd rather play with Bonny than Lindie, uhmm, but yeah...she's not like my biggest mate but I'll see her now and then...

*Tess: Ok... you said to me that sometimes there are people that will spread rumours about you... are there specific people that you can pinpoint where you know this person would do that kind of thing... like I don't trust her one bit?*

**Caroline:** No, not really...I don't think I've got enemies or something...

*Tess: How does it feel though then when you realize that someone has spread a rumour about you... like, what does that do to you - what's the initial reaction?*

**Caroline:** I normally leave it but I feel like bad sort of... especially if I like started it... like if someone told me that and that it was one of my friends... well, Candy would probably go tell everyone and that's where it starts becoming bad, because that's when I feel bad...

*Tess: Why do you feel bad?*

**Caroline:** Uhmm... I don't know... I don't feel bad when I haven't done anything, but if I started something then it came back to me, then I feel bad... but if I haven't started then I don't feel bad...

*Tess: Yeah... then you're almost in the clear... because you weren't involved...*

**Caroline:** Then I can go and tell the teacher because I know I won't get into trouble...

*Tess: I get the feeling that the teachers are very involved in resolving problems... so the moment things get out of hand... they put the lid on it...*

**Caroline:** Yeah...definitely... I think in high school it will be different...

**Tess:** *So how do you think you guys could resolve your problems without the teachers... do you think there's a way?*

**Caroline:** Yeah... well we might have to sit down and talk to each other... maybe not around our friends but maybe we must just go sit somewhere and talk to each other... uhmm... I don't know... we'd just leave each alone maybe and get together again...

**Tess:** *Do you think that some people can like get destroyed by some of the things that happen?*

**Caroline:** Yeah... I think, like Kate... when Kate got into trouble with the teachers, she was quite hurt... but she knew she was in the wrong so she knew she had done something but she was still like cross sort of... sad... the girl she fought against... her name was Charly, she also was in the wrong, but she didn't get into trouble and I think that's what Kate was upset about, because Charly was also in the wrong but she didn't get into trouble with the teachers...I think that's why she also got hurt.

**Tess:** *Did she have anyone that supported her in that time?*

**Caroline:** Kate? ...yeah well... most of us supported her... all her friends... and she's got quite a lot of friends... but, yeah... she was... most of us supported her...

**Tess:** *Kate... is she one of the popular girls in your grade that you mentioned before?*

**Caroline:** Yeah... she's the one that's not really liked by other people and the bossy one.

**Tess:** *Why do you think she's so bossy?*

**Caroline:** I don't know... she... she probably thinks she's like a leader and... ach... she's probably not, but I don't really play with her... she's probably not though... that's why she's so bossy, 'cos she thinks she's the leader...

**Tess:** *And as you mentioned before... if you feel you have the people behind you, then you feel more confident maybe.*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *Do you think she is a confident girl?*

**Caroline:** She's quite confident...

**Tess:** *Now before I asked you if you think that some people can be really broken by this situation... what happens if somebody who's maybe not so strong, who maybe doesn't have so many friends, uhmm... if she has a rumour spread about her?*

**Caroline:** She'll probably just leave it...

**Tess:** *Are there sometimes girls that want to leave the school because things are getting too complicated?*

**Caroline:** Yeah... Candy wanted to leave the school once... don't know why... she probably wanted to be with her sister... and then Kate also wanted to leave the school when that happened... she also wanted to leave the school...

**Tess:** *Why? Is it so unbearable to go back to school do you think?*

**Caroline:** It's hard because the teachers embarrass you to discipline you and you come back to school and people like start teasing you because your reputation is like affected.

**Tess:** *Surely that resolves itself after sometime though...*

**Caroline:** I'm sure it resolves over time but some people don't really let you forget...

**Tess:** *Why do you think some people don't let you forget?*

**Caroline:** Well... I think...maybe they might want to be popular as well, so when they have something they can tease you with, they can always use it against you...

**Tess:** *So tell me... when people are fighting and people take sides... how does that work, who will do what?*

**Caroline:** Well some people will also tease and others will rather stay out of it...

**Tess:** *Why do some people avoid getting involved?*

**Caroline:** They're scared they'll get into trouble with the teachers and that's why they don't take part...sometimes people will join because they try and become popular...

**Tess:** *So teasing people and hurting people makes you popular?*

**Caroline:** No, not really... mainly you become popular if you hang with the popular guys...

**Tess:** *And how do popular girls interact?*

**Caroline:** They think they're a bit better than others... like Kate for example has a lot of friends but some of them don't like her, but they're too scared to tell her I think... I don't know but I'm sure that's what happens...

**Tess:** *So she can't really trust all her friends...*

**Caroline:** No... but she does have a few friends that she can trust... but some of her friends are just friends with her because she is popular...

**Tess:** *Ok... are those the girls that hang around boys as well...*

**Caroline:** Yeah... they spend more time with guys...

**Tess:** *Does that change things in the group... or do the girls act differently when boys are around?*

**Caroline:** I think they think they are more mature... but in a way they sort of try to live their too fast because they don't do other things half the time because they spend most of their time thinking of guys...

**Tess:** *And marks-wise... what happens to their marks?*

**Caroline:** Most of the popular people's marks are very low... I think because they're thinking of things that they can do... I don't know I think that's why their marks aren't so good... mine and Jennifer's marks are very high, but Candy... her marks aren't good at all...

**Tess:** *Why is that?*

**Caroline:** I think she doesn't do much work, like her mom does most of her schoolwork for her...so she doesn't learn...if you don't do it yourself... you don't learn.

**Tess:** *It sound like you have a very mature attitude towards school and friends... it seems quite balanced...*

**Caroline:** Thank you!

**Tess:** *So tell me a bit about break time... what do you do and who do you spend most of your time with during break? Do you think you can draw me a scene from how things look during break, like who you spend time with and who's connected to who.*

**Caroline:** Yeah... I can try... like must I draw the field and everything...

**Tess:** *Well, you can decide how detailed you want it, I guess for me, I am just interested in who you surround yourself with and who the key players in your social life are at school.*

[drawing]

**Caroline:** Well my group... Candy, Jennifer, and me are usually in the middle of the one football field. Sometimes we like say hello to Ernst, Bradley, Matthew and Alex and sometimes they come and join us... I'm putting Matthew a bit separate from Brad, Alex and Ernest because... well, Ernest and Jennifer are actually dating, and Ernest is fighting with Matthew at the moment because he said that Matthew was flirting with Jennifer... so they are fighting at the moment... And then, like... on either side of the field when you go up the stairs, there's tables where we can sit if one of us is tired or so... Also on the field there's many grade sevens, so I'm just going to draw a big circle for all the Grade sevens, because there's too many...

**Tess:** *Do you spend time with the Grade sevens sometimes during break?*

**Caroline:** Sometimes, but they usually also have their own groups... I'm not sure about their groups though... And then we sometimes... we might go to the one side of the field... that's usually where Kate hangs out and say hello to her or we go to the other side, and that's where Faye usually sits... sometimes she also comes and says hi to us.

**Tess:** *How do Faye and Kate get on?*

**Caroline:** Oh... they're friends... Kate and Faye are friends...

**Tess:** *Interesting... because they just sound like such opposites...*

**Caroline:** Yeah... they are [giggles]... but they get along... I don't know how!... I don't know... if I were Faye I don't know if I could get on with Kate...

**Tess:** *Explain that to me... would she irritate you?*

**Caroline:** She wouldn't irritate me... well... she probably would actually... she's just got a different personality sort of... from me and Faye... she'll be like too popular... not that Faye isn't popular...

**Tess:** *Explain that a bit more to me...*

**Caroline:** Well, like Faye and me are sort of similar in personality and we get along nicely... Kate and Faye have very different personalities but they are both popular... but in different way, like we said before... uhmm... I don't know... they... I don't know how they get along... Faye is more like cal, and Kate is like always all over and she always has to do something...

**Tess:** *Is she almost nervous, or...*

**Caroline:** Not nervous,... like edgy!

**Tess:** *Nice word! Ok, that describes it quite well it seems... so boredom for her must be something quite difficult to handle...*

**Caroline:** Yes... she's always got something on her mind... I think sometimes she stirs things up because she is bored...

**Tess:** *Do you think that can be one of the reasons why people start fights or arguments... just to create some sparks?*

**Caroline:** Yes... if someone spreads a rumour that I am a bitch, then I wouldn't... I would just leave it, and I think because she is with all of her friends and everything she got sort of offensive and wanted to start a fight... I think that's why she starts the fights.

**Tess:** *Uhummm... it's to create some action... whereas Faye wouldn't do that because she is...*

**Caroline:** ...calm and together... Kate is sort of searching in a way... I don't think she's really happy with herself.

**Tess:** *Are you happy with yourself?*

**Caroline:** Uhummm....

**Tess:** *How would you describe yourself?*

**Caroline:** Wow... uhmmm... don't know... yoh...

**Tess:** *Is it tough?*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *Well, I don't know if it would make it easier but if I had to ask how would Jennifer describe you, what do you think she would say?*

**Caroline:** She'll probably say that I'm quite pretty and that I'm quite clever... and I'm funny... she'd probably say that I think. I think I'm a nice person to be around and that I am honest... I don't start fights... and not a lot of people start rumours about me...

**Tess:** *Do you manage to slip through the cracks without people noticing or are you quite visible in the groups you hang out with?*



**Caroline:** I can sort of slip through... I won't say anything... I just watch sort of and so people don't notice me if I don't say anything...I think that's why...

**Tess:** *Yeah... you don't add your two cents to the conversation...*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *So is it the more vocal ones, the ones that talk more that tend to get into trouble more...*

**Caroline:** I think so, because they open themselves up more...

**Tess:** *Ok... and if people are gossiping? Do you take part in that?*

**Caroline:** No, not really... I pretty much just leave it... yeah... I've always been like that...

**Tess:** *And you say that when people pick fights with you, you might retaliate if you have to... can you defend yourself quite well?*

**Caroline:** I can defend myself well, but only when my friends are around me, because if I try to fight against other people, especially this sort of people then I'm sure... especially if the other people are talking for that person...then I don't know what to say...

**Tess:** *So it is very important to have a strong bond with someone who will support you and... if you are in such a situation, that you can defend yourself...*

**Caroline:** Yeah...

**Tess:** *Ok... I think I have a pretty good idea of what friendships are like for you... I think I've asked all the questions I can think of for now... is there*

*anything you would still like to say or add to what we have spoken about... or is there anything you would like to ask me?*

**Caroline:** Not that I can think of now...

**Tess:** *Well, if at a later stage there are any questions you would like to ask, you're more than welcome to ask me.*

**Caroline:** Ok.

**Tess:** *Thank you very much Caroline for your time and honesty... I really appreciate you allowing me to interview you.*

## APPENDIX III

### INTERVIEW WITH TRACY

*Tess: Thank you Tracy for taking the time to do this interview with me. As I have mentioned to you before, this interview is not structured in a specific way. I just want to get a better understanding of what your experiences are like when it comes to your friendships and relationships... how would you describe your current friendships?*

**Tracy:** Well, uhmm,... it's like this: I've been pretty much best friends with a girl called Tammy from like Grade 3. We've always been in the same classes together. We also spend most of our time together... we've pretty much grown up together. Our mothers are also good friends and my brother and her brother are also best friends. So we always see each other on weekends and when our parents get together. She's like my best friend most of the time.

*Tess: Is Tammy your only friend at the moment?*

**Tracy:** No, well... not really my only friend... She is my best friend but lately I spend a lot of my time with the other girls in my class as well, it's just that Tammy is the friend I have kept for the longest... but she's not my only friend... She also has other friends and... well, when she wants to spend time with other girls then I spend time with the other girls in my class too. She sometimes hangs around this girl, Daniella, who is usually alone, and it's like,... when she spends time with her, she's like a different person. It's as if she transforms into this different person. She acts differently and she becomes mean towards me... she doesn't want to spend time with both of us together and I... I don't like spending time with them when they are together, because they aren't nice to be around... it's strange... I like always feel like I'm doing something wrong or upsetting her and then I end up apologizing to her for something that I don't even know what I did wrong... it's just, she gets so offish towards me that I then feel that she would rather be with Daniella and then I am all alone,.. and when I apologise, she becomes friends with me

again. She like bounces between me and Daniella... sometimes other people as well... Anyways,... so lately I've decided that I need to also spend time with other people... I'm like forced to look around, but it is difficult because... well... it's like they all have their groups of friends and I sometimes feel like I don't fit in anywhere...

**Tess:** *Explain to me what groups of friends there are and why it is so difficult to join others?*

**Tracy:** There's the cool crowd who everyone wants to be friends with, but they can be really nasty to other people and,... and they think that they are so much better than everyone else... meanwhile they like spend time flirting with the boys and getting bad marks... and they tease other people all the time... they seem to think it's funny when you make others feel bad... it's actually quite pathetic! The one time, a girl called Annie and her little sidekick, Tanja,... ach, gosh [giggle]... Tanja always runs after Annie... she like doesn't have a personality of her own, she just always does what Annie asks her to do... Anyways,... so Annie tells Tanja to tell this one girl, Sandy, that Andrew... this guy that Annie is sort of seeing, has a crush on her... So Sandy thinks Andrew has a crush on her and... so she thinks he likes her and then she like writes him a note telling him how much she likes him and gives it to Tanja... to give to him, 'cos Tanja like said that she will give it to him... and then... but then Tanja takes the note to Annie who then shows it to everyone in the group and everyone teases Sandy and makes her feel really bad, and then she just ran off and started crying and just went home early... [pause]

**Tess:** *Why do you think this girl... Annie set up this whole situation?*

**Tracy:** Oh,... I don't know... it's just something she does... it actually happens all the time. It's like she's addicted to being nasty... she just thinks it's funny and everyone else laughs at her jokes... she really picks on others and makes them feel terrible. I'm just glad when she's not picking on me or teasing me... but I felt really sorry for Sandy that day... she was all alone with people laughing at her. She gets picked on quite a lot by Annie...

**Tess:** *Does Sandy not have any friends who defend her when these things happen?*

**Tracy:** Not really... not proper friends... She like hangs around this one group sometimes... I guess you could call them the nerds... but she doesn't really belong in that group because she doesn't get the marks all of them get and... and she also doesn't really want to be in their group... She probably wants to be part of the popular crowd and that is why Annie doesn't like her... she's like a thorn in Annie's side. Annie will like act as is she wants to be friends with Sandy and then when Sandy trusts her, she hurts her by being nasty... she like embarrasses her and makes her cry... so... anyways, but Sandy always goes back for more...

**Tess:** *How do you understand this pattern that repeats itself the whole time... why would she put herself in this position?*

**Tracy:** Well... everyone wants to be part of the cool crowd in a way... so did I!... for some reason, I don't know...I did for a long time and then I got hurt so often that I knew I would never be able to trust those girls... I don't really want to be friends with them anyway... they date older boys and sleep around... they smoke and drink alcohol and get terrible marks at school... they have these 'exclusive' parties where everyone like wants to go to but if you aren't invited, you're like a loser... I don't care anyway because I like started to find people outside of school who I can trust and who accept me for who I am and so it doesn't matter what they think of me... But... yeah... there was one thing that happened to me which made me feel really angry. It happened when I met this one guy who wasn't in my school and then Karin, a girl from the cool crowd in my school, found out about him and she like told him that "Tracy's such a loser and nobody really likes her at school" and stuff... and he obviously told me what she said... and it was like impossible!

**Tess:** *Wow... that must have really hurt you to hear that...?*

**Tracy:** Yeah... it hurt me because, if you think about it... here I am trying to move away from the people at school and then they still haunt me... it's like you can't escape them!. I was thinking like "why don't you guys just leave me alone!"...It's as if they have nothing better to do than make other people's lives a misery... I actually went to that girl afterwards to ask her why she did that and she... I actually think she was surprised that I knew what she did... but anyways, she just said that she doesn't know why she did it but that she is sorry. But you like can't trust these people, because like later ... it was in break time I think... then later I like walked past her and she was like telling another girl about what she had said to this boy and she was like laughing saying how it was like so funny to see his reaction,.. so yeah right, so much for "I am so sorry, Tammy", you know... She obviously wasn't sorry at all... but that's how it is! I felt so angry and hurt, I just wanted to punch or strangle her! It's like you can't get through to these people make them understand how it feels for them to do that kind of thing... but if you think about it... that's probably what they want anyway... to see how far they can push you! And then, when you want to like sort things out... and you like go talk to them like a human being, that just makes matters worse 'cos then they know they are getting to you!

**Tess:** *It sounds as though you felt trapped in some way?... As if in your attempt to correct the situation, you would actually make it worse?*

**Tracy:** That's exactly how it is!... It's as if you are screwed either way... a uhhh... like a catch 22? Because the more you try to explain yourself the more ammunition they have to hurt you... and nobody can help you out! Parents anyways don't understand what happens, and if they interfere then that's even more problems! it would just make things worse because then you go home and tell-tale on them,... like "ahhh... running home to mommy!" so they think you're weak and pick on you more. It's the same if you go to the teachers... if they mention something about what you told them or, even worse, they hand out detention, then... then it's like you are to blame and then the they get angry with you... the best is to try not to do anything that other's pick on you about... [pause]

**Tess:** *So tell me a bit more about the different groups that exist in your grade... you said that there are the popular ones and the nerds, are there any other groups?*

**Tracy:** Well... those are the main ones... but I guess you could say there are the outcasts... or maybe more the rejects... those are the people that don't really fit in anywhere and they usually sit on their own or move between groups... then you get the sluts... those are the girls that already have boyfriends outside of school and they like sleep around and stuff... you should hear them... they always act all dramatic and say things like "oh... I'm so worried I might be pregnant"... so that the whole world must know that they sleep around and stuff... they are also part of the popular group... with the popular boys... and otherwise... well, I can't really think of other groups, but there definitely still are other groups... well I think... it like there's another group of girls that hangs together that is not really popular or nerdy, but they are fairly normal... they like go to movies and... in a way they are ok, but they are cliquey... yeah... uhmm, I mean... they don't allow people in easily. They talk about things that they do together where I can't talk along 'cos obviously I wasn't there "like hello!"... and then you feel pushed out... it's like they don't really seem interested in making new friends... Sometimes they roll their eyes while another person is talking, ... like saying "This is so boring" or they don't know what they are talking about... they're actually quite rude!... Or they'll like start a conversation while someone is talking and totally interrupt them during the story...

**Tess:** *Tracy, ...I get the sense that you are more of an observer and that you aren't a part of any of these groups that you have described so far... is there a group that you do belong to, or do you move between groups?*

**Tracy:** I don't really belong to any group... I was always closest to Tammy and the two of us did almost everything together, so I didn't have a group as such,... but, like Tammy sometimes would leave me and then I was all alone. Sometimes I join groups for a short time, but... I don't know... it's like hard to

get accepted. I always feel left out or not good enough... it's like... uhmmm, the people will act like they like you and speak to you and then the moment you turn your back on them, they bitch about you to someone else...

**Tess:** *How do you know that they do that?*

**Tracy:** What... that they talk about me?

**Tess:** *Yes, like how do you know that they talk behind your back?*

**Tracy:** Well... I can see them doing it. It's actually quite in your face! Like when I walk up to them during the break, they will look at me and be talking and then... like they'll be in a circle talking during break and then... when I'm like close enough to hear what they say they shut up. Obviously they are saying something I mustn't hear or something,... because... they just whisper or something and obviously then I'm not supposed to hear who they are talking about... or, sometimes they will point at you and talk and laugh... and then when you ask them why they are laughing they say "nothing" and when you walk off, they like... they like carry on laughing and talking. I was part of a group for about two weeks when I overheard three of the girls that are part of the group talking about me... they were like... "did you see how she was standing there while talking, as if she's the sexiest person on the planet" and saying things like, that they don't like me and stuff... and that they don't know why I won't leave them alone... It's like shocking! I couldn't believe they were saying these things, but that's how they are... I should have expected it...

**Tess:** *Did you know that these girls have a tendency of responding like that to new people in the group?*

**Tracy:** Well... not really... I should've known... it's just that that is so typical. It happens all the time that people talk badly about you. I tried so hard to be a part of that group and to be friends with them but then the moment you leave their sight, the like talk about you badly... it's not only me, they do it to each other the whole time too... like when one of them will walk off and the other's



talk about her badly behind her back... or when one isn't looking the other's will roll their eyes at her...

**Tess:** *It just sounds as if there is no trust between you and the other girls... is there anyone you do trust?*

**Tracy:** Well... I thought I could trust Tammy, but I'm not so sure anymore. She always jumps between friends and I think she talks badly about me as well. Then when I'm friends with her again, she will like be all fine and then we get on well again, but whenever we fight, I have to apologise and try to make her feel better again... even if she starts the fight... The one time I was sick for one day, so then when I came back to school, Tammy was like friends with someone else and totally ignored me. It was like... when she saw that I was walking towards her during break she walked off with her other friend. She was so not interested in speaking to me! So eventually, like later in the day, I like got to speak to her, and I asked her... uhmmm,... So I got to speak to her and I asked her what her problem was and she's like "what do you mean?" and I said "Clearly I've done something wrong"...because she was like walking away from me and everything!,... so she said "no" and that I mustn't be so sensitive and stuff and that she would just rather spend time with, I think it was Daniella... but yeah... anyways, so you can imagine how surprised I was, coming back from being sick and not knowing what I did wrong...

**Tess:** *Why do you think that incident happened?*

**Tracy:** I don't know... it's as if you're never safe... there's always some problem or issue with someone. And one like constantly has to apologise and check with others how things are going and if things are ok between you... One day everything is fine and you get on well with everyone and then the next day people talk behind your back and make life difficult for you... It's so irritating! Like, it's confusing... sometimes I am so confused and frustrated and worried, that I just want to go home, lie on my bed and never go back to school... you're lucky if there's no problems during the day when school ends and you go home. It just seems never ending... I mean... that's why I am so

happy that I am meeting people who don't go to my school. They can know me like I am. Without other people butting in. Their opinion is not tainted by what other people maybe tell them... oh well... even that crashed on me when that girl spoke to that friend of mine from outside the school. It's like this plague that follows you... When I was younger I always dreamed of going to another school. You know... like starting all over again, with new people and new friends... somewhere where nobody knows me,... like a clean start... but my parents didn't like the idea... they didn't think it was a good idea because they thought that I would have the same problems in another school... I don't know... maybe they were right,... maybe information about me would have gone to the other school anyway and then I could have in any case stayed where I was all along...

***Tess:** I get the sense that you felt the urge to escape... or to run away from this whole messy situation... it must have been a very difficult time for you...*

**Tracy:** Oh yes... it was hell. It still is hard now, because there's always bitching and backstabbing... it's as if nobody can be happy for another person. If somebody likes you... like a boy in your class or something... and... so if somebody has a crush on you and like another girl has a crush on him, then they will like... they'll do anything in their power to make him not like me. Like they actually walk up to him and talk badly about me... They will even tell him lies about me and say things I've supposedly done that I haven't... instead of just leaving me alone and not butting in! ...they're just jealous and want to ruin things for me... like... they're just jealous! Like my friend Tammy was so upset with me... she decided she doesn't want to spend time with me because boys speak to me and not to her. Ach... it was so stupid, really! Like what am I supposed to do when people talk to me!... It's not like I could do anything about it!... But, anyways... I guess I just have to get through school and then I don't have to see any of these people ever again!

***Tess:** Do you think you will break off contact with everyone from school once you are finished?*

**Tracy:** Well, I'd like to still be friends with Tammy, but lately... I'm not so sure if that will happen. She doesn't seem to see the friendship the same way... she wants to have other friends and only spends time with me when she has no one to talk to... in a way I'm a replacement for her.

**Tess:** *You seem to have come to terms with this new arrangement in your friendship... do you spend much time thinking about your friendships?*

**Tracy:** In a way I think I spend most of my time thinking about my friendships... or the problems in the friendships and how I can fix them... I don't like fighting and arguing and always want to make things right between people. I'm always the one apologising to others and trying to make them feel better. Like... say there's a fight between two people... then I always try to make them feel better. But when someone upsets me or hurts me... nobody comes to help me... I often feel alone. It's so bad sometimes that part of me feels I don't want to go to school but the other part feels I have to otherwise the situation might become worse... and then I'm not there to defend myself!

**Tess:** *Again, there is this sense of being trapped and caught between a rock and a hard place, as they say.*

**Tracy:** Yeah... pretty much.

**Tess:** *Tracy, throughout our chat I noticed how some people appear to be more dominant, or calling all the shots, whilst others are more the followers who do what they are told. Is that something that you have observed as well?*

**Tracy:** Well... uhmm... I think people like Annie are probably the more stronger ones in the groups. Like I said, she is part of the popular group...

**Tracy:** She's like the leader or something... it's like, she always bosses other people around and... she like tells people what to do and then the others just do it. It's like they are zombies or something... they just do what she tells them to do. She like dominates them and they are her slaves... And also... when she like treats others badly or is nasty to someone, then they laugh with

her and tell her how funny she is... in a way... in a way they actually make her do it more. It's like they're her cheerleaders or something. Some people just stay quiet and you can see that they just don't want to get into trouble with Annie...

**Tess:** *Why... what do you think would happen if they told Annie that she is being mean or that she should stop doing what she is doing?*

**Tracy:** Annie would probably make their life a misery too... she would probably be really mean to them... she would probably turn others against them. It's like... If you aren't with her, you are against her and she will turn other people against you too. I think in a way she scares people because they could lose everything, their reputation and their friends and everything...

**Tess:** *What do you think makes this girl so powerful that other people are afraid to stand up to her?*

**Tracy:** I don't know... uhmm... no, I don't know... she just is. Maybe other girls want to be like her because she is really pretty and many of the boys in our class like her... I don't know... maybe they are just afraid that she could ruin their life.

**Tess:** *Are there other people like Annie who wield the same power?*

**Tracy:** Well... Annie has two close friends who are like her best friends... Tanja and Karin... they would like do anything for her, so... so if you like bother them or do something that they don't like or something, then they will also do what Annie does... Like Karin is one of them... she's the one that spoke to that guy I met who wasn't from my school and who told him all that mean stuff about me... Well, with her for instance, I didn't feel like I could speak to her after I overheard her talking to that other girl about that and laughing,... like after I had asked her why she did it in the first place,... so I just left it because I knew it would just make things more complicated... it really is the best choice I think... sometimes I think it's best to leave these

things and not go talk to the person to sort things out... and hope they bother someone else soon [nervous giggle]. But it is difficult to stay out of it sometimes... because they are being so unfair and just plain mean... they have like no respect!

**Tess:** *Where do you see yourself in relation to all these different groups and people?... you seem to have good insight into what is happening between people, but where would you position yourself?*

**Tracy:** I don't know at the moment... I think I am in between groups at the moment. I don't really belong to any group and I don't even know if I have a best friend at the moment... sometimes I feel like an outsider, like I don't belong anywhere and nobody cares what I do. I feel quite lonely sometimes and wish I could find someone who I can trust and talk to... it's just...uhmm... it's crazy how the moment you think you might have found someone you can trust and you like share secrets with them, they like stab you in the back by telling others what you told them...

**Tess:** *Can you give me an example of when something like that happened to you in the past?*

**Tracy:** Well... there was this one girl in my class, Natalie, whose parents were good friends with my parents,... so whenever the parents got together, like on weekends and stuff or in the holidays, and then we would like have to spend time together as well... So,... when it was just the two of us, she was very nice and friendly and we had lots of fun together, but the moment... so when we were back at school and there were other people around, she would just ignore me and avoid spending time with me... I think she was almost embarrassed or something... like, she was more interested in being with the popular girls and always ran after them, even though they did not really like her that much. Sometimes she would also tease me or talk badly about me to others, instead of standing up for me... and then,... and then if we like had to spend time with each other again because of the parents, she would try to be

all nice to me again, as if nothing happened... she was being totally two-faced... and that is so typical!

**Tess:** *You mentioned that you feel lonely sometimes and that, in a way, you are between groups at the moment... what helps you through this time and how do you cope with these feelings of isolation?*

**Tracy:** ... I don't know... uhmmm... I sometimes spend time alone in the library, looking at books and stuff. I enjoy reading. It also gives me an excuse to not walk around alone during the breaks... uhmm... I also write poems or letters in my diary about how I feel and what I would like to say to people... I would probably never say those things to them face to face [giggles]... and like I said, I'm trying to find people I can spend time with outside of school, so then I don't feel so bad when I don't have anyone at school... but it is hard sometimes, because people like force themselves on you... it's like I try to avoid getting wrapped up in all the bitchy stuff, but they seem to always find something to bitch about and cause you trouble... and it's hard to not be affected by it because it's like in your face...

**Tess:** *Can you give me an example of such a situation?*

**Tracy:** Uhhh... it's like when Tammy starts talking to me again and she like starts talking badly about Danielle and then I feel bad because in a way I don't actually want to get involved, but I want to show her that I am her friend and that I support her and then it just gets messy... in a way I then feel guilty because I am taking her side and she is being nasty to someone else and I don't want her to talk about me like that... she probably does that to me as well anyway... ughhh... it's just gets really complicated!...

**Tess:** *So are you friends with Tammy at the moment or not really?*

**Tracy:** Well, I guess we are sort of friends... it's hard not to not be friends with her because she's been like my friend for such a long time... she knows me better than anyone else and I know her better than anyone else. We always

joked that we will grow old together and have children at the same time and stuff, so... yeah... I don't think we'll ever like not be connected... but I think, just lately things have been strained...

**Tess:** *Strained in what way?*

**Tracy:** Well... like is said before... she moves in and out of my life... and now she wants to hang with the more popular people and she's changed in a way... she's started running after guys and wanting to get their attention and stuff. She's just acting different... like, I think she's just acting different, like she has a new personality,... to impress the popular people.

**Tess:** *What does she do to impress them?*

You mean how does she act?

**Tess:** *Yes,... like what does she do to get more accepted by the popular group?*

**Tracy:** Ach... she will talk badly about others... like saying how they are so immature and how they are no fun... and she'll like try everything to get invited to their parties. She'll like buy them things and tell them how nice they are and she like lie for them. It's like she's being all self-destructive and ruining her life... I think she even started smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol to impress them because they all do it... and she is rude to the teachers sometimes and does not listen to them. Recently she actually swore at a teacher in class, saying that she's like this bitch or something, and then the teacher phoned her parents and gave her detention and stuff... it was actually really bad!... and I feel bad watching her throw her life away like that... but the popular girls thought it was really funny and like congratulated her later... She also seemed to think that it was really funny... she just didn't seem too concerned about it... I don't know... she's just being really stupid if you ask me...

**Tess:** *So what do you do in such a situation when you see your friend throwing her life away like that?*

**Tracy:** I tried to speak to her and tell that “Tammy, you’re like not being yourself” and stuff... and she just told me to leave her alone and that maybe I just don’t know who she really is... and that I’m just jealous of her or something... She just wouldn’t listen to me and just ignored me. All I wanted to do was help her and like show her the light! I told my parents and they told me that I should just leave her alone. I don’t think that they want me to spend time with her anymore because... it think my parents are worried about me doing the same things,... not that I would or anything,... but it’s hard if that’s like your only real friend in the world...

**Tess:** *You don’t feel like your parents understand your situation?*

**Tracy:** In a way they do, but in a way they also don’t... parents don’t seem to get it really... I think my parents just think the whole thing will sort itself out... it’s just... I don’t think they really liked Tammy when I was even good friends with her... sometimes I would like tell them what she does to me... and so, I think because they know how she used to ignore me and talk badly about me and stuff... they just don’t really want me to not spend time with her or be friends with her, especially now that she’s doing all these things like smoking and drinking!...

**Tess:** *I get the sense that this bothers you and that your parents don’t seem to see the bigger picture and how this affects you?*

**Tracy:** I don’t think they can really understand the bigger picture... they don’t realize that if I don’t have Tammy, I have no one, so... if I ditch her completely then I have no one... They would probably just say “oh well... find yourself another friend” and they don’t realize that that’s not exactly easy to do!... like, hello it’s not like you can buy them at the supermarket or anything!



**Tess:** *You seem quite frustrated with the way your parents have reacted to your problems with Tammy, can you explain that a bit more to me?*

**Tracy:** It's just... they don't seem to realize how difficult it is to make friends and I just feel that they didn't really give Tammy a chance... I think they never really liked Tammy that much from the beginning... so now it seems like I can't find someone who will be a good friend to me...

**Tess:** *Do you feel that your parents support you and understand you or not really?*

**Tracy:** Well, they do try to understand me... I think... but they don't really. They don't know what it's like to have to go to school and be surrounded by all this bitching and emotional manipulation and stuff. It was probably easier for them when they were young... I don't know... But they do try and support me... but that's mainly when I get good marks and when I do well at school or something like that... or when I want to do extracurricular things like volleyball and stuff... but when it comes to friendships they don't really understand. I think they were more popular in school than I am, so they don't know what its like to be... to be like at the bottom of the food chain...

**Tess:** *Is that where you think you are at the moment... the bottom of the food chain?*

**Tracy:** In a way yes and in a way no... like... I don't think I'm a complete outcast or anything and I do think that I am a nice person to be around... I don't have it as bad as some of the other girls have it, so I still think I am one of the lucky ones... But like I said... at school I might be at the bottom of the food chain, but I think... I think that if I meet people that don't belong to my school that I will be better off... that way they don't get involved in what is happening at school and then I am safe... I don't want to run after people at school... it just seems like a never-ending story... and too complicated [smiling]...

**Tess:** *I get the sense that you see this as an opportunity to branch out and meet new people... in a way you are realizing that there is more to life than just school...?*

**Tracy:** Exactly!... I'm trying to mind my own business and just get through school in one piece...

**Tess:** *Well... I think you are doing a great job!*

**Tracy:** Thank you!

**Tess:** *Tracy... is there anything else you would like to add to what we have spoken about or is there something that you think I may have misunderstood and that you would like to explain a bit more?*

**Tracy:** No... I think I've said what I wanted to say..., unless you still want to ask me anything?

**Tess:** *Thank you Tracy... you have given me a lot of information and I have a lot to work with...*

**Tracy:** Ok...

## **APPENDIX IV**

### **INTERVIEW WITH MAY**

**Tess:** May, thank you taking the time to speak to me, I really appreciate it. You've mentioned to me before that things at school can be quite tough at times, with friendships breaking up and arguments happening between people. I'm curious to find out more about what it is like for you at school and what your opinions are about friendships and struggles surrounding friendships. Lets have a chat...

**May:** Ok, well, basically what I think is that it is important that when you are in this specific age group it is important to involve yourself with the right people. It's like, you obviously get the popular crowd, who sort of act like they have so many friends, where in actual fact, ... I don't know, it's like the definition of popular is you have lots of friends. But it think actually, when I look at them, I think: "you don't have lots of friends! You think you have lots of friends but in actual fact, you don't! So how can you consider yourself popular?"

Anyways, I always wanted to be in the popular crowd, like most people. Now I had one very, very good friend since grade three. I was like soul mates with her. It was like great. I made lots of other friends, but she was my specific friend, she was like tied to me. So what happened was, I got separated from my other friends but at least I had my one friend. I was happy. I thought: "At least I have somebody that I can lean on who was like a genuine friend!" Then there was this other girl, she was from the popular crowd and she was also split from her friends, so she came. Now she had big troubles, you know, her name was Kate. She had big problems at home. She was caught smoking and stuff like that. It was like serious stuff. We heard lots of stories, like she tried to commit suicide at her party or something. It was like ridiculous stuff! And, well, I knew about it because one of my friends had like gone through it all and she had made friends with this girl. And she'd been ditched and she ended up slapping her in the face. It was like dreadful. Anyway, I was warned against her by her other friend and it wasn't as easy as it started like, because

what happened was that my close friend fell into her trap. She also wanted to become popular so she became friends with her. Kate acted very nice with her and being Judy's friend I also wanted to become friends with her.

So the three of us were like friends. We sat together in class and we did everything together, all the projects. And we always used to go... (pause) 'Cos like my mom had been warned about Kate and she found out that I was friends with her. And Judy and Kate all wanted to go out and my mom wanted to hear nothing of it and I was thinking about my mom "how can you ruin my chances at becoming popular! How can you just take it ways from me like this!? Why, why!" And in the back of my mind I knew I didn't want to be involved in all the smoking... but maybe I did... I mean, because I wanted to be popular... but I knew it was wrong, I knew everything was wrong, but, uhmm... it just shows you what peer pressure does to you. Because my friend's friend was into it and because Kate was into it and I was friends with Kate, and I nearly fell into the trap. And I used to come home and I used to cry.

I was in such agony because I couldn't be friends with this girl and here she was like my ticket to being popular! You know,... and everything was going perfectly until my mom trashed everything. And then my mom,... I don't know how she did it, but obviously she never let me go out with her... and I ended up having to tell Kate this because every time she invited me I would have to say "No. I can't go!" and eventually I like said to her "hey listen, my mom won't let me go out with you because you tried to commit suicide and because you're an idiot!"

It was tough for me!... and now to top it all off, Judy was like my original friend and she was with Kate and Kate was taking her away from me and I was like "Judy, don't go and do all that stuff!" She didn't listen to me because she fell into the trap and there was no way out. She was there with Kate and it was Kate and Judy, where it was May and Judy. Now it's Kate and Judy so May has no friends,... so now, Poor May is sitting there! It was like, I had no friends now because Kate and Judy were against me and there were these

two guys swooning all over them and they used to tease me because I was like a goody-goody, you know,... cos I wouldn't go with them and smoke and stuff! So there I am,... I have no friends, I just lost a good friend, and I have people teasing me! And so I wanted to switch classes, but I knew it would be running away from the problem and there was nothing that I could do.

But then, when I was friends with Kate I used to be popular and I used to look down at everyone. And there was this other group ... they were the distinction people,... they were the nerds. Now I used to think "oh my word, you nerds! Go away!" And so I actually found that "hey! Wait a minute, the nerds actually have more friends than I do! So maybe I should go to the nerds!" So I went to the nerds and I made really good friends! I am still friend with the nerds today!... I love the nerds, ok!? They were there for me... that's what they did. They probably didn't even know because I tried not to talk too much, but I was still down in the dumps because I still didn't have a very good friend.

Anyway, so the nerds have friends in other classes. So I became friends with them and eventually I ended up having a really wide circle of friends. And I though, like, "what happened? You know. I came out of it and it's all because of my mom and my new friends that I made, and I came out of it and I was so happy because like, I went from having nothing to having something! But I was still, you know... and even now, Judy and Kate are still together. They have parties, they have people... apparently Judy stopped smoking but Judy had a party... uhmmm, now my best friend Judy, she invited me to a party... I wouldn't go. I said, "I'm not gonna go to your party because you're going to smoke and do all sorts of stuff!" Cos when I was still friends with Judy we like planned that Judy's gonna have this big party and there's going to be so many people and we're going to have so much fun... and I didn't even go because of what happened! It's actually quite weird because the one year we were planning this party and we were quite excited and the next year I didn't even go because of what happened. And it's like weird, it's actually very weird, but uhmm, ja...

They're still friends and they are happy together, because Kate... OK she had a very destroyed life! Her life was destroyed her parent's were divorced, she was like ... she had two other siblings and she was torn between her mother and her father! So... and she had moved houses from her mother and her father something like sixty times, so she was very... she had a bad life... of course she was smoking. And so then Judy actually told me that she's Kate's only friend... she may seem popular, she may have so many other friends, but actually Judy is her only friend! She fixed her smoking problem; she is her friend, and now they are best friends! They are inseparable... and I am happy for them because, like, Kate was a sad excuse for a person! You know, and Judy was there and she helped her, so I was very, uhmm... Obviously I was upset because my friend went away, but she is good for Kate... she helped her.

It had a lot do with a façade that they put on because... sure, she looks so popular, because she's with all the guys and she's pretty, and she's so popular and... but she actually has no friends. And until Judy and I came along... and then I obviously left, and now Judy and Kate... I promise you, they are like happy... and I think that's great!

**Tess:** *So do you think that they have a type of genuine friendship now?*

**May:** Yes, I do think that they have a genuine friendship. It's weird, it's very weird! Because Judy and I had a genuine friendship. But, uhmm... And in a way, I kind of feel, maybe I was being a bit possessive over Judy, but, you know,.. cos I warned her so many times about Kate and I said: "If you get involved with Kate I am going to leave!" and so she did get involved with Kate, so I got the message that she wanted me to leave so I left! But I was like... and I kept on saying, and maybe I was in her face, but I said to her: "you know what Judy,... you've lost more than you've gained!... you've lost it!... you've lost so many other friends because of what you're doing!" and she... oh, I missed a big part!

I forgot about it! Kate and Judy were caught cheating in the exams last year, and they weren't expelled!... Which was weird! But... they ... and that's also, that's another reason why... they were,... uhmm... and I laughed because I knew! And it was exactly how I'd had pictured it! After I had regained all my senses. I don't know what's gonna happen to Judy... She's gonna go downhill! She is like smoking with Kate and she's gonna do bad things and she's gonna get involved in that crowd, and it's gonna get worse! She's gonna go out and go to parties and she's not going to come home!... You know... that's how bad it's going to get. And uhmm it's starting hey!... It started at the end of the year and they were cheating in the exam and I said to her "Judy, what are you doing!" what are you doing! And she said "I am making friends!" I was like "Oh... I'm happy for you!". It was just... when I heard that she cheated it was like, it's happening! It's like... I'm reliving my dreams, what is happening here!? It was scary because, you know, if she was with me she wouldn't have done that! You know, Judy was an innocent girl! You know... and now she has gone with Kate and she's like a totally different person!

**Tess:** *So you and Judy are no longer friends?*

**May:** No, no, look, Judy and me, we don't hate each other!... I still wished her a happy birthday for her birthday and we do talk. But then again, she is popular and she looks down at me now.

**Tess:** *What means popular?*

**May:** Like she's friends with the popular group. They just have that name and its like if you are like below them then you like respect them. They like look down at you and it's horrible. They like think that they are that much better than you but in actual fact you're probably better off than them because you're gonna have a better life than them! You probably have more friends than them! But then... they act like that! And it's with all of them! They're like that to everybody.

**Tess:** *It sounds like that is very frustrating*

**May:** It is! It's very frustrating. We get so annoyed. Because all of my friends they like... we always sit together and we think who do they think they are!

Oh! And Kate is dating a Matric (giggle) that's how good she thinks she is. But I think... it's because of her status.

*Tess: But what do you have to do to be popular... it sound like you have to smoke, you have to date older guys...*

**May:** You have to... well first of all you won't find an ugly popular person. They're all pretty and all they guys like them... they do have friends but... they don't have as many friends as we do because they are horrible to them. They only have friends that they think are popular because it would damage their reputation... if they were friends with people that were getting nineties. If they were friends with those people, they would almost hide it. If they're found talking to them the people would be like "What are you doing talking to them?!" I think it's the look, it's who you are friends with, and that you get asked out by a lot of guys. That's what I think.

*Tess: so May... the group that you are with now, is it almost in opposition to the popular group?*

**May:** So like, do we hate each other?

*Tess: No, I mean more, do you associate with each other or is it very much a case of 'us and them'?*

**May:** Yes it is very distinguished and the groups are very segregated. We try and be friends with them and sometimes they are friendly with us. Because we are friends with guys and the popular people, they're like... they choose...uhmmm. I'm trying to explain... it's like, the popular people, they do associate with us and we do associate with them but, you do get the one's who don't... they're like: "Hey, go away!" And then you get the ones that are



friends with us and they talk to us and they are quite friendly... sometimes it is just their personality that makes them popular.

**Tess:** *So you were saying before that when all of this was going on with Judy and Kate you were also teased and ...why do you think that was?*

**May:** Well, first of all it was Kate's influence, she would like make up rumours and then they would tease me about them, I don't know what they said about me, but like, you always used to check 'cos... what had happened was that when I was friends with Kate and would like sit at a table "cos we were friends and then when everything broke loose I was like sitting at the table with this girl and this guy who were sitting next to each other and she would like look at me and than she would go like this (hand in front of mouth as if whispering) and talk to this guy and I would just sit there and pretend that I could not hear anything.

**Tess:** *So she would make a point of you seeing her and then turn to the guy and talk about you.*

**May:** Exactly...exactly!... Whether she was actually talking about me or not was a different story. And I think it was also because I wasn't going with them and smoking with them and I was a nerd 'cos now I was friends with the nerds. And now they had this perfect thing about me because they knew that I would not crush under peer pressure so they wanted to crush me in other ways... like teasing me and stuff... and they also... uhmm. The simple fact that I am not like anybody else that she can seduce and make smoke with her like everybody else. It's just because I'm not like everybody else, I'm not like Judy!

**Tess:** *It sounds like you're quite the individual*

**May:** I would have gone, hey... I would have been there with everybody else had it not been for my mom and my friends, and so... I would have been right there, with Judy and Kate. And maybe I would have come out there. Maybe I would have been smart but I don't know what would have happened. I would

have never been friends with my other friends and made as many friends as I've made during the course of last year and the beginning of this year.

**Tess:** *The desire to be popular seems to be huge... it seems so gripping*

**May:** Yeah, it's huge. But it wasn't so much... look, I did want to be popular, but it wasn't so much that, ... it was more Judy. She had the stars in her eyes... ja ... 'cos, well, I allowed myself to be influenced by Judy. It was just 'cos, I had nobody else...so if I didn't go with Judy I would be on my own. So I would either go and do what they were doing or I was going to be on my own. So I was doing what they were doing.

**Tess:** *How long was this going on for? That there was that time when Judy was with Kate and you weren't able to join them because of your mom and there was the gossiping... until you got into your new circle of friends?*

**May:** It was about two months.

**Tess:** *Wow, that's a long time to feel torn and in between places*

**May:** It was very tough. It was very tough. And I would find myself so unhappy. And my parents were so worried about me 'cos I mean... I used to...I mean... I had no purpose! ... I mean, my marks dropped! They went straight down. 'Cos I'd just gotten my 'B' and now I'm getting high b+, but when I was with Kate and Judy I went down to a sixty and I was crushed. You know... So now I have no friends, I'm getting bad marks... you know, what is the point! Where am I going! And I wrote a song and tons of poems. It's just that you have to get so much off your chest, you just don't know... look I did talk to my mom a lot... 'cos I like had other friends in my other class. And I was so tempted to move classes but I knew that would just be running away from the problem and giving Kate what she wanted... she wanted me away.

**Tess:** *But May, do these things not also happen in the breaks as well, so could it not have been a similar set up when it comes to break time... is your reputation and whatever problems you have not known within the standard?*

**May:** Ja... but during break... uhmm... 'cos most of it actually happens in class, which is probably why my marks dropped. 'Cos during break I would get as far away as possible and would go and sit with my other friends. But during class is when Kate used to tease me and, uhmm, and when I was learning I tried really hard to concentrate... but it was... I had so much going through my mind for such a long time that I was breaking down. It was terrible! It was like hard to get through!

**Tess:** So did you then initiate and talk to the 'nerds'? Did you decide, "I'm going to take control!" What was the motivating factor for you to just turn it all around... cos you have by the sounds of it.

**May:** The motivation was that I had come to my senses. My mom and dad, they like discouraged me from everything and all that stuff. Saying like: "Do you want your life to end up like that? Where do you want to go!" you know, like "What do you want to do?... If you're caught smoking, what are you going to do... you're going to lose all that trust that everybody has in you... even your other friends! Everything's going to go downhill if you go with them!". They sort of turned me off it... and you know, in the back of my mind I knew it was wrong.

And it was me as well! Cos, my parents can only say so much but I also have to turn my mind around. And it was... so my parents helped me a lot but then it was all up to me then. I got my mind right. Then I was like, "Ok, that's enough... you can go and do your own things, I am going to try this with these other people... these nerds, and see how it goes and if push comes to shove then I can always move classes... so I did look on the bright side and I did do all that stuff but uhmm my motivation was to... It was my mindset... I just had to get my mindset right and I just had to make good of the situation that I

was in, and by making new friends was how I was going to do it. Hey, and it worked... it worked! I'm really happy now... I've got so many friends and its not like the are nerds! And I cannot believe that I called them nerds and looked down at them. Because... look, they are the intellectual group, they know what they're doing, they're all getting eighties! And I feel like, uhmm "oopsy", cos I'm getting like seventies... and I try and compare myself to them. And it is good for my marks to be with people like this and they are such great people! They have so much fun. Especially one of the girls, Penny... she's in love with music, the same as me... and I go over there and we have so much fun, we just play instruments and make music and write songs, and it's so much fun. Then my other friend, she's Grade 6 classical piano and she's like brilliant... also, a very musical bunch and they... once I informed them about what was happening they were supportive. So they were supportive, my parents were supportive, and I was thinking "Hey! This is looking good, you know! And it did look good and now it's looking even better!

***Tess:** So if you were to see yourself in hose two months going through hell, by the sounds of it, and now, how are you different? As an example, it seems like you're very confident. Are you more than you were at that time?*

**May:** Ja, ja, look I was confident to start off with, that was just me... but I have obviously grown a lot and it's experience also... so I can help other people that are going through the same thing and I can also, you know... it's great to know that you have been through everything and that you make the decisions and that you come out of this better than everybody else. It's such a great thing to have grown so much and learnt so much. I am a lot more confident and I also think that I have become a lot more friendly because of my ... the influence of my new friends... because they always help me and they're always smiling and they always get good marks and it's a good attitude to have... positive... I do have my moments and but that's just me. I have become mature... a lot more mature in terms of being able to deal with stuff like that and now I feel like if I were to go through stuff like that again I would know exactly what to do... because I know now what you gain from making the right decisions and choices... it's great! It's just that feeling that you come

out of this and you come out of it better than anybody else. And I think probably Judy looks at me and thinks... I don't actually know what she thinks, maybe she thinks: "oh, poor May, she hasn't got me anymore... or she thinks "she's got more friends than I do!" I don't know what she thinks anymore at the moment. But she can do whatever she wants to...I don't care anymore, she can have fun, she can do whatever she wants to!

**Tess:** *So does Judy look happy?*

**May:** She does look happy. She's... look, she's a naturally friendly person so she has made friends, I think... I think (giggle), uhmm, and she's obviously friends with Kate... you can see it's genuine and then she.... When Kate was going out with this Matric, in the breaks she used to sit all over this guy, kissing... and I felt so sorry Judy, because she was just sitting!... and my friends used to walk past, Penny and us, and we used to walk past and we used to think, shame! Poor Judy, she's sitting there, she's watching Kate kiss this guy and she's sitting all there and (laugh) and Judy's just standing there, you know ... and we laugh at her and we feel so sorry for her because if that's what she gained from ditching me and all of the other friends that she had... She's also become enemies with her mother because her mother didn't know what to do about this whole thing... that she cheated and that she was smoking. She became enemies with her mother; she became enemies with me... she's not where.... She hasn't gone up with this whole change. And I think that was the last straw, I think it's great (hesitant).

**Tess:** *So, let me just understand this... is there still that gossiping or that 'bitchiness' - that acting as though you're talking about someone... is that still going on?*

**May:** No, I'm no longer in the same class with them. Because in the beginning of the term, in the beginning of the year, again... now I was in the same position as last year, I didn't have my friends with me... they separated me again and I had all these new friends that were in another class and all my original friends were in another class. So I was again in a class with Judy and

Kate and all the popular people and I was just thinking what am I going to do! Then my mom and dad... and so they moved me and now I'm in a class with my friends again. But I'm worried about next year... they might just put me in a class with all of them again and I don't know if I will be able to handle it!

**Tess:** *do you think that they would resort to the same measures?*

**May:** No, I think they have chilled, I don't think they will be that immature again, but it would definitely not be that enjoyable, not being in the same class as all my friends. And it would also be irritating, because now I've made friends with all these other people, if they took me out of that class I would be destroyed because now you're moving me from my comfort zone! You can't make me unhappy by moving me... it wouldn't be fair, you know! It just wouldn't be fair!... To separate me and to make me unhappy! I don't know whether I would swap then or not... I just feel that at the same time... I don't want to act like I need my parents to fix my problems and make it go away, you know. But then also, I don't want to be separated from my friends. You know, my friends that I've worked so hard to get and that I'd bonded with and that we've made such a close relationship and now I don't know what I'd do without them. I would be destroyed if I was without them. It would be very annoying... I wouldn't know that to do. I would like be muddled.

**Tess:** *So, friends are everything...*

**May:** It is important, it is important to have friends. It's actually crucial. Because, if you don't have those people you can lean on that are always there... you know, it also depends on the right people that are and what you resort to in terms of what you confide in people. I think that with friendships that is... it's ...plays a very important role. And also in terms of how your grades go. I mean, if you have to worry about stuff that you don't want to worry about when you're studying for your final end-of year exams, you don't want to worry about that kind of stuff. And maybe at the end of the year you would get used to that kind of stuff but I just think that it wouldn't be needed...

I don't need that in my life... I'd rather just be comfortable with my friends and do my average school work with my friends there.

Another thing... the reason why my parents didn't want to move me from my class last year where I was with Kate and them, was because of my dad, being my dad, felt that the class is not there for talking and stuff, it's there for working and... but it's not like that, it's more than that. Having Kate standing there, behind you, in your back, is not what's good for your grades, it's not... what is good for you emotionally.

**Tess:** *Did Kate recruit quite a few people?*

**May:** Before, yes, before she met Judy and me, she got another one of my good friends and she got a few other people and it... they just, I don't know... I think they became friends with her again afterwards, that's how seductive she is... that's how she works... you know, she takes people, she makes them smoke and then she ditches them...

**Tess:** *How does she do that?*

**May:** I don't know! No idea... And it works! She's pretty, she has a captivating personality because she is popular... ja, that's it (giggle) ja, everything just revolves around her and then she takes you and then she just throws you away. And even if you do end up smoking with her then you never become her true friend, but because of the personality that Judy had, she thought, "hey, hang on a second this person is actually worth keeping". And I was so afraid of what was going to happen to Judy, that I was going to have to let her go and do the things with Kate and then watch her bump her head.

**Tess:** *Sort of sit on the sidelines and see it happen*

**May:** Just watch, just watch... I mean, I wish I could have been there for her but she didn't want me and I tried to offer her advice and tell her that "you're going to lose everything you have, you're going to lose your relationship with

your mother, your relationships with your good friends, you're going to lose everything... and, uhmm, she wouldn't listen... she didn't want me, so then I just stood back and waited to see what was going to happen and that is when she started cheating and I watched her bump her head then, that is when she started smoking, and I watched her bump her head then, and all these things were happening and obviously she got through it with Kate and... because they went through it all together, they were both caught smoking, they were both caught cheating... so they were there for each other. It was a bond that they had! That's what I think... that's... I think that maybe the reason why she didn't come back to me was because of Kate and Kate was there for her. I don't know how...

***Tess:** Well, you could think of it that way, or you could think that they didn't really have anyone else. In desperate times people tend to cling to someone who is in the same boat as them.*

**May:** Maybe... I think it could also be like that but I think that they had already had established a very good friendship by that time. So they didn't just cling to each other because they were in the same situation. Now they are even closer. At that time they had already had a friendship and they knew what they were doing.

***Tess:** Do you miss Judy?*

**May:** No. I think that she... if she missed me then I would have missed her but she doesn't and she didn't. She didn't care about me and she didn't care what it was doing to me, what Kate was doing to me... she didn't care... so I don't miss her!

***Tess:** You were hurt by her...*

**May:** I was hurt by her and now that I am with my new friends I don't need her... and her smoking and her wrong things... ja, I don't miss her... I have better things. I have better friendships and more promising things in my life



than to have to worry about that and to miss people and that... I don't need that especially with my schedule...

**Tess:** *It sounds like you think of the future quite a bit as well... like you do think of your friendships lasting well into the future.*

**May:** I think Judy and I are pretty much done for. We were done for when she started cheating in the exams... that was like OK, that's your second chance, bye, bye. I think I have much more confidence... the new friends I am with have good heads on their shoulders, they would never smoke they would never think of doing anything like that ... they are very cautious about what they do, uhmm, but then again they still know how to do adventurous things and, with me there, they know what I've been through, they know I would shout at them if they do something like that... they know... They probably have better heads on their shoulders than I had when I was in that position. Because I would have, I would probably have gone there with Kate and Judy and they would never have done that... that's weird... I never thought about that....

**Tess:** *What?*

**May:** That, if they would have been in my position whether they would have gone and started doing everything with Kate and them... Anyway, I do think that it would have also been a desire of theirs to be popular. They have never made a point of wanting to be popular... but I think that they do have an urge... but I don't think they would have gone out of their way for something like that they wouldn't fall under peer pressure.

**Tess:** *Sounds like they are strong characters?*

**May:** They are very strong. They won't... all of my friends and even my other friends that I am not that close with wouldn't do that, especially since they wouldn't jeopardise their good marks and their reputation with the teachers and reputations with their parents... they are all very happy with their parents,

they all have wonderful families... their families are always there when they need them, uhmm... Ja, they would never do that and they are a very confident bunch of people, they know what they are doing.

***Tess:** You were saying before that you've learned from this experience and that you could help someone else in that situation. What would you do if you were to help someone... almost like a plan of action? How would you go about it. What would you do?*

**May:** Ok, so if I were to help somebody else, if they were in the same position as me, I would say that you have to have support behind you. It's very important that you have cushioning behind you that you can fall back on should bad things happen. Then another thing that's also important is that you have to have things to look forwards to... things that keep you going, you know that you wouldn't do something stupid...

***Tess:** Ok, like what would it be?*

**May:** Commit suicide (nervous giggle), like that's what I mean...

***Tess:** Did you think of that at some stage?*

**May:** Probably yeah, but I would have never done it. I'm scared of pain. I would never have done it. Uhmm, but if somebody had... but also, another reason why I would never do something like that is because I had done too much before and I had gone through too much. Now I had made this choice of not doing this now I was not going to throw it away by throwing my life away, kind of thing. You know. But I would never have done that even if would have gone through the worst time of my life... also because of my religion and stuff... it's not my place to decide when to go.

***Tess:** So what are those things to look forwards to? What were they for you?*

**May:** Some of it is materialistic stuff, like for instance your birthday... like you look forward to getting presents... all the attention will be on you... and also things like holidays and things like doing things that you like. Like sports, I love sports, so that's something to look forward to. So if I have had a hard day of homework today then tomorrow I will go and play netball and I will be excited about that. You know...it works the same way. That thing that you look forward to, you have to have that in order to be happy. You want to have something that you can strive towards, you know... that's what you want to do... that's what your focus is on and it also makes your life so much happier.

**Tess:** *It's also something that you're personally striving for. Like you love your sports, and that is an area of your life that does not necessarily involve friends... is that also quite useful because you can focus on other things instead of getting wrapped up in difficult social circumstances.*

**May:** It's good to take your mind off it and it also helps with the confidence. All of a sudden you think, "Oh I am so useless and all my friends hate me so I am a really bad person", and then you go play sport and you win medals and trophies... it helps so much... it helps more than you think it helps because you have a sense that you can actually do something. That you are capable of doing something... and it is important. I think that something like sport and also music... I also confided in that when I was going through all of that. Writing songs and poems, and uhhh, ja... and then also stuff that you enjoy. What also happened was that my marks gradually improved again and what happened was that it was all a chain reaction.... It helps a lot, it helps a hell of a lot...

**Tess:** *So we've spoken about support, and something to look forward to. So what other aspects would you consider?*

**May:** Ja... you definitely have to take on an out with the old and in with the new approach. You need to get rid of all the old things that you would associate with the bad times and even the things that caused the bad times. So what I did was that I went and I took... I left the Kate and Judy issue and

the bad marks and I left that behind and I focused on the positive things like, uhmm, my new friends, my improving grades, the things I was good at... so it's support, out with the old in with the new, and what was the other thing... oh ja, looking forward to something.

It is just a positive approach that probably goes with the out with the old in with the new approach. There is something in it that you... like, that is actually worth living for. There has to just be.... Even if there is nothing, if you can just take the worst situation and turn it around, it makes it a lot happier...

**Tess:** *Is it like a sense of purpose?*

**May:** Ja, ja... sense of purpose, sense of being a worthwhile individual and being worth the air and the oxygen and whatever. You want to have... you need to have a sense of "I can accomplish things, I am worthy".

**Tess:** *And those four points are seemingly intertwined with each other in a way... do you feel that they crumble to a large degree when you are in this difficult place. That you cannot think of the positive and look forward to something? Is it like a process that you follow?*

**May:** Before you realise these four things that I have mentioned, there is a time where you are numb... there is like nothing... it is actually unreal because you have nowhere to go... like when I was so angry with my mother when she did not let me go out with Kate but at the same time it was like a whole.... And I knew that everything bad was going to happen and I didn't want to get involved in that kind of situation. So is was torn and I was numb and I didn't know what to do. You know... it was like... you can't describe it with words, it is so... you are so alone, you are so alone and you are blank. And you just sit there and you're like: "what now?, what?" it is hard to describe. Actually you can't think because there is nothing to think about. And sometimes you don't want to think because you don't want to know what's coming ahead of you because you know something bad is going to happen.

You have this sense of foreboding always. And you're expecting the worst to happen... whether or not it happens is a different story.

It is like stage where you don't want to do anything but you know that you need to do something because you cannot stay like this for ever... you won't survive. It takes time to get over that stage... you need to open yourself... it is very difficult, but you need to let things come to you. Sometimes one can not only go and get things, but maybe one day somebody will come to you and they will become your best friend for the rest of your life. They might come to you and ask you why you are so alone why you are sitting there. Whether that happens all the time I don't know. You need to go out and try and help yourself instead of waiting for the help to come to you.

**Tess:** *What happened in your situation? Did you go out and help yourself?*

**May:** I helped myself. But in some cases, like, I think the support that I had was also... ja... I think I did go out and try and help myself. There was no way I was going to sit there all alone and beg for somebody to come talk to me. I am generally a very social person... I would be very unhappy if I didn't have any friends. So I knew that I had to do something and that is what got me. I think my confidence also got me through and that's what got me where I am.

**Tess:** **I think it's wonderful**

**May:** I'm quite proud of myself

**Tess:** *You should be! I think it's great!*

**May:** You don't get that sense of it's all in a day's work, ok (laughs)! ... It was like more than a year's work.

**Tess:** *It sounds like you are extremely mature about what happened to you. You seem to have that inner strength and I'm not sure everybody has that.*

**May:** Ja, I don't think anyone would have been able to handle it the way I did. I think if it had been one of the popular people in my position for example, and they would have had the same mentality as they have now, I don't think they would have gotten through it. They would have resorted to other methods.

**Tess:** *What kind of methods, May?*

**May:** Self harm and stuff

**Tess:** *What is your view of this self-harming method?*

**May:** Kate's whole 'sewerage pipe' (Laughs), suicide thing... I think the whole thing was a scene to get attention. That's just sick.

**Tess:** *But May, I am amazed that acts like that and also the bad girl image seems to attract people. Because that's what I'm getting, I'm getting smoking, I'm getting suicide attempts, I'm getting going out with older boys, kissing on the "playground" – all of that seems like those things that aren't exactly...*

**May:** Attractive?

**Tess:** *Yes, but also at the same time, they seem to be so attractive. They are the popular thing to do?*

**May:** Ja, but what they have done now... the good popular people they all pretend that they are so good. They all have this mentality of "Oh my gosh, I'll never smoke, I'll never drink, I'll never do that kind of stuff" but what do they do, if push comes to shove and they are sitting with this guy that they like sitting in front of them they will do whatever they can to get their attention... they are going to do *anything*... they will do anything. And they can say

whatever they want to say and that they are genuine and sincere about what they are saying, but they are too immature. They don't know what they don't know...they've never been through it... they don't know what's going on they don't know... if they are in that position they'll crush, they will crush and it is so obvious what they will do.

**Tess:** *Sounds like sticking to your guns and being genuine with yourself is really the key to this whole thing... to actually stand by yourself and not expect others to boost your confidence.*

**May:** Yes! You can actually add that to our list of points. Stand by yourself, believe in yourself!... you need to have that self-confidence behind you.

**Tess:** *I think you have done well May*

**May:** Thank you

**Tess:** *You have been incredibly open and honest about your experience, May, thank you. Is there anything else you would like to say or is there anything you would like to ask me?*

**May:** It is nice to talk about all this stuff and tell people about it... To sum everything up... the groups people are in are judged not always by their personality. It is actually very little about their personality that determines what groups people are in, it is more: looks, it's more, habits, like smoking and stuff... it's your friends... or your 'not-so-friends'... people who you pretend are your friends...

**Tess:** *So how far you are prepared to go to jeopardise who you are?*

**May:** Ja, ja. It's basically who you stand with and who people see you with. That's what I think. Maybe it is different. But what I have been through and I look at it and I just think: "no". I mean their whole purpose... they think that they have lots of friends. They think they are so much above everybody else

but they are actually not. They are like forty feet below you... below me. They are actually way below... they probably have broken down homes and probably have no friends. They just look like they have friends. They are probably deeply tragic people! That's what I think. They can act so well but I think they are actually very unhappy people. If you were to ask one of my friends they would probably tell you the exact same thing. They might not have the experience behind them but they know from other people's experience about that.

***Tess:** So they didn't have to go through that to know what it is like?*

**May:** Ja, because they have learned from others and from me. From talking and that they know exactly what I went through... I don't know if they feel it... I don't think they can feel what I've been through. But I think they wouldn't be stupid enough to do something like that. They would advise people otherwise. Like I would do. I would advise people to turn around. You know... go the other way... the other way is better. That is what I would say. You know, I wouldn't count on being popular to be happy.

***Tess:** It's amazing how friendships between girls can become so complicated...*

**May:** That's it! With girls you always get that yakking behind each others back. You cannot tell girls something without them going to somebody else and telling them. And that happens with everybody... I mean I do it; my friends do it; all the other people do it... because it is a mannerism that we cannot say what we want to the people's faces. With guys, they beat each other up and that's it. I had to stop fights with guys... they jump on each other and punch each other and then like it's all great after that. After that it's done and they have sorted things out and they know their places and everything, you know.

With girls you think that you are so much better than everybody else and that when you talk about people, be it to their face or behind their back you can't be genuine. You can't be genuine because how can you say to somebody's



face.... Ok, lets say that somebody would go to another person and say to their face that they didn't like the way they were behaving and that they find them annoying and whatever. I think that that is the.... I would applaud them for that. Now... it is being horrible...uhmm yeah, I wouldn't applaud them for that but it is better than talking behind somebody's back. You know... and that is why we get so angry with people... with girls. That is why we have such huge fights where you ignore each other and you have this grudge against somebody until one person is mature enough to say sorry. Or they just don't say sorry and it just goes on forever or until you leave school and you just don't care. But that's how bad it gets. That's why guys would rather just swing a fist and get it over with.

**Tess:** *Why do you think girls don't do that. Why do you think girls are so reluctant to just say: "listen here, what you did really upset me"*

**May:** Because they don't have the guts. They don't have the guts to go to them and say to them: "Hey, just don't do this", they are not mature enough.

That's probably why guys beat each other... because they are not mature. They can't talk it over. Girls are much more mature than guys, that is proven. They will always have that sense of maturity and the guys don't have that. So they probably don't even know any better. They just swing a punch at each other and then they are done. I don't know if that happens with the older guys but it does happen with the younger guys.

**Tess:** *It does seem to sort their problems out*

**May:** Ja, it does work pretty well (laughs). It does because afterwards they are best friends again and they know their place, they sort it out and then done! With girls it's so prolonged and it's like horrible.

**Tess:** *Do you think it is ever resolved with girls or is there that lack of trust where the same problem comes up again when things aren't spoken about?*

**May:** Usually problems resurface. But it depends on the person that you are fighting with. Like, if I have a fight with one of my friend, one of us always says sorry and we apologise. One of us would come to our senses because we have good heads on our shoulders. Maybe with the more popular people they don't have that maturity... or they probably do have the same maturity as us but they don't exercise it. So they can't solve problems so easily. But I think when they do have a problem with someone then they might talk about them behind their backs and then eventually the other person will find out and then confront the one that was talking behind the back and then they talk about it and maybe sort it out. Because the one has been busted for talking behind other's back...she has been found out and now she's that much... that's like minus two points for her. She is already at a disadvantage and stooped to a lower level. When the girl confronts her and asks her "why were you talking behind my back? And then the other will explain to her what she has been doing wrong and then the girl will disagree and then you have a fight and then that's when everything goes mad! That is when you have your true point of tension. And then it is where you come to the more serious things where they get emotionally depressed and stuff... so it's all about the way you deal with criticism behind your back and the way you confront them face to face. It is a whole weird thing depending on your personality what you will do.

***Tess:** It does sound like a person who is comfortable with themselves will be able to handle criticism better and they will be able to go to others and confront the issues. It sounds like a type of maturity and inner strength is needed?*

**May:** That is a good point because I think that the way that girls act is determined by the way that they can fight with each other. So like their personalities will determine the way they will be able to handle situations and that, so you can see how the person behaves, with their mannerisms and reactions and actions how they will handle something like that. Whether they will be able to handle criticism behind their back or whether they will handle direct criticism, and which one they will be able to handle more.

**Tess:** *It sound like girls are very much in tune with spotting weaknesses and they will know that this one will not be able to handle this and...*

**May:** Well, I don't know if they will be able to think that far, I would never have thought that far. I would have never thought of targeting people's weaknesses. I would have just gone the way I would have... If I have a problem with you I will go to you and say to you "hey"... but that is just me.

**Tess:** *But it does sound like for some it can be a kind of experiment where they will try different things on people and see what happens.*

**May:** Yes that is possible... it depends how sick you are... like, Kate would do something like that.

**Tess:** *It does show a lot of insight into people... in other words, she is not unskilled socially and knows how she can influence people.*

**May:** Oh no definitely not. She is very much in tune with how she can affect others...

**Tess:** *Well, May. I want to thank you sincerely for taking the time to talk to me about your experiences. I have really enjoyed speaking to you and listening to your views.*

**May:** Thank you. I had a good time too.