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Laura R. Hammel
Cleveland State University

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Laura R. Hammel
Cleveland State University
Ursuline College

Abstract

Although strides recently have been made to facilitate the understanding of relational aggression and its consequences, one significant limitation has been the lack of research on long-term impact. Through a grounded theory approach, this study examines how resiliency behaviors exhibited by victims of relational aggression during their adolescent years aid in the development of trusting adult friendships.

Bullying and harassment are pervasive problems in schools. It is estimated that 1.6 million school-aged individuals in the United States are bullied at least once a week (Olweus & Limber, 1999). Bullying leads to poor academic performance, low-self esteem, early dropout, child suicide, and violent acts of victim retaliation such as those that unfolded in Colorado, California, and Wisconsin in which 71 percent of the attackers reported feeling bullied by others prior to the incidents (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005; Pace, Lowery & Lamme, 2004).

A purposeful and frequent activity, bullying incorporates power and intent to harm and causes physical, psychological and emotional pain (Rigby, 1997). While these results are common among victims, bullying techniques typically differ between age groups and genders. For instance, relational aggression, identified as a technique used primarily by girls (Coyne & Archer, 2005), is not overt or easily identified compared with the physically aggressive acts most often associated with bullying. Relational aggression is defined by Coloroso (2004) as:

> The systematic diminishment of an individual's sense of self through ignoring, isolating, excluding, or shunning. Like all bullying, relational bullying springs from powerful feelings of dislike or contempt toward somebody considered to be worthless, inferior or undeserving of respect. This contempt often arises from deeply rooted attitudes that mirror social and cultural prejudices related to race, gender, religion, physical attributes or mental abilities. (p. 23)

Relational aggression is characterized by interpersonal and psychological abuses such as verbal harassment, exclusion from activities, name-calling, and initiation of rumors (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). Not only does relational aggression appear in classrooms and on playgrounds, but also it is prevalent in the popular media. In fact, research shows that it is present in 92% of programs popular among British adolescents (Coyne & Archer, 2005).

Furthermore, relational aggression is considered by some theorists as the most dangerous bullying behavior to self-esteem as adolescents' social self-perceptions are derived largely from their subjective interpretation of how they are treated within the peer group (e.g., Goodwin, 2002; Lunde, Frisen, & Hwang, 2006; Simmons, 2002; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). One theory ascertains that high-status female students engage in and pull off relationally aggressive behavior successfully in school settings, in part, because their status and other personal traits recognized as positive may partially account for the difficulty in identification (Vaillancourt et al.). If high-status bullies display a number of positive characteristics, it is easy for teachers, administrators, parents and peers to give them the "benefit of the doubt" regarding their negative social behaviors. And because all bullies do not have low esteem, identification is further complicated.

Rivers and Smith (1994) posit that the use of relationally aggressive behavior depends upon maturation and manipulation of a fully developed social infrastructure—appearing in girls as young as eight and peaking when they reach 11 years. Also there are indications that girls possess both socially advanced skills and verbal prowess that allow them to choose their words and amuse others by verbally attacking their victims—either directly or indirectly. The social sophistication displayed at a younger age by more and more females enables them to go beyond physical aggressiveness (e.g., Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Vaillancourt et al., 2003).

Highly powerful bullies—as opposed to low or moderately powerful bullies—are more popular and more liked. In fact, gangs of girl bullies rate high in terms of the current youth culture by knowing the newest fashion trends and the latest idols. It is possible that they are, even if frightening, admired. Regardless of power status, but in line with gender-role stereotypes, female bullies are perceived by their peers as being more relationally aggressive than physically aggressive, more attractive but less athletic, and as having greater peer intimacy than their male counterparts (Vaillancourt et al., 2003).

Underwood (2003) suggests using the "two cultures theory" as a framework for understanding why relational aggression, rather than physical aggression, may be more common in girls. She theorizes that boys' and girls' peer groups are so different that they essentially are separate cultures that invariably lead to different developmental trajectories. In essence, the forms and functions of girls' peer groups—which are typically smaller, more intimate, and more relationship focused—provide a unique environment in which social aggression is likely to be effective and to flourish. Peer groups are microcosms of the larger society and, as such, mirror social mores that perpetuate environments. The innate side of gender may be universal and not culturally specific, but how it gets manifested in any given society depends on the norms, traditions and conventions of that culture. Ultimately, culture, as well as gender, should be considered when identifying or examining bullying behavior—as the aggressive actions could be different.

Another developmental explanation for girls reporting higher levels of relational victimization is that they tend to invest a tremendous amount of energy into social comparisons and peer acceptance (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Gilligan, 1982). Relying more heavily on peer feedback to inform their self-worth, adolescent girls may be particularly susceptible to both the impressions of others regarding physical appearance or attractiveness and to being accepted as part of a social network (Eder & Kinney, 1995). Like the high-status student being given the "benefit of the doubt," these bullies are often seen as displaying typical adolescent behavior by adults. When perceived victimization goes unnoticed, students are less likely to feel safe in their schools. Making adult intervention even more difficult is that the negative consequences associated with being bullied, on a single occasion or repeatedly, may not be evident until long after the incident has occurred.

Yet this behavior is given tacit approval by American society. According to Brown and Gilligan (1992), relational aggression is considered a female rite of passage and exacerbated by the absence of access to constructive conflict resolution. In fact, girls approaching adolescence often disavow their feelings and suppress their experience in order to preserve relationships. According to Brown and Gilligan (1992), "women excuse, justify, or actively impose on girls the self-censorship that they once suffered, promoting an intergenerational cycle of silencing which deadens relationships and undermines the potential for change" (p. v).

Despite studies suggesting the detrimental impact of bullying, a thorough exploration of the long-term consequences of relational aggression is missing from existing literature, in particular its impact on a victim's ability to form adult friendships. Moreover, research suggests that resiliency strategies are imperative for the survival of individuals marginalized by a variety of physical and emotional abuses, yet relationally aggressive infractions have not been studied from a resiliency perspective.

Therefore, this study examines whether resiliency characteristics in victims of adolescent relational aggression helped or hindered formation of adult friendships. The following questions guided the research: (a) in what ways does a childhood experience of bullying create trust issues for women in adult friendships, and (b) can women develop healthy relationships after they have been the victims of relational aggression?

One approach to studying a victim's relationship-building efficacy is through the lens of resiliency—or an individual's ability to bounce back after repeated traumatic experiences. Research in this area indicates that victims of physical and mental abuse are able to overcome some long-term psychological effects and ultimately lead satisfying and productive lives through a combination of innate personality traits, such as temperament and skills, and distractions, like sleeping or eating (Bogar & Hulse-Killacky, 2006; Everall, Altrows, & Paulson, 2006; Grossman & Moore, 1994).

In a longitudinal resiliency study, Herman (1992) discovered that one child out of ten showed an unusual capacity to withstand an adverse early environment providing the child was characterized as having an alert, active temperament, unusual sociability and communication skills, and a strong sense of being able to affect his or her own destiny. Additionally, certain personality traits and processes have been identified as fostering resilience, including:

> (a) special talents or skills, (b) a sense of humor, (c) creativity, (d) an ability to plan, dream, hope, and fantasize, (e) an ability to tolerate pain, (f) insight, (g) independence, (h) self-respect, (i) an ability to restore self-esteem when it is temporarily lost, (j) a capacity for learning, (k) cognitive flexibility, (l) an interest in information seeking, (m) good school performance, (n) good impulse control, (o) determination, (p) social consciousness, (q) internal locus of control, and (r) a philosophy of life that offers personal meaning. (Flach, 1997, p. 287)

To escape the barrage of abuse, victims often remove themselves or find temporary sanctuary by creating diversions or by self-soothing. Identified by Eder (1997) as states of distraction, (a) sleeping, (b) eating, (c) immersion in books, television, or movies, (d) physical activity and (e) anti-social behaviors like shoplifting or reckless driving are often used to create distance between the individual and the abuse. When bully victims are absorbed in other activities, they can be in another world in which their personal characteristics do not elicit hostility from others.

A victim's ability to establish and maintain at least one relationship—with a pet, family member, or peer—allows the victim to develop an ability for constructive interaction which can offset the impact of relational abuse (Higgins, 1994). Higgins also contends that even the most basic expression of warmth and compassion can matter for decades.

Method

Framework

Because the inclusion of the victim's perspective over time is an important addition to the theoretical and clinical views on the ramifications of relational aggression, content analysis of published resiliency studies of situational childhood abuses, such as sexual, physical and emotional, was coupled with grounded-theory based research in this study. I analyzed responses through constant comparison with the goal of illuminating how personal resiliency tendencies fostered survival during and an ability to develop friendships following relationally aggressive situations.

Participants and Setting

A convenience sample of three women, Julie, Susan and Caroline, participated in this study. They were recruited by personal solicitation or were referred by other contacts. Research criteria specified that participants (a) were women between the ages of 21-45, (b) had been bullied during their adolescent years, (c) currently had satisfying careers of their choosing, (d) felt relatively content with themselves, and (e) maintained a close relationship with at least one woman. Participants all lived in northeast Ohio at the time of the interviews.

The interviews occurred at convenient sites in which participants felt safe discussing their experiences. I interviewed two individuals at places of employment, and the third chose to meet at a coffee shop near her home. As long as the participant felt comfortable, the setting was otherwise incidental.

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis focused on participant perspective and personal accounts. Using a purposeful sampling approach, I collected data through semi-structured interviews and case study questions. These methods, respectively, were designed to provide opportunities for information to emerge spontaneously and to validate information provided in interviews.

I used an interview protocol containing queries and interviewer follow-up prompts to ensure that respondents provided information required to examine the global research questions. The guide helped keep the interviews on track. This approach proved successful in that all of the women shared stories with little prompting and without undue anxiety.

I developed the interview questions, piloted them with a colleague, and then fine-tuned them (see Appendix A). The pilot process proved to be helpful in several ways. First, it allowed for practice conducting an interview. Secondly, it identified redundancies and inappropriate phrasing in the questions. As a result, I rewrote questions prior to the administration of the survey. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed within five hours after each interview and ranged from 1 to 1.5 hours each.

The first set of interview questions probed memories about adolescent bullying experiences, including the participants' most significant encounter, their emotions around it, who, if anyone, championed them, and how they coped with the aggression. The second interview asked about current relationships in which they were involved.

Following the first round of data collection, a case study question was created based on schema from problem-based learning literature. The case study incorporated items from the research objective and explored the question: Can women develop healthy relationships after they have been the victims of relational aggression? (Hall, 2006) (see Appendix B). Following the personal interviews, I sent the case study via email to each participant. In addition to addressing the research question in a different way, the case also served to check the validity of interview responses to determine if the questions posed actually led the respondents to the stated research objectives.

An Introduction to the Participants

Susan, Julie and Caroline each had a unique story to tell about her experience and subsequent trauma of relational aggression. Susan, a Caucasian, married woman from Ohio at the time of the interview, grew up in a suburb about 5 miles from Cleveland. A stand-out athlete at the private high school she attended, Susan was bullied by a group of girls because of her prowess on the field. She dealt with the trauma by "walking away" from her tormentors and subsequently avoiding them, while pouring her energy into her game. Susan avoided telling her parents because she did not want to worry them and felt that telling school officials would only escalate the issue. She explained:

> I kept ignoring the girls at first. Then the first bullying started, when they would knock my books out of my hands. I got really angry when they pushed me down the stairs but I was afraid to do anything because I didn't want to get expelled or anything. I wanted to punch them or kick their asses but one of the girl's fathers was the coach for the boys' sports teams so I knew anything I said would be ignored.

Injured by the fall, Susan could not continue sports and switched schools. Anger created a wall between her and her parents, and she turned to gang membership for support.

Julie, a Caucasian, married woman living in Ohio at the time of the interview, grew up in rural northeastern Ohio and attended a small, homogenously-populated high school. She was bullied by a group of girls because of her size and her family's stature in the community. Julie, however, was bullied in concert with the rest of the girls in her group which provided some in-group empathy and support. Nevertheless, she feared the confrontation, which happened in the lunchroom, even though she rationalized that she would not be harmed in front of the teachers and other students. She said:

> I remember being scared to death to go to the cafeteria, not even thinking in my own mind that they couldn't even do that in the cafeteria. I think we just sat down at our own table and a couple of (the bullies) went by and they would say things to us, like you're this or you're that…. We're going to kick your butt when you walk out to your car tonight… just kind of harassing us. They threw some things on us, too. I just remember sitting there thinking I wanted lunch to be over.

To deal with the bullying, Julie and her group avoided the lunch room and she changed her appearance by dressing in a more understated way. However, she did not solicit help until her anxiety grew:

> I remember being embarrassed to tell my parents that people wanted to kick my butt because I didn't want to be perceived like that. I was physically small and more or less scared that they would really hurt me. I feared confrontation in general so even when they'd say something to me, I'd get completely nervous and scared. My brother did say something to these girls on more than one occasion. I didn't ask him to do it, but he knew what was going on and he kind of did it when he was in the right place at the right time.

Caroline, a divorced African-American mother of one, lived on the East Coast at the time her bullying experiences took place. She attended a large urban school and used public transportation to get to and from school. Her bullying experiences occurred predominantly on the bus and were conducted by a group of girls. Caroline's mother was not supportive about Caroline's issues, but Caroline could confide in her father. While he did not take action, he was a sounding board. Caroline dealt with the trauma by burying herself in books and schoolwork, sleeping, avoiding her tormentors by intentionally missing the bus, and changing her appearance. Eventually, she moved and the bullying stopped. She explained:

> They would draw pictures of me and put them up. I would wait until all the buses they had specifically for our school left, and then I would have to take just the main bus line so I wouldn't be on the bus with them. When I would be on the bus with them, I would be the person that everyone talked about and then, on top of that, they would throw things at me or push me. It came to a head one day when I was trying to get on the bus and one of the girls sat down on the seat and put her leg across the aisle to the other seat and said, "I dare you to walk past me." And I stood there. The bus driver was screaming for everybody to move, the kids were pushing me, some were pushing me into her, and I knocked her leg off the seat and that set off the chain reaction of her hitting me. The bus driver put us all off, so there was me—and four girls—beating me up and the rest of the bus of kids watching. So the next day at school I come having been beat up and so not only did I have the extra stuff going on then… I had a black eye.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam (2002), theory building involves the identification of a core category or the main conceptual element through which all others are connected. With resiliency as the focus, I searched the interview transcripts for key categories relevant to the research questions using a scheme of open and axial coding (pp. 143-149). I also consulted Everall et al. (2006) multi-categoried, four-domain framework for resiliency of victims of sexual abuse as a secondary method of identifying resiliency. Data analysis considered social, emotional, and cognitive processes and goal-directed action to determine how participants created positivism in their lives despite victimization. As an active participant in data collection, I used rigorous coding procedures to understand how bully victims came to form trusting relationships, particularly with women.

During the open coding process, themes of trauma, survival strategies, and personal attributes emerged from the data, underscored by social, cognitive and emotional processes. Subsequently, I incorporated the themes into a chart (see Table 1). I read each interview transcript twice to determine thematic incidences. Using axial coding, I then grouped comments and incidents into the column I judged to be the best fit. The core category of resiliency was substantiated during the selective coding process.

I used the same framework in the case study analysis to determine if respondents employed strategies in concert with resiliency tendencies. A comparison of case study responses to personal interviews further validated the hypothesis of resiliency in bully victims. A final analysis of participant perspectives using supporting literature indicated that friendship and trust building after victimization is an active process that can be described best through the lens of resiliency.

Findings

Previous studies present resiliency theories related to verbal and physical aggression (Everall et al., 2006), but less research has been done on the victims of relational aggression. This study concurs with the literature that an individual's ability to negotiate and survive bullying experiences is testament to his/her resiliency and introduces new ideas about the long-term effects of adolescent relational aggression on women's ability to form trusting relationships.

Commonalities existed in both the content of the victims' experiences and how they addressed them despite age and racial differences among the three participants. Additional themes emerged from the language participants used to describe their experiences of bullying and their adoption of coping strategies (see Table 1). The language of trauma,

Table 1
Actions and Emotions as Related by Victims Indicating Resiliency Tendencies

Trauma	Survival	Personality Traits
Scared	Used avoidance strategy	Relating to others
Nervous	Confided in group	Facing feelings
Feared confrontation	Family intervention	Shifting perspectives
Embarrassed	Moved away	Taking action
Lack of confidence	Hid	
Depressed	Changed appearance	
Insecure	Retaliated	
Physical abuse/hospitalization	Fought	
Felt unsafe	Slept	
Fear	Journaled	
Low-self esteem	Excelled at sports	
Pushed family away	Joined a gang	

indicated in the first column, and the survival mechanisms, in the middle column, correlate with the last column showing personality-trait categories, which have been identified as determinants of individual resiliency in supporting literature (Everall et al., 2006).

In addition to a common discourse, participants reported other similar anecdotal evidence. First, in all cases bullies and victims were often friends or acquaintances. Julie's tormentors were a group of older girls in her school. Caroline was bullied by a gang of girls who rode her bus, and Susan's friends and teammates victimized her. These findings support extant research indicating that relational aggression is generally directed at friends or same-sex peers (Simmons, 2002).

Second, participants experienced traumatic feelings of fear, anxiety, low-self esteem, and lack of safety. In all accounts, the victims pushed away family members or interventions unless the interventions were performed without their knowledge. Of her experience, Susan said: "I did lots of bad things to people then. I pushed them away… like my parents. Uh, you don't wanna do that to your parents. But I was angry."

The women's feelings of guilt, inferiority and a core of ever-present existential anxiety resulted from human disconnection. They were reluctant to seek help which led to isolation. The recurring rejection by a social group is experienced by an individual as punishment for simply existing (Perera, 1986). So, having grown accustomed to shouldering the burden alone, these victims no longer felt that they could ask for assistance.

Third, while none of the participants could pinpoint what instigated the bullying, they all had well-defined theories related to the shape and size of their bodies. Physical appearance and athleticism were reported as primary causes of bullying in all cases. Ironically, at the same time that being overweight is reason for ridicule, being athletic is also grounds for bullying (Eder, 1997). Fried and Fried (1996) write that "being overweight makes one a prime target for abuse" (p. 11).

While small in stature (an attribute she claims prevented her from standing up to the bullies), Julie also was a noted athlete—yet she was the subject of ridicule by a group of older high school girls. Susan reported being overweight but athletically gifted—singled out for trophies, awards and often in the media for her athletic prowess: "I would still get teased sometimes about my size. But it wasn't so bad because I was good at sports and that made me feel good about myself." While not athletic, but self-described as overweight, Caroline said:

> It started with me having glasses and continued with them noticing that I had crossed eyes. So it kind of started when they called me the names that had to do with crossed eyes, and then the glasses issue, and then it went from that to my skin because I had acne. (They proceeded to attack) my clothing choices and then my hair. Plus, I was chubby. This chain reaction created a phenomenon in which I became the person in class that everyone messed with.

Because fault can be found with anything, once someone has been targeted, there is little they can do right and the abuse escalates (Samuels, 2002). In her interview, Caroline referred to this phenomenon as a "chain reaction" and nothing she did, including resorting to violence, could rectify the situation.

Even though the respondents in this study made personal choices that at times contradicted these determinants (such as physical retaliation and joining a gang), they possessed a number of personal characteristics and strategies that enhanced their resiliency. For example, Susan exhibited an extreme tolerance to pain—even continuing competitive sports with an undetected broken wrist. Julie persevered in finding self-esteem in her prowess as an athlete, and Caroline's school performance helped her cope.

Bogar and Hulse-Killacky (2006) explain that "to be resilient an individual must first be exposed to a traumatic situation, then act in ways that provide protection from negative affects that might typically occur" (p. 319). In other words, what serves as a protective factor for one person may be a

risk factor for someone else, so protective processes tend to be unique to individuals. This proved true in this study as each woman used a different type of personal strength as an escape mechanism. Caroline used avoidance and escapism (into literature); Julie changed her appearance by donning less-preppy clothing; and Susan increased her intensity toward sports.

Everall et al. (2006) report that resiliency is aided when social support exists—and resilient individuals seek out alternative sources of support if needed. This played out in the respondents' lives as they gravitated toward groups or individuals. For instance, Julie relied on her "group" for solace and empathy. Susan acculturated with a gang in order to feel she belonged. Emotional outlets were an essential tool used by the participants to handle the trauma. For example, Susan relied on her boyfriend, Caroline wrote in her journals, and Julie talked to her brother or group members.

Additionally, each participant took charge of her life by taking action. According to Everall et al. (2006), action serves as a distraction from negative thinking and provides temporary relief from emotional pain. To escape persecution, Julie reported that, "We stayed out of their way. If we got near them, they'd say stuff to us and threaten us." Likewise, Caroline avoided her tormentors by waiting until all the buses had left for the school and took the main bus line so she would not have to ride with the bullies. Susan ignored her tormentors—until the bullying became physical. Eventually, Caroline moved to another city; Susan changed schools; and Julie finally confided in her parents who took action to stop the attacks.

All women excelled at scholastics or sports or both. Julie and Susan reported an increased sense of self-esteem and worth due to their prowess in school and sports, indicating that this enabled them to cope better with the bullying. Caroline did not excel at sports, but was a self-described excellent student who wrote and read a lot in her spare time to escape her tormentors. Susan said:

> There was a group of friends I had in elementary school and we all played sports. We were friends then but I would still get teased sometimes about my size. But it wasn't so bad because I was good at sports and that made me feel good about myself.

Caroline used school work and literature to escape and reported, "I read a lot and wrote a lot in journals." Julie reported: "I guess just like being involved in sports and things like that kept my mind off it and made me feel good about myself." Being in charge of cognitive processes and the ability to redirect thoughts into more positive channels are additional resiliency tools (Everall et al., 2006). In this case, each participant's ability to use cognitive processes to distract or self-soothe helped her control negative thinking patterns.

To an extent, these findings support the theory that resiliency is promoted by the ability to establish and maintain at least one relationship (Higgins, 1994). Julie and Susan chose to affiliate with a group in order to cope, while Caroline disassociated herself from an outside group but was able to change her home life (which was not contributing to her feelings of self worth) so that she was in a more affirming situation. Interestingly, members of Julie's group also were bullied and she maintained friendships with members of that group into adulthood. Susan selected a more self-destructive route and joined a gang after her athletic career was ended by a particularly vicious and physical bullying incident that shattered her wrist.

Finally, it is interesting to note that physical separation was the only relief from bullying that the victims were granted. In all cases, either the victim or the bullies moved away or changed schools. Julie confided that the following year, when she was a sophomore, her tormentors went to another school—so the bullying stopped for the remainder of her high school years.

Discussion and Implications

Based on the perspectives and accounts of Julie, Caroline and Susan, the results of this study suggest that certain individual traits, developed as or through coping mechanisms during experiences of adolescent relational aggression, led to resiliency which, in turn, helped these individuals develop an ability to form trusting relationships. Conversely, the absence of these traits, and subsequent undeveloped coping mechanisms, appear to have hindered the formation of trusting adult relationships in participants.

For instance, consistent with previous research (Everall, et. al, 2006; Smith & Carlson, 1997), the women demonstrating fewer resiliencies during and after the trauma seemed less able to negotiate functional adult relationships, indicating that social-emotional support is essential for developing resiliency and that the lack of this support during trauma inhibits future healing. Resiliency factors for these participants seem to be inextricably linked to one another, enabling positive steps in one area to produce positive changes and added momentum to the entire process.

This study supports a call for more research that will tease out a resiliency effect in bully victims, and it also presents a possible theory that all resiliency factors need to be present to ensure full recovery from the trauma of bullying. In their accounts, Caroline and Susan reported the least amount of positive social support which appears to have affected their choices of coping mechanisms and, subsequently, their ability to negotiate trusting relationships. They used more emotion-focused coping strategies—also called passive strategies—when external stressors seemed beyond their control (Smith & Carlson, 1997). This contrasts with the problem-focused coping, or active, strategies that Julie used more consistently in her attempt to actively alter the stressor, which ultimately enhanced her resiliency.

In the resiliency literature, emotion-focused coping is portrayed as creating a more helpless pattern in a victim,

whereas problem-focused coping is active and carried out when the victim believes she has the opportunity to change a situation (Smith & Carlson, 1997). This pattern is played out in participants' accounts of current relationships. According to Susan:

> I don't have any close women friends because women are petty. I'm still angry about what happened in high school. I have a lot of anger. At work, I'm up for a promotion and there is this woman who is calling people up and saying bad things about me because she wants the job. In a way I don't care because I have a thick skin, but I'm still angry about the physical stuff that happened in high school. Men just tell it like it is, and I like that. I'm close with my mom now—does that count for a close woman friend? I don't tell her everything, though. I'm not sure I'd tell any woman everything.

Likewise, when asked about confronting a situation with a "trusted" friend in a case study question (see Appendix B), Julie and Caroline provided responses that correlated with the coping mechanisms they developed during their bullying experiences. Julie and Caroline said:

> Julie: We talk daily so we have disagreements frequently about things but more often than not, I'll just say "I disagree" and give her my point and we can move on. We're at the point where we understand that we both don't have the same opinions. We may try to persuade one another, but I'm not mad if she doesn't take my point of view as her own.

> Caroline: I don't get close to anyone because I don't want the same thing that happened to me as a child to happen as an adult. And if I push people away then they can't know enough about me to hurt me. If there is confrontation, then I'm done. I have this one friend who called me out on it, and that's when I realized what I was doing. We had a disagreement about something, and it seemed like she was attacking me and my parenting skills. We didn't talk for a few days. She called me and said that she knew that we could disagree, but that I would then push her away. I still talk with her a couple of times a month, but I stopped telling her stuff and I don't trust her. And that's what I do because I don't want to give anyone any ammunition to bully me. I think as an adult I have more control over my life and who is around me and that's how I like it. I don't have to ride the bus anymore.

This research suggests that when the study participants experienced success across all of the resiliency domains, in particular maintaining at least one healthy social relationship during the trauma, they were more successful in future relationships. Absent one or more resiliency traits, these former bully victims struggled with trust as adults.

Interventions

Ultimately, recognizing relational aggression as a form of bullying is an important consideration for school-based efforts to reduce the behavior. An estimated 30% of students nationwide are either bullies or victims, but nearly 25% of teachers report that they do not think it necessary to intervene in the behavior (Feinberg, 2003). Paradoxically, bullying often is viewed as necessary and positive by people who think that children need to relate in this manner to transition to adults, particularly when it is in the form of relational aggression (Simmons, 2002). In other words, bullying is "okay" because it teaches a lesson about what should be expected from relationships later in life.

Frighteningly, these adult constructs make it possible for teachers, parents, and administrators to conclude that aggressive behavior is, in fact, not abuse but rather, a learning and growing experience. Because of the complexity involved and absent the tools needed to recognize, understand and mediate aggression, adults have further justification to ignore relational issues. Failure to stop relational aggression implies tacit approval; therefore the prevalence and surreptitiousness of the action demand that teachers and other adults become more aware of the bullying behavior that is perpetrated and possibly legitimized when engaged in by both genders. It is for these reasons that bullying in schools and finding effective solutions for managing this conflict are challenges for the leadership of educational organizations.

Many successful intervention programs are based, in part, on Olweus' (1997) work that targets the context in which bullying occurs and the behavior of both bully and victim. While his program does not differentiate between gender or physical and relational aggression, it provides a solid underpinning to creating an anti-bullying culture that promotes learned positive behavior for both students and adults, zero-tolerance of adult bullying, and meeting the needs of individuals. School psychologists and other trained mental health professionals are critical to making this process work. Olweus' approach has been shown to reduce bullying by 50% and includes (a) early interventions that target specific risk factors and teach positive behavior and critical-thinking skills at the classroom level, including lessons, discussion and parent meetings, (b) intensive individual interventions that provide bullies and victims with individual support through meetings with students and parents, counseling, and sustained child and family supports, and (c) a school wide foundation that offers universal interventions; a value system based on caring, respect, and personal responsibility; positive discipline and supports; clear behavioral expectations and consequences; skills development; and increased adult supervision and parental involvement.

Likewise, Simmons (2002) provides strategies for policy making and teaching geared toward parents and educators. She focuses her attention on relational aggression and con-

tends that active listening is the most vital contribution from parents. While there is not much a parent can do to alleviate the problem, offering a refuge at home can help a victim survive. Working with a child—allowing her some autonomy in strategizing—provides her the power she needs, but feels she is lacking, as a victim. Getting the facts, making sure the classroom teacher knows, asking for a seating change, encouraging the formation of protective social bonds with other students are effective parental interventions. Also—helping a child choose activities in which she will make a contribution, rather than be judged by what she is wearing, can alleviate popularity contests. Passion for a sport, hobby, or volunteering can move a child out of the social misfortune in which she finds herself at school and vault her to a position in which she is making a difference. Outside of the family, Simmons (2002) advocates an infrastructure with two main components: regulation and education.

At the time of Simmons' writings, the regulatory approach to relational aggression was virtually nonexistent. School districts set broad guidelines for students, allowing some schools to be strict about specific antibullying policies while others hoped the issue would disappear by avoiding it. Recently, as a byproduct of the Safe Schools initiative in the No Child Left Behind legislation, most states have mandated that schools create policies that include anti-bullying language regarding relational aggression (www.nichd.nih.gov, 2007). Simmons suggests further that reasonable rules that can be applied consistently without regard to family, social status, race, or gender should prohibit specific behaviors, such as rumor spreading, alliance building, secret telling, and severe episodes of nonverbal aggression. She also recommends that classroom teachers ban behaviors such as sighing, snorting, eye-rolling, or back-turning, and socialize girls away from these actions. A teacher can integrate lessons with stories about children who experience relational aggression or openly discuss her own history with bullying.

In a study by Bosworth, Espelage, DuBay, Dahlberg, and Daytner (1996), students participated in a multimedia violence-prevention intervention called SMART Talk (Students Managing Anger Resolution Together). The program was grounded in Bandura's social learning theory, Knapczyk's role-model theory and a psycho-educational intervention program called ART (originally developed for juvenile delinquents) and designed to help middle-school students practice social skills. The program's goal was to decrease the number and intensity of aggressive and violent incidents by engaging students in computer-based games, simulations, graphics, cartoons and interactive interviews that impart nonviolent conflict-resolution skills. The researchers concluded that, as an intervention strategy, SMART Talk was appealing to students due to its interactive, multi-media approach and that when used to enhance an organization's conflict-management program, it provided an additional resource that met the learning needs of students in the middle grades.

DeRosier and Marcus (2005) tested the long-term effectiveness of a social-skills program for peer-rejected, victimized, and socially anxious children. Third-graders with peer problems from 11 public elementary schools in North Carolina were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups using S.S.GRIN, a social-skills training intervention considered most effective due to its general applicability as well as its efficiency in reducing multiple problem areas after single interventions at varying sites. In S.S.GRIN, both cognitive and behavioral methods were used to teach and practice each skill, including didactic instruction combined with active practice. Positive reinforcement, corrective feedback, and cognitive reframing were integral teaching methods. The findings from this study supported S.S.GRIN's long-term efficacy for enhancing children's functioning across social, emotional, and behavioral domains. Participation appeared to help children with different types of peer problems and treatment effects built over the year following treatment. Interestingly, the improvements were found largely for measures of self-reported social competence—children who left the program felt better about themselves and their ability to be successful in social situations.

The Expect Respect project, administered by Rosenbluth, Whitaker, Sanchez, and Valle (2004), targeted the involvement of all members of the Austin Independent School District in recognizing and responding to bullying and sexual harassment among students. To achieve reductions in bullying and improvement in school climate, the program utilized five components: classroom curriculum, staff training, policy development, parent education and support services. The authors selected the *Bullyproof* curriculum (Stein & Sjostrom, 1996) because it focused on increasing the ability and willingness of bystanders to intervene, and thus was hypothesized to reduce the social acceptance of bullying. Lessons included writing assignments, role plays, and class discussions designed to help students distinguish playful teasing and joking from hurtful teasing and bullying, to enhance students' knowledge about bullying, and to develop skills for responding as a target or bystander. In addition, there was staff training, policy development, parent education and counselors available to assist school psychologists. The study indicated that the project positively impacted children's awareness of bullying and their intentions to intercede when witnessing bullying.

Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, and Voeten (2005) hypothesized mixed success of bully intervention programs that fail to approach the issue from a participant perspective—a group process in which bystanders often encourage or silently witness bullying while offering little or no support to the victim. Therefore, the aim of their study was to evaluate the effects of an anti-bullying intervention program utilizing a cohort longitudinal design augmented by extensive teacher training. Salmivalli et al. (2005) evaluated the overall effects of an anti-bullying intervention using multi-level modeling and the degree of implementation of the program. They looked for intervention effects for several outcome variables indicating

the degree of bully-victim problems in the class, students' beliefs related to bullying and intervening in it, and self- and peer-reported participant role behaviors. Each teacher in the study attended a one-year training course covering three systemic levels that had been considered important in earlier bullying literature—school, class and individual student level. The main emphasis was, however, on the group mechanisms of bullying and, therefore, on intervening at the class level. This aspect is particularly important in looking at interventions for relational aggression as girls tend to bully other individual girls in cohorts of at least two (Simmons, 2002).

Salmivalli et al. (2005) posit that the participant role approach provided a common framework for teachers to use in curriculum-based, class-level work. Teachers discussed bullying with the whole class stressing group mechanisms and participant roles. For interventions at the student level, individual discussion methods such as shared concern and a no-blame approach were introduced to the teachers. Regardless of the method used, the role of systematic follow-ups after the intervention discussions was strongly emphasized. At the school level, the role of whole-school policy against bullying was emphasized, and printed guidelines were given for developing policies. Salmivalli et al. (2005) found that training teachers in anti-bullying work is not sufficient if they lack either the motivation or resources to implement the program and that support from school management and colleagues is critical for success.

Limitations

The generalizability of this study would be enhanced with a larger sample size for a wider selection of experiences; however these findings align neatly with research conducted on victims of other abuses, such as sexual and physical abuse. Other limitations of this study can be overcome by including participants of different races, such as Asian Americans and Latinas, to determine if race is a factor in female bullying and if resiliency strategies differ. Additionally, the participants studied attended coeducational schools as adolescents, which could have been a factor in the degree of bully aggressiveness. Including women who are products of single-sex educational environments might determine if the absence of a patriarchal structure affects the behavior. Finally, researcher objectivity could have been enhanced by keeping a field journal as well as including inter-rater reliability by incorporating a second data coder to avoid confounding factors for better external validity.

Recommendations

Comprehension of relational aggression can encourage further research to determine where and how society allows the phenomena to develop and can provide information on how to check its progress. Future work should consider the inner qualities victims believe may have contributed to their success in coping with the bullying behavior. Including specific inquiry about respondents' close adult female relationships might yield information about the specific resiliency domains individuals use to negotiate friendships.

Further research examining relational aggression through a critical lens and from a feminist perspective could identify and explain power issues that contribute to an environment that promotes female bullying. Future studies also should focus on the bullying experiences of women in high-ranking corporate and academic positions and their subsequent relationships with either friends or subordinates.

In this research, usage patterns of resiliency strategies emerged from the collective stories of the participants, providing insights into the processes and determinants that contributed to their ability to negotiate trusting relationships with other women following an experience of relational aggression. Therefore, this study supports the literature that trauma victims, in this case bully victims, can form healthy, trusting friendships with same-sex individuals if there is support and encouragement for them to do so.

Because women's relationships transcend many personal and professional boundaries, it is critical to understand the future ramifications of relational aggression on the next generations. Relational aggression must be taken seriously by the adults who interact with girls on a regular basis. Bully prevention programs in schools and language in policy need to extend to include the covert bullying habits of females.

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Appendix A

Relational Aggression Resiliency Study

Interview I Questions

Experience

1. Tell me about the most significant bully incident of your adolescence.
2. What can you recall about the content of this incident?
   a. In what ways were you teased?
   b. What words were used?
   c. What was written about you?
   d. In what context did the bullying take place?
   e. What was the duration?
3. What were your thoughts and feelings then about what was happening to you?
4. How did you express those feelings and thoughts?
   a. Who were your confidants?
   b. What did you confide or express?
5. What were some of your coping mechanisms? Why do you think they worked?
6. Who were the people who took action on your behalf?
   a. Did you ask them to or did they do it on without consulting you?
   b. What were the results of the action?
7. Tell me what gave you comfort or pleasure during this time?
8. Was there anything you wished someone did or told you during this time?
9. What are your beliefs about how you handled the situation in school and how you kept going (what traits did you use to cope?)
10. Are there any pivotal experiences you identify as having contributed to your ability to move on?

Appendix B

Relational Aggression Resiliency Study

Interview II Questions

Current Relationships

Detailed follow up questions will be formulated after the initial interview so that the researcher can ascertain if the coping mechanisms used in adolescent relationships are still in place today.

1. Think about your closest friendship now. Who is it with?
2. What do you value most about this relationship?
3. How do you disagree with this friend? Describe a time when you had a disagreement and how you handled it.
4. What would be something you couldn't or wouldn't tell this friend? Describe an incidence in which she/he betrayed you?

Appendix C

Case Study:

Judy and Jill have been friends for 15 years. They have supported each other through failed relationships, struggles with jobs, and career changes. They confide everything to each other.

Last week, a mutual, but distant, friend asked Judy if she was feeling okay and to ask for help if there was anything she needed. Judy was puzzled and questioned the acquaintance about why she would ask this question. The acquaintance told her that Jill had mentioned that Judy was battling some severe health issues, confirming that Jill had divulged private and personal information that Judy hadn't even confided to her family. Judy had specifically asked Jill to keep the information to herself until she had time to figure out how to tell her family the news.

Put yourself in Judy's shoes. How would you handle this situation with Jill?

Julie Answer:

I would call Jill immediately and tell her exactly what happened and sort of play dumb to see how she reacts and to see what her reasoning is. I would tell her that it was upsetting to me especially considering how I hadn't even told my family yet. I would try to listen, but ultimately know that I really trusted her and it just is hurtful that I thought I could tell her in confidence.

Caroline Answer:

I would ask Jill if she had spoken to their friend about the information. More likely than not, Jill will reply, "no." I would just continue by reminding her about how our relationship is based on trust and that it's extremely important that she give me the same discretion that I give her. I would tell her that although she may not have realized it, she revealed enough information that the friend felt involved enough to say something about it. Knowing that this will make for an uncomfortable few days with the friendship, I would drop the discussion with Jill—the motive is to get her to recognize that news travels and that discretion matters in friendship. Unfortunately, I would not hold much trust in Jill any longer and so I would discontinue sharing with her the things dear and personal to me. In other words, I would hold a grudge. Forgiveness is not something I value.

Appendix D

Screening questions used during recruitment process:

1. Why do you want to participate in this study?
2. Please explain how you feel the effects of your bullying experience are affecting you now, if at all?
3. Do you have at least one close relationship with a woman?