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Sugar and spice : the hidden world of pre-adolescent female aggression

Sarah Crofton Winsor
Smith College

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes that *relational theory* offers an appropriate and effective framework for both prevention and intervention in situations of covert bullying behavior among pre-adolescent females. After a review of recent literature about the phenomenon of pre-adolescent female bullying, the thesis describes the relational theory advocated by feminist psychology professionals in the last thirty years as an alternative understanding of female social and emotional development that contrasts with the previously dominant male-based paradigm. Following the suggestions of relational theorists, the thesis proposes a new understanding of the specific covert bullying behaviors of young girls that is based on insights into their social context and also suggests ways that these behaviors can be detected and prevented while offering girls more constructive and healthy means for life-giving connections.

SUGAR AND SPICE:
THE HIDDEN WORLD OF PRE-ADOLESCENT FEMALE AGGRESSION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Social Work

Sarah Crofton Winsor

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I explore the hidden culture of pre-adolescent female aggression and the bullying that takes place among girls in school. I do not consider overt bullying such as physical aggression or verbal threats, but focus on covert insidious aggression such as rumor spreading and gossiping. My study provides insight into the factors that influence girls to choose this particularly female form of hostility. Pre-adolescent female bullying behavior is a relatively new area of research that is only beginning to get the recognition it so urgently needs. Reports on how school officials deal with this behavior suggest that the matter is neither detected nor taken seriously within the school setting. A tremendous amount of lasting damage is done to vulnerable young girls who are victimized, and perpetrators are also harmed when they inflict injury on their peers with no immediate consequences. The purpose of my thesis is to examine how Relational Theory offers insight into the causes of pre-adolescent female bullying and how therapeutic intervention based on this theory can provide a compassionate and effective means of stopping this behavior among perpetrators and healing its effects among victims. I not only describe the factors that influence girls to bully in this clandestine way, but also show how relational theory offers a means for understanding the deeper social and emotional causes for young female aggression and bullying.

My identification of covert aggressive behavior in pre-adolescent girls is intended to document this form of aggression and its subtypes in order to make the reader

aware of what this particularly female form of aggression looks like. My study distinguishes among the types of young female bullies, as well as victims within the girls' social circle, in order to describe the complexities of a girl's social life and relationships, especially as discussed in the work of relational theorists. I use a relational model to explore the origins of pre-adolescent female aggression and to distinguish how and why aggression manifests in girls biologically and socially. I also document the impact that relational aggression has on both the targeted child and the aggressor, so as to note the effects of this type of bullying on both victim and perpetrator. Finally, I explore the importance of teachers' behavior, attitudes, and experience and how they may influence social aggression, as well as the role teachers, school administrators, and social workers have in effective intervention. In order to learn to see this type of bullying behavior, school staff need to be observant and well informed.

Because girls' aggression is not sufficiently recognized within the school setting, school officials may see girls display indirect bullying behavior but not know how to intervene. In many instances such officials are uncomfortable and unsure of the appropriate approach to this kind of bullying and dismiss it as "being girls." Often, indeed, they are completely unaware of such covert bullying. Yet intervention is not only possible but crucial for the safety and well-being of all the parties involved, victims, perpetrators, and their families, as well as those students who may become confused and anxious when they observe the behavior, its destructive results, and the apparent lack of disciplinary consequences.

Covert Aggressive Behavior and Bullying

Young Female Bullying

In this study it is necessary to review the descriptions of specific types of young female bullying that are described in the reports of researchers in this field. It is important to recognize the precise behavior to which we are referring. My central purpose is to understand the reasons for pre-adolescent female bullying and to suggest effective means to identify and put an end to it. This goal can be achieved by becoming familiar with the behavior and then understanding it in the context of the increasingly significant body of research in relational theory developed by members of the psychological community who have focused specifically on women's development. At the heart of their findings is the fact that, contrary to conventional teaching, women's development takes place in ways very different from men's. According to Jean Baker Miller, it is clear that "traditional psychodynamic theories and forms of practice neglected or misunderstood many aspects of women's experience." (1997, p. 1). This fundamentally new understanding of women's psycho-social development calls into question the essentially male-dominant paradigm and it has become the basis for a wholly new way of approaching female experience. This "relational theory" and the relationally focused therapeutic model that developed from it offer an important foundation for understanding the bullying of pre-adolescent girls and also provide the insights that invite the healing of this cruel and destructive behavior.

Researchers have made an important beginning in the study of bullying among young females, but most of these studies have been made only in the last dozen years and this relatively young field is in need of further input. Pre-adolescent female aggression differs sharply from its male counterpart in its covert and subtly devastating nature. These [bullying] acts, which are intended to escape detection and punishment, are epidemic in middle-class environments where the rules of femininity are most rigid (Simmons, 2002, p. 22).

Victims of bullying behavior

Victims are a complex group (Swearer, Grills, Haye, & Cary, 2003, p. 65). The first kind is the *submissive* victim. In previous literature, this type of victim has also been described as passive/submissive (Olweus, 1994). These victims are characterized as anxious, insecure, and not likely to retaliate when attacked. Submissive victims often withdraw or cry when bullied by others. They are usually sensitive, gentle, and intelligent children; their relationships with their parents are generally good and they are not accustomed to conflict, shouting, or violence at home (Dunn, 2004, p. 85).

"Within the group of children with poor social skills is a subgroup of individuals whose behaviors seem to attract the attention of bullies more than the average child" (Roberts, 2006, p. 32). These individuals are referred to as *provocative victims*. They create a special challenge in understanding the bully-victim relationship because their behaviors draw attention to their vulnerability. These individuals are often not liked by their peer group and tend to be at risk for adjustment difficulties (Batsche, 1997, p. 172). Low self esteem and increased levels of depression are problems for both types of victims

(Carney & Merrell, 2001, p. 366). These descriptions are based on both female and male victims.

Bullies

The "Queen Bee," the "Sidekick," the "Wannabe," the "Gossiper," the "Floater," the "Direct Bully," the "Target," and the "Bystander" are some of the names by which researchers have designated girls' roles within their social groups. Bullies systematically and repeatedly target another group of youngsters towards whom they are either directly and physically aggressive (e.g., hitting), or indirectly and relationally so (e.g., shunning) (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000, p. 80). Three types of bullies can be distinguished: the aggressive bully, the follower, and the relational bully (Orpinas & Horne, 2006, p. 17). The aggressive bully, the role most recognized by teachers and peers, initiates the aggression, tending to use overt aggression, either physical or verbal, as well as threats and intimidation to achieve his or her goals. For example, a bully may use physical force or threats to be first in line for lunch, to coerce other children into doing things for "him," or to use the playground equipment longer than others. Another bully may use aggression because she is socially unskilled and angry, and consequently her classmates reject her because of her belligerent and inappropriate behaviors. Contrary to popularly held assumptions that bullies' aggressive behaviors are manifestations of feelings of inferiority and poor self-concept, some studies have shown that bullies sometimes have high levels of self-esteem (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001, p. 1). However, Staub (1999, p. 1) referred to this as false high self-esteem because these bullies frequently maintain their self-esteem through dubious methods such as denigrating

others, manipulating peers, and exerting power through threats and physical superiority.

The followers (they have also been called "passive bullies" or "henchmen") are less common than the aggressive bullies (Orpinas & Horne, 2006, p. 19-20). They are unlikely to start the bullying, but will follow the aggressive bully if the bullying behavior is rewarded. Olweus (1991) described these children as anxious, insecure, and attention seeking. They may seek to bolster their self-esteem by joining the bullies, acting either as "assistants" who help the bully or "reinforcers" who encourage the bully by cheering or simply laughing (Salmivalli, 1999, p. 455). A group of passive bullies is likely to be comparatively mixed and may also contain insecure and anxious students (Olweus, 1993, pp. 34-35).

Among girls, covert aggression is the usual choice. The sugar-and-spice image is powerful and girls know it. They use it to fog the radar of otherwise vigilant teachers and parents. For girls, the secrecy, the "underground"—the place where . . . girls take their true feelings—are hardly unconscious realms (Simmons, 2002, p. 23). A combination of nonphysical, often furtive, methods of aggression is extremely dangerous, in large part because it is impossible to detect (p. 44).

Bullying and female socialization

Theories about the reasons for the different behaviors of boys and girls rely on recognition of the way female children are socialized in western culture. Girls are taught not to express strong negative emotion nor to be obvious in their quest for power over their peers. One of the effects of this social training, which is provided both at home and in public venues, has been to compel girls to develop shrewd and devious behaviors that

can be difficult to identify. Persons in authority over such girls may not recognize what they are observing and may feel confused or resistant about intervening because of the subtle manipulation inherent in covert bullying styles. The tremendous damage that can be done to individual victims, as well as entire educational communities, makes it imperative that these bullying behaviors be more clearly known and documented. It is also vital that authorities such as classroom teachers and other school staff be educated to notice and attend to the behavior and not discount it as simply innocuous immaturity but recognize it as cruel and fundamentally destructive. Teachers are especially well-positioned to perceive bullying behavior at an early stage, to assist victims, and to request counseling support for both victims and perpetrators. My study contributes to the research on pre-adolescent female bullying by offering insight into the personal lives of some members of the affected population and by showing that relational therapy can be instrumental in identifying bullying and offering alternative behaviors. Teachers routinely observe behavior that goes on literally under their noses and they can use their unique position as advocates for young girls who are trying to negotiate the complexities of the social world. Social workers and other therapeutic professionals must be available to train and support educators and other school personnel about covert bullying behavior, as well as to provide ongoing preventive programs for the students themselves.

Aggressive behavior and bullying

Research on the origins of aggression has historically been guided by two contrasting theoretical views that are situated within the long-standing nature-nurture debate (Coie & Dodge, 1998, cited in Moretti, Odgers & Jackson, p. 31). Aggression is defined as "a forceful action or procedure (as an unprovoked attack) especially when

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intended to dominate or master," or "hostile, injurious, or destructive behavior or outlook especially when caused by frustration (*Merriam-Webster Online*, 2005). When people talk about aggression, words like attack, force, and violation usually come to mind. Since aggressive behaviors are typically understood as observable physical acts, we do not normally associate aggression with words like quiet, subtle, and hidden. Dr. Nicki Crick coined the term "relational aggression" (RA) in the 1990's to describe a peculiarly female form of aggression that *is* quiet, subtle, and hidden (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Simmons (2002) exposes the secret culture of girls' aggression in schools. She interviewed girls throughout the United States and she discusses their experience with bullying behaviors as victims, perpetrators, or both. Simmons explores how girls in American culture are taught to express their anger in the late-20th century social context and the ways in which these young adolescents manifest anger. She also describes school attitudes toward the bullying behavior among girls and provides concrete anecdotes.

Hoover & Oliver (1996, p. 5) offer a guide for teaching professionals and parents to address "mostly overt bullying (and victim) problems during the pre-adolescent and adolescent years." The authors present an understanding of the problem from the family dynamics to the classroom environment and finally to the overall culture of the school. They believe American prevention programs should be targeted to grades two through four because it is in these years that most individuals have developed the psychological acumen to understand human relationships and bullying may not yet be a severe problem. Diane Senn (2007) discusses the damaging effects that female bullying has on the victim as well as on the bully. Senn talks about the teachers' need to be more informed about what is taking place in their classrooms. She discusses how to empower the victim, how

to encourage the onlooker to take an anti-bullying stand, and how to guide the aggressor to find more appropriate ways to have her needs met through class and group lessons and role-plays. Coloroso (2003) describes the devastating effects bullying has on victims, families, schools, and communities. She speaks of bullying as a life-and-death issue that is ignored, minimized, and denied by most adults. She writes about breaking the cycle of violence and offers her book as a guide to teaching professionals and parents.

A specifically relational approach to female development was pioneered by Jean Baker Miller in her writings about women and their position in society. Miller discusses how women are seen as "unequals" or "subordinates" and she envisions the potential for a more creative and cooperative mode of life (1976, p. 27). She calls not only for social equality but also for a new language in psychology that would separate the description of care and connection from the vocabulary of inequality and oppression. She sees this new language as originating in woman's experience of relationships (p. 54). *The Complexity of Connection*, a collection of writings from Wellesley College's Stone Center, expands cultural-relational theory. Referring to the Miller's theory, Jordan claims that ". . . people gain a central sense of meaning, well-being, and worth through engagement in growth-enhancing relationships; . . . an active interest in being connected and movement toward increasing connection are at the core of human development." (Jordan, Walker & Hartling, 2004, p. 47).

Gilligan (1982, p. 17) discusses how moral development differs in boys and girls. She describes the importance of relationships between girls and the need for a shared feeling of connection with each other. As Miller puts it, "Women have played a specific role in male-led society in ways no other suppressed groups have done. They have been

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entwined with men in intimate and intense relationships, creating the milieu—the family-
-in which the human mind as we know it has been formed. Thus women's situation is a

crucial key to understanding the psychological order" (1976, part i, p.1). Miller & Stiver

(1997) discuss how women form and keep relationships and they document how

relationships and connections between women are exceptionally important to a woman's

psychological health. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule (1997, p. 146) interviewed

135 women and they explain why women feel silenced both in their families and the

world. The women expressed frustration because even once they realized they had a

voice, they felt unheard and unheeded by male authorities. It is in conversation with each

other, sharing good experiences as well as frustrations, that women nurture the

connections that keep them healthy and balanced.

Aggressive Female Behavior and Its Subtypes

There is greater variety in aggressive behavior in girls compared with that

observed in boys; girls can display particularly female forms of hostility. Three subtypes

have been formulated to describe aggressive behavior in girls: *indirect, social,* and

relational aggression. Physical aggression has been widely described to identify how

boys communicate their anger. While girls do express anger through physical fighting,

more girls show anger passive-aggressively through non-physical social means. Few

would argue that boys have access to a wide range of ways to express their anger

(Simmons, 2002, p. 8) while many girls, on the other hand, are forced to cut themselves

off from direct aggression altogether. So while "girlfighting" still happens frequently, it

is no longer considered "normal" from a public point of view and adults remind girls daily that "good girls" do not fight with their friends (Brown, 2003, p. 70). Researchers have identified another form of apparently uniquely female aggression. Relational or indirect aggression (Crick, Ostrov, Appleyard, Jansen & Casas, 2004; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) involves the negative use of peer relations, such as shunning or maligning a peer (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000, p. 80). Social aggression is intended to damage self-esteem or social status within a group (Simmons, 2002, p. 21). When girls feel angry or resentful, they often hurt one another by fighting physically, but more often through verbal insults, friendship manipulation, or nonverbal expressions of disgust or disdain (Underwood, 2003, p. 4).

Covert Aggression

Several researchers have proposed the term "indirect aggression" to describe more subtle, hurtful behaviors that girls use more frequently than physical fighting (Underwood, 2003, p. 18). One feature of such covert aggression is that the aggressor may remain unidentified, thereby avoiding both counterattack from the target and disapproval by others (Buss, 1961, cited in Underwood, 2003, p. 18). Covert aggression is "a noxious behavior in which the target person is attacked not physically or directly through verbal intimidation but in a circuitous way, through social manipulation" (Kaukiainen, Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, Osterman, Salmivalli, Rothberg & Ahlbo,1999, p.83). Covert aggression is indirect behavior in which the perpetrator makes it seem as though there has been no intent to hurt at all. One way this is possible is by using others

as vehicles for inflicting pain on a targeted person, such as spreading a rumor (Simmons, 2002, p. 21).

Example of covert aggression: Tasha/Nala age 9

Tasha was considered a very fine student. She earned good grades, was polite to teachers, and volunteered to help around the classroom at any opportunity. Tasha drew pictures of horses and would tell her teacher story after story about the horses she had ridden and taken care of.   She was what teachers expect and want from their students, the ultimate "good girl."   Nala was a new student at the school Tasha attended and the other students were drawn to Nala's sweet nature. This upset Tasha, so she told a few girls in the class that Nala came from a poor family without any food. This behavior was not new to Tasha, as she had spread rumors about other girls in her class in the past. The girls knew what it felt like to be shunned by Tasha and they were motivated to avoid that possibility. Nala noticed a change in Tasha and in some of her other classmates. Nala called Tasha to ask if Tasha was mad at her. Tasha sounded surprised and exclaimed "What? I am not mad at you! Don't worry, we are still friends." Nala immediately felt better and was excited to go to school the next day.

Social Aggression

Social aggression is defined as "the manipulation of group acceptance through alienation, ostracism, or character defamation" (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson &

Gariepy, 1989, p. 323).   Social aggression is intended to damage self-esteem or social

status within a group (Simmons, 2002, p.21). In the worst case, the agents manage to

convince all in the social realm of the target to avoid having anything to do with her,

making the target a social pariah within her peer group (Roberts, 2006, p. 60).

Example of social aggression

The rumor that Tasha spread about Nala earlier in the week spread throughout

the classroom. The next day when Nala came to school most of the girls in the class got

up and gathered together at the back of the classroom. While Nala unpacked her

backpack she nervously eyed the girls in the back of the classroom. Some were

whispering, smiling, or laughing while others were looking out of the window as if to

suggest, "we really don't want to be back here but we have to." As Nala sat down at her

desk, she smiled at Tasha who rolled her eyes, turned her back, and laughed with the

other girls.

Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is "behaviors that harm others through friendship or

group exclusion" (Crick, Werner, Casas, O'Brein, Nelson, Grotpeter & Marcon, 1999, p.

77). Relational aggression includes, for example, social exclusion or spreading rumors

with the intent to harm others, or as a form of retaliation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In

contrast to physical aggression, in which the agent of harm is actual or threatened

physical damage, relational aggression involves actual or threatened damage to relationships as the vehicle of harm (Moretti, Odgers & Jackson, 2004, p. 28). Relationally aggressive behavior is ignoring someone to punish them or to get one's own way, excluding someone socially for revenge, using negative body language or facial expressions, sabotaging someone else's relationships, or threatening to end a relationship unless the friend agrees to a request. In these acts, the perpetrator uses her relationship with the victim as a weapon (Simmons, 2002, p. 21).

Example of relational aggression

None of the girls in Nala's class was talking to her. Occasionally, Nala would speak to Natalia and sometimes Erin secretly over the phone. The two girls tried to consol Nala about the bullying situation. During school hours, however, neither Natalia nor Erin would speak to Nala or look in her direction, following the behavior of the other girls in the classroom. Tasha found out that Natalia and Nala had talked over the phone. Tasha called Natalia and invited her to Tasha's birthday party where all the other girls in the class would be, but Natalia had to promise Tasha not to tell Nala about the party. Nala again called Tasha to ask Tasha if she was mad at her. "Nala!" said Tasha, sounding mildly annoyed, "I don't know why you think everybody is mad at you!"

Social, relational, and covert aggression can certainly harm friendships, but these behaviors can also damage social standing and social self-concept. Each of these research approaches to *alternative*—rather than direct or physical—aggression has made important and unique contributions to our current understanding of aggression among

girls and indicates the variety of ways in which girls may cause social and relational harm

(Underwood, 2003, p. 25).

RELATIONAL THEORY AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Relational theory

Relational theory is rooted in Jean Baker Miller's groundbreaking understanding

of human development first proposed in *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976). In

this book she questioned the very premises that had undergirded theories of human

development, postulating that "the most basic difference is the one between women and

men" (1976, p. 3) and that women develop socially and emotionally in ways quite

different from men. Noting that theories of human development had assumed male

experience as normative, Miller observed that female experience was not only unequal in

status and power to that of males, but that when women differed from men, their

experience was always considered inferior. Among the first to open what would soon

become a floodgate of feminist deconstruction of male models in many fields, Miller

asked important questions about the presuppositions underlying the psychology of

women's development.

Gender socialization

Are boys and girls taught how to express aggression in this culture by the nature-

nurture model or are they socialized by gender? Is it in a girl's nature to demonstrate

aggression covertly or is she taught this means of attack? Gender socialization as it

occurs in American culture prepares the ground for girlfighting. "When girls internalize

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and unquestioningly accept the divisions we make in this culture between good girls and sluts, schoolgirls and airheads, nice girls and bitches, and when they betray other girls in order to be taken seriously or in the name of popularity, romance, and male attention, they perpetuate their own subordination, consolidate their secondary status, and become complicit in their own oppression" (Brown, 2003, p. 33).

If the secrets of male adolescent development revolve around the harboring of continuing attachments that cannot be represented on the logic of fairness, the secrets of female adolescence concern the silencing of the girl's own voice, a silencing enforced by the wish not to hurt others but also by the fear that, in speaking, her voice will not be heard (Gilligan, 1982, p. 51). Gilligan and her colleagues have illuminated how girls react to the destructive forms of relationship our culture imposes on them by developing less direct ways of relating (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p.150). Since development has been premised on *separation* and told as a narrative of failed relationships—pre-Oedipal attachments, Oedipal fantasies, pre-adolescent chumships, and adolescent love relationships—that stand out against a background of separation, only successively to erupt and give way to an increasingly emphatic individuation, the development of girls appears problematic because of the continuity of relationships in their lives (Gilligan, 1982, p. 39).

For young males, "the model of a separate self, of autonomous self, of self disconnected from others, contributes to a self that is free to compete . . . A psychology of connection, on the other hand, poses challenges to the larger competitive system" (Jordan, 2004, p.13). "Girls and women typically care about the impact of their feelings and actions on the other person. I have called this *relational awareness*, being attentive

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to self, the other, and the relationship. . . . [Women] use what I have called *anticipatory empathy*, speaking and moving with an awareness of and concern for the possible consequences of their feelings and actions while also remaining aware of their own needs and the needs of the other person(s) (i.e., relational awareness)" (p. 14). "As Gilligan shows, in adolescence, girls begin to lose an authentic sense of connection to others, and thereby to themselves, because they cannot find ways to bring themselves into growth-fostering relationships in this culture" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 61). "In the face of relationships that violate one's very being, there is great validity in [the adolescents'] response; it represents what Gilligan calls resistance to the dominant patriarchal culture's imposition on them. We would call it a strategy of disconnection" (p. 150).

Growth in Connection

Miller's ideas suggest that all growth occurs in connection, that all people yearn for connection, and that growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment (Miller & Stiver, 1997, pp. 26-41). Specifically, Miller and Stiver (p. 30) describe *five good things* that characterize a growth-fostering relationship: 1) increased zest (vitality), 2) increased ability to take action (empowerment), 3) increased clarity (a clearer picture of one's self, the other, and the relationship), 4) increased sense of worth, and 5) a desire for relationships beyond that particular relationship. These *five good things* describe the outcomes that take place when growth occurs through mutual empowerment and mutual empathy; we grow not toward separation, but toward greater mutuality and empathic possibility. "[A woman's] world

is one of relationships and psychological truths where an awareness of the connection between people gives rise to a recognition of responsibility for one another, a perception of the need for response" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 30). Envisioning the potential for a more creative and cooperative mode of life, Miller calls not only for social equality but also for a new language about psychology, originating in women's experience of relationships, that would separate the description of care and connection from the vocabulary of inequality and oppression (Miller, 1976, p. 49).

The Myth of Persephone

In the ancient Greek myth, the beautiful young adolescent Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, goddess of the harvest, was picking flowers in a field when the earth suddenly opened and Hades came up and pulled her into the underworld. Persephone was then forced to be the wife of Hades. Her devastated mother searched for her and finally learned what had happened. In her anger, she refused fertility to the earth. Finally an agreement was reached with Hades that allowed Persephone to return to earth for a part of each year.

This story has been used by relational theorists as a powerful metaphor for the effects of the forces of patriarchy on a vulnerable young adolescent female. When girls reach a certain phase in their development, they are deeply influenced in their journey to full selfhood by the almost magnetic expectations of patriarchal culture, and they are often swallowed up by patriarchy. The girls' mothers, most of them also engulfed in their turn years earlier, may either pretend not to see what is happening or may wish to

prevent it but not know how.

How Relational Theory may empower Persephone

In early adolescence it may happen that girls who have been active, direct, multifaceted, and confident—and especially those who have been keen observers of relationships—begin to talk and act differently. They appear to lose certain lively and important parts of themselves, especially their abilities to understand and comment on what they see around them, as they try to fit into the kinds of relationships that the culture prescribes for them; they "go underground" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 82). With this silence, the imagery of the Persephone myth returns, charting the mysterious disappearance of the female self in adolescence by mapping an underground world kept secret because it is branded by others as selfish and wrong (Gilligan, 1982, p. 51). Today we can see through relational theory how "young maidens" or pre-adolescent/adolescent girls lose aspects of themselves as they try to negotiate how they are supposed to behave. During this time of discernment, these girls retreat into themselves and become strangers to their families. Freud attributed the turning inward of girls in puberty to an intensification of primary narcissism, signifying a failure of love or "object" relationships (Gilligan, 1982, p. 39).

Boys tend to use "single voice discourse" to pursue their own self-interest without orienting to the perspective of the other (Tannen, 1998, p. 174). From a broad point of view, not allowing women to acknowledge their own experience makes sense in the context of a patriarchally derived culture. The strength of women has typically

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threatened the patriarchal status quo. It is necessary not to concentrate only on changing

the girls to increase their sense of connection and competence but, more important, to

focus on changing the systems within which the girls lose their voices, their sense of

competence, and their real sense of connection with themselves and others (Jordan, 2004,

p. 22). It must be recognized that "women being able to know and speak their experience

would profoundly disrupt the social structure" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 134).   Miller

asserts that . . . affiliations, relationships, make women feel deeply satisfied, fulfilled,

"successful," free to go on to other things (Miller, 1976, p. 83) and that examining the

action of creating together the relationships within which all life activity takes place

offers a more accurate notion of the optimal human condition (p. 61).

Since the central feature of relational theory is that women develop in a context

of connection with others, maintaining relationships and building on them, it is clear that

a woman's sense of self becomes organized around being able to make and then to

preserve affiliations and connections (Miller, 1976, p. 83) . Eventually, for many

women, the threat of disruption of connections is perceived not as just loss of a

relationship but as something closer to a total loss of her self. When the dark cloud of

relational instability dominates girls' *everyday* social worlds, the threat of isolation hangs

over them. Bullying creates disconnection and a profound sense of relationship-shunning

(Simmons, 2002, p. 135). Shunning is the kiss of death among teens, especially girls,

because it involves denying to the target that which is most valuable within Girl World,

social interaction (Roberts, 2006, p. 60).

"Because girls often aggress as a group, exclusion and its cruel trappings can be

a perversely good opportunity for secure companionship" (Simmons, 2002, p. 134).

Affiliation is valued as highly as, or more highly than, self-enhancement. In addition, it allows for the emergence of the truth, that for everyone, men as well as women, individual development proceeds *only* by means of connection (Miller, 1976, p. 83). Girls who are different or not "normal" because they call feminine ideals into question by being too full of themselves or because they look different or dress "weird," produce anxiety because they remind other girls of their own potential failure to match up (Brown, 2003, p. 70). "In the girl's world, the worst aggression is the most opaque, creating a sort of emotional poison ivy which makes it hard to concentrate on anything else" (Simmons, 2002, p. 44).

Bullying and Anxiety

It is clear that bullying is a significant and frequently devastating problem that is all the more destructive for its regular concealment among the young female population. Whereas young males are commonly overt, obvious, and physical in their choice of bullying behaviors, girls are more likely to hide their aggression and choose deeds that cannot readily be recognized and can often be denied. In this thesis we have seen that such covert bullying has its roots in the way girls are socialized in this culture. Girls feel compelled to live up to a "sugar and spice" model in which they do not display, or even acknowledge, negative feelings. As the result of this cultural bind, they must find ways to display normal negativity without seeming to do so. Not having been allowed to experience and befriend their own feelings, they are at the mercy of unconscious acting out and they find ingenious ways of doing so.

All human beings require a sense of some degree of connection with others in order to thrive in the human community. Girls and women especially depend on a strong sense of relationship with others in order to prosper and grow emotionally, mentally, and even physically. Girls gain a self-image, make decisions for themselves, and find their place in the community through a constant relational engagement. As they approach the risky edge of adolescence they may find themselves threatened like Persephone by the overwhelming expectations of patriarchy and may succumb to depression.

The prevalence of depressive disorders among school-aged youth varies depending upon age and sex, and these disorders appear to be increasing (Swearer, Grills,

Haye & Cary, 2004, p.66). The following symptoms occur most often in childhood

depression: (a) dysphoric mood, irritability, and weepiness, (b) low self-esteem,

hopelessness, decline in school performance, and poor concentration, (c) slower

psychomotor behavior, social withdrawal, and increased aggressive behaviors, and (d)

fatigue, difficulty sleeping, weight loss or weight gain, and somatic complaints (Kovacs

& Beck, 1977).   It is clear that these [teasing, shunning] cruelties leave a trace that can

last a very long time—well into adulthood" (Dunn, 2004, p. 83).   Thus, symptoms of

depression in youth are related to both inter- and intrapersonal functioning (Kovacs &

Beck, 1977). For a young girl who feels powerless and is insufficiently connected to her

feelings, the idea of becoming empowered by ruling the feelings of other girls can be

very tempting. Her own anxiety may be assuaged by controlling the emotional lives of

other girls.

   Anxiety-related symptoms have also been implicated for youngsters involved in

the bully/victim continuum (Espelage & Swearer, 2004, p. 68). Anxiety disorders are the

most commonly diagnosed conditions in childhood. The experience of anxiety is often

marked by an array of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses. The overall

anxious response typically consists of motoric (e.g., avoidance), physiological (e.g.,

increased heart rate), and subjective (e.g., fearful thoughts) reactions that interact in

complex and diverse ways both within and across individuals (Wicks-Nelson & Israel,

1991, cited in Espelage & Swearer, 2004, p. 68).

   In recent years, researchers have shown increasing interest in discerning how

anxiety might also be involved in peer victimization experiences, with the majority of

studies investigating the relation being anxiety and victim status (Espelage & Swearer,

2004, p. 69). Anxious behaviors have been described as both preexisting characteristics of victims, as well as consequences of being victimized. Thus, these anxious behaviors may provoke victimization, as bullying peers may view these behaviors as an indication that the victim is weaker or less likely to receive support from others (p. 60). To help children who are the targets of bullying, the teachers and the school counselor need to be aware of the problem (Orpinas & Horne, 2006, p. 243).

Relational therapeutic intervention

The primary focus of relational theory is, as the name implies, the centrality of *relationship* in the formation and development of a healthy and confident person who is able to feel compassion for others as well as care for her own needs. Especially for young adolescent girls, positive and stimulating connections with peers are central to the establishment of a vibrant, self-assured individual. While the need to be in relationship is not limited to girls, this aspect of the female social and emotional growth process becomes crucial as girls test their own power and decide how they will interact with a patriarchally constructed culture. Girls who are socialized not to show negative emotion, and are not given tools to deal with normal feelings of frustration, anger, or hurt, may turn to their instinctive ties to relationship in order to devise means of coping. Recognizing the sometimes overwhelming sense of powerlessness that some young girls experience can go a long way towards understanding the devious coping skills they use when they bully other girls.

Education must be an essential element of a relational therapeutic intervention.

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Neither the girls involved nor their parents or teachers are likely to be aware of the deep-seated cultural expectations in which the girls are enmeshed, nor the adults' own part in the ongoing perpetration of these norms. Learning about young girls' social development should ideally not be ignored until a major problem presents itself, but in most school settings there is no opportunity to explore the world of young girls' development because the need is not recognized. However, a crisis situation does offer the chance to remedy an essential but neglected area.

Nala and Tasha: intervention

      Nala's mother was shocked and badly shaken when she learned of the bullying her young daughter had endured, although Nala's acknowledgement certainly explained a lot of puzzling behavior. As soon became clear, Nala had endured far more than simply being shunned and ridiculed. She had also suffered considerable physical abuse, being pinned to the floor of the bathroom by the bullies or struck with sticks. She was also frequently threatened and terrorized at various locations around the school. The physical abuse, like its emotional counterpart, always took place where no adult could witness it and Nala was too frightened ever to tell anyone. Nala's mother was appalled that such behavior could be taking place at what had seemed a normal school environment. Attempting to be calm, she spoke to her daughter's teacher about the behavior. Nala's teacher was mildly resistant to the news, clearly hoping for a quick "girls will be girls" explanation. Although the school had no formal policy for dealing with bullying, and most of what it did have referred only to witnessed physical threats, the teacher spoke

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with the school principal and other staff to ask what might be done. The school administration also displayed significant resistance to hearing about behavior that spoiled the school's image. The staff quietly hoped for a quick and simple solution and a speedy end to the uncomfortable situation. One of the other teachers knew a social worker who was familiar with the issue of bullying among girls and had made this field her specialty. She was available to consult with schools where a problem had been recognized, as well as to help school staff design ongoing preventive programs.

Susan, the social worker, met with the principal and Nala's teacher, then invited Nala and her mother for a private conversation, and then met with Nala alone. It was immediately clear to Susan that many of the classic features of covert female bullying had taken place and that Nala had been seriously injured. In each meeting she gently introduced a description of covert aggression and as she compared it to what she was hearing, she confirmed that this had been going on. The next steps, meeting with the girls responsible and their families, required considerable therapeutic delicacy because of the likelihood of disagreement and resistance. Precisely the same underlying denial of negativity that caused the young female bullies to act covertly is likely to be present within the family dynamic. In order to coax out the recognition of what has happened between Nala and Tasha and the girls who did Tasha's bidding, Susan explains the basic principles of relational theory and how a girl might feel stuck in her choices. Susan recognizes that the bullies are trapped in unacknowledged cultural expectations. In a private session, she invited the primary perpetrator to talk about what she felt and what she hoped to accomplish by her behavior. In a group setting, she asked the other bullying girls ("passive bullies") about their roles in this activity.   As Susan made clear that such

behavior is totally unacceptable, she also saw the bullying girls as victims in a different way from Nala.

Next Susan met with all of the families involved, individually and then as a group. All the parents also had the opportunity to meet, with Susan's facilitation. This meeting gave the parents the chance to discuss their thoughts about what they had observed, as well as their possible confusion and shock about their daughters' involvement. Sharing their negative feelings in a facilitated session let the parents say out loud precisely those things they would not say out loud at home, which may have given their children the impression that such feelings can only be expressed covertly. This was a time for everyone to be in agreement that there is a bullying situation at hand, when parents could hear what other parents felt about the circumstances and how they believed a resolution could be found. More often, however, parents are not in agreement that there even is a bullying situation, so it is important that Susan document the observed alternative bullying behavior and explain why girls so often choose this means of acting out. If relational connections are crucial at this point in a girl's life, creating anti-relationship is key in overpowering a peer and making oneself appear in charge.

Often school administrators and parents of bullying children make an ill-conceived attempt to avoid acknowledging the harm done by using a version of "victim blaming" in which the injured child is sent for counseling. Many parents of victims have described their daughters being sent to psychological therapy for treatment when there was nothing wrong with them, or being encouraged to get costly social skills training when it was the perpetrator who in fact needed the help, or being ignored because the perpetrator was stealthy and it came down to a case of she-said, she-said (Simmons,

2002, p. 204). Susan made sure that discussions did not focus on who the victim and aggressors are in the classroom, nor would it be prudent for the victim and the aggressors to meet in a group of their own. Too much focus on who is right and wrong would inevitably become the topic and the bullying girls may feel threatened by confrontation and become aggressive in their approach. A relational therapeutic approach would focus on frequent ongoing meetings among all the girls in the class to reflect on the girls' feelings about the class dynamics and their sense of connection. Frequent reflection opportunities would go a long way toward long-term prevention of aggressive behavior by encouraging the girls to recognize their feelings and also to become aware of a variety of skillful means to address them.   Such opportunities might even give the girls a sense of camaraderie as they made common cause against the institutions of patriarchy. Gilligan writes about how young girls' physical games, as well as their conversations with each other and with adults, reveal a healthy irreverence and resistance to the fundamental unfairness of patriarchy (cited in Brown, 2003, p. 226).

In a long-term prevention program, it is important for the social worker to work with girls on communication and conflict-resolution. This means providing girls not only with a healthier relationship to aggression, but also with permission to experience the uncomfortable feelings that often precede anger and conflict (Brown, 2003, p. 204). This is a time to talk with the girls about how anger makes them feel and to explore a variety of scenarios that the girls can discuss. The social worker can introduce relational therapy through role-playing activities and encourage the girls to hear the truth and to tell the truth (p. 226). Girls need to learn about both successful and also failed attempts at sisterhood and they need to be taught how to practice sisterhood in their own lives so they

can imagine a reality that splits the taken-for-granted world open (pp. 226-27). The social worker can discuss with the girls the importance of connection and allow a "check-in" space for the girls to talk about what is going on with them currently. "Many of the conflicts that ignite girl bullying are relational, and teachers frequently report that allowing girls to talk their issues out helps dissipate their anger" (p. 251). This would be an opportunity for Tasha and Nala as well as the other girls to get the support and tools to deal with alternative aggressions. Through talking about themselves the girls will begin to see each other in a more personal way. Girls must hear each other's stories and Nala, with protective encouragement from Susan, needs to tell the girls how she felt being bullied. Susan must see the current dynamic operating among the girls, for understanding this force would guide her toward appropriate activities and subjects for discussion.

The story of Nala and Tasha did not, unfortunately, end happily. Although Susan's intervention method was skillful, well-focused, and insightful, it became clear that there were matters going on in Tasha's own family that required therapeutic intervention well beyond what the school or Susan could offer in this context. Tasha's family was unable to accept that Tasha had done significant harm to another student, that Tasha had behaved similarly to other girls over a period of time, and that she needed personal psychotherapy. There was no indication that Tasha would not at some point repeat the behavior. For the sake of the other students' safety, the school administration made the decision to ask Tasha to leave. Nala finished out the school year, but remained troubled by what had happened to her. Nor did the school seem able to accept that what had happened was more than an isolated personality discrepancy. They continued to deny the situation's seriousness and had no plans to institute an ongoing bullying-

prevention program, whether relationally based or not.   Nala's family decided to enroll

her at another school the following fall. This unfortunate outcome is all the more

regrettable because a tremendous depth of learning and connection could have been

accomplished with the help of the talented relational therapist.

SUMMARY

       The focus of this thesis has been on the covert aggressive behavior displayed by

pre-adolescent girls and the reasons that their aggression is exhibited in this hidden way.

By means of a review of the literature on young female bullying, I demonstrated the wide

variety of ways this behavior manifests in the social lives of young girls, as well as the

significant harm that the behavior produces in the lives of victims, perpetrators, and other

students. I depicted specific types of bullying behavior, as well as the characteristics of

different kinds of victims and bullies. I described the culturally guarded social system in

which young girls are educated to believe they must not have negative feelings and that,

in the unhappy event that they do, they cannot display them. I then described the theories

of some feminist thinkers in the area of modern psychology and showed that their

relational approach to women's development, in which the formation of intimate

connection is central, offers alternatives to the patriarchally constructed social world in

which young adolescents may feel trapped. I referred to the myth of Persephone to

demonstrate the powerlessness experienced by many girls on the brink of adolescence, a

sense that may pressure some girls to overpower other girls in covert ways. I suggested

that a *relational therapeutic* framework for girls' emotional and social education offers

the possibility that girls may learn to recognize the significance of connection, to

acknowledge their own feelings, and to claim their own voices. Throughout the text, I

interspersed an illustrative narrative about the experience of a particular victim and bully

and the school they attended. Within the narrative, I described the role of a skillful social

worker whose familiarity with relational theory offered the possibility that such a

therapeutic professional is an invaluable resource both for intervention in an acute situation and, just as important, for presentation of an ongoing program whose purpose is to recognize and prevent young female bullying through understanding its causes. Such a program is within the scope of any school and requires only acknowledgement of the risk and confidence in the essential desire of the girls for healthy and life-giving connection.

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