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**THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GIRL-TO-GIRL AGGRESSION**

A Thesis in  
Nursing  
by

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## ABSTRACT

In the last decade, much literature has focused on the indirect aggression occurring within adolescent girls' relationships, sometimes referred to as female bullying or relational aggression. Most of these studies were based on white, middle class girls, and neglected overt or physical aggression. The experiences of girl-to-girl aggression in diverse groups of girls who are out of the mainstream because of poor relationship skills and aggression are notably absent, yet this group may be the most at risk for escalating and/or persistent aggression. Using a phenomenological strategy of inquiry, this study describes the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression in six adolescent girls from a marginalized group, attending an alternative school. The girls were interviewed using an unstructured interview, and were asked to respond to selected readings from popular literature on girl-to-girl aggression and relationships. Themes and core meaning structures of girl-to-girl aggression in this population of girls were identified using Van Manen's methodology. The meaning structures are: attachment amidst risk, fighting as approach to friendship, protective response, and having friends and forming identity. The findings have implications for guiding nursing practice and research. This is the first study to identify girl-to-girl aggression as a path toward attachment and friendship. Nursing care needs to recognize the identity of girls in this population as fighters, and aggression as their way of protecting and holding on to relationships. Strategies include primary prevention to identify high-risk girls, mentoring programs using culturally congruent mentors, and emphasis on protective factors, friendship, and attachment through girls' support groups.

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CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION



## Introduction

Some data suggest that adolescent females have become increasingly aggressive and violent over the past decades (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The arrest of girls for assault and weapon's charges has increased, exceeding that for boys (Smith & Thomas, 2000). In a recent survey involving nearly 16,000 students, 64% of middle school girls and 61% of high school girls admitted hitting another person within the last year because of anger (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2001). Other recent research (Chesney-Lind & Belknap, 2004), however, suggests that variations in how data are collected, recorded, and interpreted lead to contradictory findings about the rise in adolescent female violence. Regardless, adolescent girls' violence is a salient concern, not only in terms of adverse consequences for girls' current function, but also in terms of placing them at risk for a host of other negative outcomes such as affiliating with an aggressive peer group, choosing antisocial romantic partners, becoming adolescent mothers, and engaging in aggressive parenting (Pepler, Craig, Yuile, & Connolly, 2004).

Girl-to-girl aggression may be a contributing factor in the rising incidence of female violence. According to U.S. Department of Justice statistics from 1991 (Whitaker & Bastian, 1991), other girls or women committed 54% of reported violent crimes against 12-15 year old girls. In addition to physical aggression, anecdotal reports from teachers and parents suggest girls are becoming meaner, nastier, and deviously manipulative in how they relate to one another. Alternatively, it may be that mean and manipulative behaviors now are being recognized as aggressive (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

What happened to dismantle the image of girls as “sugar and spice and everything nice”? Recent study of girls’ aggression suggests that one culprit is a type of non-physical aggression that occurs within girls’ friendship circles consisting of tactics such as negative body language, exclusion, rumor starting, and other mean behaviors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Underwood, 2003). Relational (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), social (Underwood, 2003), indirect (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1992), and female bullying (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003) are all terms that researchers use in describing such aggression. These subtly aggressive behaviors are pervasive among teen-age girls (Ahmad & Smith, 1994). Teen girls use the term “girl drama” (Adamshick, 2005) to describe the intense interactions that result when girls engage in mean or underhanded behaviors such as starting a rumor or gossip about someone, talking about someone behind her back, excluding someone from a group, stealing a boyfriend, and giving someone negative body language or stares. Dr. Nikki Crick, a national expert on relational aggression, provides a similar definition of relational aggression as an interaction process that includes tactics aimed at harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, Nelson, Morales, Cullertonsen, Casas, & Hickman, 2001).

Analysis of focus groups with teenage girls completed by the Governor’s Prevention Partnership (Jones-Bamman, 2004) suggests that some girls resort to the indirect types of aggression because it is not socially acceptable to fight. By dealing with conflict in clandestine ways that affect relationships, they feel that outwardly they are still “nice girls”. However, girls, who place high value on friends, keenly feel the damage to a relationship. Adolescent girls are socialized to measure their success in terms of their

relationships (Maccoby, 1998). Anything that interferes with relationships will affect girls' relative position in their social group. Behaviors of relational aggression come into play as adolescent girls try to preserve their spot in a friendship circle and prevent themselves from being abandoned or cut off from a peer group. The need to fit in is so strong during this period of girls' development that some girls will lose their voice, succumbing to cultural expectations of "niceness", all the while losing their authentic selves (Gilligan, 1982). Girls learn that there is danger in being authentic. They learn how to avoid disagreement and how to avoid fighting in direct or confrontational ways. They learn that the way to keep friends is to be *indirect* about their true feelings (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). For other girls, however, their cultural mores may not place as much taboo on outward and physical expression of anger (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995).

Feminist theory suggests that indirect or relational aggression is a useful maneuver to maintain conformity among females (Chesler, 2001). In order to level the playing field, females will try to make other females look worse, or at least not better. The attributes of others are subtly turned from positives to something that doesn't quite measure up to one's own good qualities. In order to avoid being abandoned or cut off from the group, females will tell each other one thing, but, indirectly, behind backs, tell another story (Chesler, 2001). Thus, connection and belonging are maintained, but no one is superior.

Characteristics of relational aggression, causative factors, adverse consequences, and suggested interventions are the topics that occur frequently in research studies about girls' relational aggression (Underwood, 2003). Most of the research has focused on white, middle class adolescent girls. Girls who are out of the mainstream youth

population, such as those referred to an alternative school due to problems with aggressive behavior, are rarely studied. Little research examines girl-to-girl aggression that is direct or physical rather than relational. One of the few studies in this area suggests that girls' relational aggression is an antecedent to physical aggression (Moretti, Holland & McKay, 2001). Thus, one gap in the literature is study of the whole continuum of adolescent girls' aggressive behavior toward other girls. Another gap concerns the lack of research on girl-to-girl aggression in high-risk girls who are out of the mainstream, and identified for their aggressive behaviors and relationship problems. Lack of cultural diversity in study samples is another gap.

#### *Understanding the study sample*

Chesney-Lind and Shelden's (1998) seminal work with delinquent girls sheds light on many factors contributing to girls' aggression, especially for girls who are out of the mainstream. Their approach to understanding girls' aggression and violence considered the interaction of social class, race, ethnicity, and culture. They identified risk factors that foster violent and delinquent acts in young women, including negative attitudes toward school, lack of academic success, physical and sexual victimization, low self-esteem, perceived lack of opportunities, and traditional beliefs about women's roles (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998).

The girls who informed the current study, students in an alternative school, seem to fit Chesney-Lind and Shelden's (1998) portrait of girls at high risk for aggressive behavior. They are unique in that they are out of the mainstream peer group, not meeting acceptable behavior standards for public schools, yet not so out of control as to need juvenile detention. They have not been successful in traditional schools. Their life

situations are complex, their reactions and behaviors poorly understood. They react dramatically and impulsively to situations they perceive as threatening or upsetting. The girls in this alternative school may spend several class sessions each day in an in-school suspension program for those who violate the rules of conduct. In many cases, girls' home lives are non-traditional, including foster families or families marked by losses of one or both parents, sometimes under violent circumstances. The racial mixture is diverse, with representation from Caucasian, African American, and American Indian. The girls in the study are from working class families. Two are quite economically disadvantaged, and are unable to afford stylish clothing. These two girls also have sub-par standards for self-care and hygiene. The conversational style of the participants suggests both educational gaps and certain ethnic or racial affiliations. The school itself is an older building in a lower income section of the town. A difference in terms of the girls who informed this study, as compared to Chesney-Lind and Shelden's work (1998), is that the girls in this study were not adjudicated juvenile delinquents.

Artz's (1998) ethnographic study of violent school girls in Canada is one study that explored girls similar in at least one respect, aggressive behavior, to the sample for this study. Artz's (1998) participants were girls specifically identified for their aggressive behavior and were described as six violent, middle class, white, school girls who were not part of a visible minority. Dominant, abusive males and conflict-avoidant, conciliatory mothers characterized the homelife of the girls. Physical force was the source of power and control in the family. Artz's (1998) findings provide insight into the behaviors and motives of aggressive girls. She concludes that girls who are violent toward other girls are exerting horizontal violence and oppressed group behavior, playing

out scenarios of their home life. Girls stated they beat up their female peers because they “deserved it”. The violent girls believed that this was the right thing to do in a situation in which they felt the victim caused them to become aggressive. Artz (1998) hypothesizes that girls who are aggressive to other girls have internalized a belief of women’s inferiority that allows them to rationalize being aggressive to other females.

It is important to gain understanding of the marginalized nature of the girls who participated in this study. They are struggling against many odds in their life, such as lower social class, less than satisfactory educational achievement, difficult family situations and uncertain futures. Their aggressive behaviors may be a symptom of their larger problems, a way to draw attention to them. Jeanne Weiler of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College of Columbia University, drawing on research by Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1998), notes that many girls with extremely troubled school and social lives, unable to gain status through traditional middle class avenues, seek recognition through adoption of a “bad girl” image (<http://www.cyc-net.org/features/ft-teengirls2.html>). This description may be applicable to girls who are enrolled in an alternative school.

The sample in this study, girls who are known for their aggressive behavior, are similar in that respect to the participants in Artz’s (1998) study. Their descriptions of their lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression adds to the understanding of how girls view their own violent behaviors. This study bridges the gap between girl-to-girl aggression as understood in the context of white, middle class girls, and its understanding and meanings in a population that is out of the mainstream female youth culture and identified for aggressive behavior and poor relationship skills.

### *Aggression in Youth*

The established literature on aggression is vast. Research on aggression in children has primarily focused on the category of physical aggression (Fry & Gabriel, 1994). The literature on gender and aggression added the layer that suggests that boys use physical fighting more than girls do (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Macoby & Jacklin, 1974). One study of elementary school children (Tomada & Schneider, 1997) found that boys scored higher than girls did in both relational and overt aggression. Much of the early research on children's aggression has focused on boys. Since the 1990's, psychosocial research in child development has steadily expanded to include phenomena related to aggression in girls. Several studies examining aggression in both genders have suggested that female youth make greater use of indirect or social means of aggression, whereas male youth tend to use direct or overt aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Osterman, et al., 1998; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

### *Bullying, Relational, and Social Aggression*

Recent research on aggression in both male and female youth illustrates that bullying is a serious problem as a type of aggressive behavior (Griffin & Gross, 2004). Being the target of bullies or bullying other children is considered a risk factor for youth violence (Thorton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2000). Bullying affects as many as 75% of students in schools in the United States and may be the most prevalent form of violence in schools (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; National Crime Prevention Council, 2001). These statistics included physical and verbal threats and attacks, as well as indirect, social, and relational tactics of aggression in the definition of bullying.

Bullying represents the earliest incarnation of relational aggression. Typical behaviors that characterize bullying are teasing, exclusion, threats, gestures, or physical aggression (Olweus, 1993). Researchers have identified that bullying can be either “direct” or “indirect” (Griffin & Gross, 2004). The direct type of bullying behavior consists of the more readily observable physical aggression, or physical or verbal threats or gestures. Indirect bullying takes the form of exclusion, social rejection, and spreading rumors. This type of aggression is often likely to go undetected because of the clandestine nature of the behaviors and is more challenging to measure and document accurately in studies (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

Research by Galen and Underwood (1997) has added another dimension to understanding non-physical aggression in youth. They use the term “social aggression” and define it as verbal rejection or social exclusion, and negative facial expressions or body movements. Their developmental investigation was comprised of two studies, with results presented in one article. In Study 1 (Galen & Underwood, 1997), boys and girls from 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grades were given the Social Behavior Questionnaire to assess how children perceived behaviors of physical and social aggression, and how hurtful each was perceived to be by the children. In Study 2, a laboratory task was created to observe socially aggressive behaviors among girls in a natural-like setting. Results from Study 1 showed that girls use subtle means of expressing anger and contempt, and that these behaviors do warrant the term “aggressive” behavior because girls perceive them as hurtful. The girls viewed socially and physically aggressive behaviors as equally hurtful. They also viewed physical aggression as more hurtful than the boys did.



The results from Galen and Underwood's Study 2 (1997) showed that girls were more likely than boys to rate samples of social aggression as indicating more anger by the aggressor. The social aggression depicted triadic interactions and included behaviors of glares, ignoring, and facial expressions of disgust and dislike. The researchers proposed that their results might indicate that girls feel more vulnerable to all types of aggressive behavior (Galen & Underwood, 1997). This study provides evidence for the significance of relational aggression as girls' way of expressing anger, and illustrates the hurtful quality that it brings into girls' relationships.

The serious negative consequences of girl-to-girl aggression are documented in the literature. Being victimized by relational aggression is associated with depressive symptoms (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), low self-concept (Paquette & Underwood, 1999), bulimic behaviors, and adjustment problems (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002). Girls acknowledge how the hurtful behaviors of relational aggression affect the quality of their relationships across many venues. Dellasega and Nixon (2003) compiled girls' stories garnered through dialogue and written responses. Their book is full of anecdotal comments from middle school and adolescent girls attesting to the pain and agony that they experience in relational ways from other girls. In many cases, girls were so traumatized by relational aggression that they were afraid or worried about attending school. Data obtained through a Girl Scout survey confirm that relationally aggressive behaviors such as teasing and being made fun of are the number one concern for pre-teen girls and contribute to a sense of feeling emotionally unsafe (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2003).

Indirect or relational aggression peaks in middle childhood and adolescence,

especially in females (Ahmad & Smith, 1994). It tends to occur within girls' friendship circles, and involves using relationships to hurt another. Relational aggression is so characteristic of girls that the term female bullying has been used to describe the phenomenon (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). Another term that has been adopted by girls themselves in referring to girls' aggression in their peer group is girl drama. Typically, girls direct relational aggression more toward other girls than toward boys (Russell & Owens, 1999). Tactics may involve starting gossip or false rumors about others, excluding a peer from a friendship circle, or ignoring or playing tricks on another. Girls at the adolescent age are also prone to use boyfriend manipulations to aggress other girls (Crick et al., 1999). Occurrence within a friendship may be one factor distinguishing it from the closely related term social aggression. Galen and Underwood (1997), however, maintain that the main distinction between relational aggression and social aggression is that social aggression includes nonverbal behaviors. Cyber bullying is another avenue by which girls aggress each other. Anonymous harassment through Instant Messaging, chat rooms, and posting of altered photos is not only damaging, but also creates fear in the victim (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Muscari, 2005).

Questions about relational aggression that beg answering are what causes girls to engage in this type of behavior and what purpose might it serve in girls' development or relationships. The need for interventions is also a priority concern. Two focus group studies (Jones-Bamman, 2004; Owens, Shutte & Slee, 2000) explored the reasons for girls' relationally aggressive behaviors and got similar responses from the participants. The middle and high school age girls stated that bullying was a way to combat boredom and to create drama in their lives. Girls in both studies also cited belonging to a group and

maintaining status as a reason for indirect aggressive behaviors. Girls who established themselves as “important” or as a member of the “right” group clearly possessed social power. Anything that would draw attention to oneself and provide distinction of one as a member of a select group provided a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Another common reason the girls gave for their aggressive tactics was that they were competing with other girls for a boyfriend (Jones-Bamman, 2004).

Despite the negativity associated with the term aggression, it has been postulated that social aggression in females may serve some self-advancing functions in development. Underwood (2003) suggests that identity development, moral negotiation, and maintenance of group boundaries all may be inextricably tied to social aggression behaviors. Theorists disagree as to whether relational aggression may be considered within the realm of normal child and adolescent development (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). Perhaps it is normative for certain ages, but less so for others. The fact that relational aggression spans much of a female’s life (preschool through adulthood) substantiates it as a highly entrenched behavior, perhaps functional on some level, though not necessarily healthy.

Identity development is an important consideration in the overall understanding of girls’ relational aggression. Girls most often involved in relational aggression are also in the formative stages of identity development. One theory on the development of identity in females maintains that females benefit from the dynamics of an interconnectedness of relationships (Gilligan, 1982). This web of connection allows for growth of self and others through the exchange of ideas, emotions, and experiences. Strong motives to help others also contribute to the importance of relationships in the lives of adolescent females

(Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Relational aggression between young females seems contradictory to forming a strong web of positive connections. However, as the term relational aggression might imply, the participants of this phenomenon are engaged on some level in an established relationship. These relationships may be sorted into targets according to whether one is in the “in group” or the “out group.”

The need to belong is also a high priority in the teen age group; some of the behaviors of exclusion of others may be oriented toward self-preservation. By excluding another, one maintains a spot for herself in the peer group. Merten’s (1997) study examining the construct of meanness sheds more light on the importance of protecting one’s place. He found that girls used mean behaviors within their own circle of friends to maintain their position and prestige in the group. Further research is needed to determine effects of relational aggression on girls’ growth of identity and feelings of closeness or acceptance within their female peer group.

Regardless of other effects of social aggression on girls’ development, researchers and experts concur relational and social aggression can be hurtful (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Underwood, 2003). Data show that the relationally aggressive behaviors of bullying can be just as damaging as the direct forms of physical violence (Crick et al., 2001; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

Despite the rising incidence of violence in girls, little research has examined physical aggression in girls, especially toward each other. There is conjecture that relational aggression is the antecedent to physical aggression for some girls. The high correlation between social and physical aggression supports this (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Underwood, 2003). Girls with definite patterns of physically aggressive behavior,

such as those with discipline problems at school, are seldom participants in research studies on girls' aggression. These girls, though outside of the majority peer group, are a growing segment of youth who may provide valuable perspectives on the experience of girl-to-girl aggression and its exacerbating components.

One recent study provides preliminary data on predictors of aggression in both boys and girls identified for their aggressive behaviors (Moretti et al., 2001). The participants in this Canadian study were predominantly from lower middle-class families. The study examined the role of self-representation and other-representation in predicting relational and overt aggression. Findings showed that a negative self-representation predicted overt aggression and relational aggression in girls, but only predicted overt aggression in the boys. The researchers found that relational aggression was highly correlated with assaultive behavior in the girls. The girls were very focused on controlling and manipulating their social relationships, including acting out physically toward others if necessary. The researchers conclude that relational aggression in girls may place them at risk for engagement in overt aggression. This is one of the few studies that included a large percent (42%) of non-Caucasian girls. Additional research with girls from diverse ethnic backgrounds may help to clarify the role of race or ethnicity in girl-to-girl aggression.

Artz's (1998) study of the life world of violent girls from middle class groups provides findings that add another dimension to understanding physical violence between girls. Artz's (1998) ethnographic study of six white suburban school girls in Canada gave an enlightening account of the girls' experiences of abuse and sexist oppression. Artz found that girls' aggression to each other was a classic representation of oppressed group

behavior as girls stated they beat up their female peers because they deserved it. The violent girls believed that this was the right thing to do in a situation in which they felt the victim caused them to become aggressive (Artz, 1998). Artz's study provides a rare look at girl-to-girl physical aggression.

Physical aggression in girls appears more strongly related to peer rejection than it is for boys. A study of 9-10 year olds showed that physical aggressiveness that occurred on the playground was negatively related to peer likability, but only for the girls (Serbin, Marchessault, McAffer, Peters, & Schwartzman, 1993). Lancelotta and Vaughn (1989) noted similar findings in their study examining aggression and peer status. The correlation of aggression with peer rejection was stronger for the girls than for the boys. Physically aggressive girls also seem to be at risk for negative developmental outcomes such as dropping out of school (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Serbin et al., 1998), adolescent pregnancy (Serbin et al., 1998), and teenage motherhood (Serbin et al., 1998; Underwood, Kupersmidt & Coie, 1996). These studies, however, examined girls' physical aggression in a general way, without specifically looking at girl-to-girl physical aggression, a nearly absent topic in the literature on girls' aggression.

### *Summary*

Research on aggression in girls has steadily progressed, such that relational and social aggression has gained growing recognition as the style of aggressive behavior that females use in their relationships with other girls. Studies have examined its occurrence and frequency according to age group, the characteristics of the behavior, causes of this type of aggressive behavior, and the negative sequelae that may follow for both the aggressor and the victim of relational aggression. However, there are gaps in the current

knowledge base about girl-to-girl aggression. There is minimal research on physical aggression between girls. The girls included in aggression studies, aside from the few that have been mentioned, are generally from white, middle class backgrounds.

Anecdotal reports from girls describe situations and feelings of girls involved in relational aggression (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Simmons, 2002). However, few formal research studies have attempted to gain from adolescent girls their perspective of girl-to-girl aggression as it is lived. The lack of girls' explanation of how they actually live this experience and what it is like for them in terms of their life world (Husserl, 1970), is a gap in the research about girl-to-girl aggression. Even less is known about the life world of girls outside of the mainstream peer group who are involved in girl-to-girl aggression. Girls in this group include those who are clearly overwhelmed by problems with aggression toward their female peers and who are singled out as school discipline problems because of these infarctions.

Moretti et al. (2001) have studied aggression in girls and boys with behavioral disorders, primarily looking quantitatively at predictors of all types of aggression in that population. Their study did not explore the life worlds of the participants, nor their overall experience of aggression. While Artz's (1998) research explored life worlds of violent girls, the focus was on girls from white, middle class backgrounds and not part of a visible minority. Research is not capturing the segment of girls who fall between these two studies. This study bridges the gap by exploration of the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression in girls who are identified as aggressive and who are outside the mainstream youth population and from diverse cultural backgrounds.

#### Statement of the Problem

There has been a growing interest in girls' aggression, some of this prompted by the rising incidence of violence among female youth. Other factors that have made girls' aggression a focal research area are interest in balancing research agendas to include study of females, and heightened concern among community groups about the untoward effects of girls' relational style of aggression.

Girl-to-girl aggression has been studied and research confirms that a type of indirect, social, or relational aggression occurs within girls' friendship circles. Research about girls' aggression has primarily focused on girls in the cultural mainstream. Girls in marginalized groups, such as those in trouble at school due to problems with aggressive behavior, are rarely studied. Studies that are available suggest that aggression in young females in marginalized groups is linked to strong motives such as anger or self-protection (Lucas, 2000; Taylor et al., 1995), or in response to provoking behaviors (Artz, 1998). These studies, other than Artz's (1998), have not focused specifically on girl-to-girl aggression. A gap in knowledge occurs in understanding the experience of girl-to-girl aggression in girls in a marginalized group, attending an alternative school. This study examined the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression in this cohort of girls.

There are currently no studies that report on the full continuum of aggression in young females' interactions. Surprisingly, the experiences of girls who typically display aggressive behaviors, such as those identified for anger issues in school, rarely have been studied. The experience of girl-to-girl aggression as lived by girls in a marginalized group needs to be explored to provide knowledge about its characteristics, meanings, causes, and effects. Relational aggression is just one part of aggressive behavior in females. Examination of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression in a marginalized population



revealed the risks and challenges felt by the girls in their efforts toward attachment. The findings raise concerns about what lies ahead for girls whose experience of girl-to-girl aggression is not balanced with protective factors.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression in girls in a marginalized group, attending an alternative school. The definition of a marginalized group was loosely defined for the beginning of the study, as it was felt that participants themselves would contribute the perspective of how or whether they identified themselves in a group that is out of the mainstream.

As a starting point for the study, girls outside of the majority peer group comprised the marginalized population. These girls were students at an “alternative school” where they were court ordered or school referred due to disciplinary problems in the public school system. The study utilized a phenomenological strategy of inquiry to gather perceptions from the participants on their personal experience of aggression as it was lived in their encounters with female peers. Perceptions form the heart of experience and therefore give access to the truth. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to uncover meaning and articulate the essences of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression as lived by girls in this marginalized group. The embodiment of girl-to-girl aggression evolved as part of the process of exploring the meaning structures of the experience.

### Research Question

The research question for this study was “What is the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression of adolescent girls in a marginalized group?”

## Conceptual Framework

The phenomenological strategy of inquiry is a qualitative approach.

Phenomenology is the study of essences (Merleau-Ponty, 1958). To study a problem is to determine its real meaning. Ordinary human life experiences must be studied in their context and without preconceived ideas. This study revealed the direct description of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Space, time, and the world as they are lived contributed to the girls' account of their experience. Perceptions both informed and described the girls' experience of aggression. Understanding came with putting aside assumptions and being open to a new interpretation as perceptions were described by the girls. Phenomenology is guided by the search for what it means to be human (Van Manen, 1984). Thus, it involves more than cognitive knowing about an experience. The search involved immersion in the being-in-the-world with the girls to feel and come to know at a deeper level their experience. Through this process one changes and emerges more fully human (Van Manen, 1984).

The study population, members of a marginalized group, may be viewed from the perspective of a conceptual model of adaptation. In applying this model, one may interpret that individuals will strive for adaptation to their circumstances. In cases of extreme distress that compromise preservation of the self, either physically or emotionally, the individual may be pressured into maladaptive behavior. In the given set of circumstances, behavior considered maladaptive in mainstream society becomes functional and adaptive for the individual experiencing a self- preservation crisis (Musick, 1991).

Aggression may be viewed as one such behavior that has a different connotation for those marginalized by disadvantaged lifestyles. Harrington (1962) remarks:

But within a slum, violence and disturbance are often norms, everyday facts of life. From the inside of the other America, joining a 'bopping' gang may well not seem like deviant behavior. It could be a necessity for dealing with a hostile world." (p. 127).

The evolutionary psychology theory also may be used to explain girl-to-girl relational aggression. According to this theory, females are less likely than males to engage in risky forms of aggression (such as physical) because the aggression is more costly to females (Campbell, 1999). A female is more critical for the survival of her offspring than is the male of the species. Campbell (1999) states women have evolved a psychology in which costs of physical danger are weighted higher for them than for a male. Women's aggressions, then, are oriented toward securing resources for the offspring.

Campbell (1999) also discusses how evolutionary theory relates specifically to female-to-female aggression. In the competition for scarce resources, female primates have had to dominate other females. This involved severely suppressing the other female's desirability, fertility, or ability to produce live births. Such behavior has evolved in current society into women competing and trying to dominate other females for advantages/resources related to class, caste, race, or professional position.

Evolutionary theory may be applied to relational aggression in another way also. Campbell (1999) states that outward aggression in girls is suppressed because it is being systematically ignored. Boys' aggression, on the other hand, is consistently reacted upon

by others. Taken a step further, one might extrapolate that women have evolved to the point that they no longer recognize their indirect aggression as harmful or aggressive behavior. In fact, indirectly aggressive behavior is ignored or tolerated by others in many situations. It is very unlikely that girls/women can be convinced to change a behavior that they do not acknowledge as aggressive or hurtful. In the evolutionary theory, the behaviors of relational aggression persist out of needs to secure resources or status and keep oneself and one's kin safe. The evolutionary view also demonstrates that the behaviors may persist because they go unchallenged.

#### Definition of Terms

*Girls from marginalized groups:* Females between the ages of 12 through 17 years who are outside of the majority peer group in terms of school disciplinary problems. The girls were identified for their aggressive behavior. The study participants were students at an alternative school to which students are court ordered or school referred. The girls themselves add further refinement to this definition during the study, as their stories revealed their perspective on whether they viewed themselves as from a marginalized group.

*Aggression:* A situation, circumstance, or behavior that has intent to produce discomfort, unease, fear or injury and is perceived as hurtful by the victim.

*Relationship:* A connection between two people based on a series of contacts, interactions, or experiences with each other.

#### Assumptions

- Girl-to-girl aggression (covert, overt and physical) occurs in the relationships between young females and is an unhealthy behavior.

- Girls have insight into aggression.
- The experience of girl-to-girl aggression can be verbalized by the study participants.
- One can come to know and understand the experience of others through their iteration of that experience.

### Limitations of the Study

The purposive sampling procedure of this study may represent a limitation in that the stories will reflect the experience of a select group of girls, those from an alternative school. However, the aim of phenomenological description is to make visible the nature of lived experience (Van Manen, 1984), in this case the experience of girl-to-girl aggression, rather than to tell each girl's story. The study may be limited by the degree to which the girls can articulate the lived experience of aggressive relationships and the meaning it has for them. Another limitation of the study concerns the qualitative data analysis. Findings may be subject to varied interpretations. This threat to validity was minimized by validation of emerging themes with the participants. Themes were selected upon member agreement that a theme represented their experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

### Significance of the Study

The startling statistics of youth violence, particularly the rising incidence of female aggression and the negative outcomes associated with female relational aggression, underscore the need to examine phenomena associated with aggression between female peers. Girls from a marginalized group, attending an alternative school, who often teeter on the edges of aggressive behavior, are a pivotal group to share their experiences. Engaged in unique struggles, frustrations, and worries, including their daily

peer relations, they have much to share about the experience of human aggressive behavior.

The phenomenological stance focused a lens on the totality of the experience of aggression. Thus, the study findings contribute to a knowledge base that will guide nursing practice in unique ways for interpretation of the issue and interventions. Perhaps of most importance is that the problem of girls' aggression to each other will be more clearly portrayed for nurses and other health care providers in terms of the entirety of the experience. Armed with knowledge about what constitutes the experience of aggression in girls' relationships, nurses will be better tuned into causative factors, triggers, and manifestations of both direct and indirect aggression. The phenomenological perspective will contribute to a change also in how nurses currently interact with aggressive girls. Interactions will flow from understanding the meanings and deeper nuances of the experience of aggression, such as girls' needs for connectedness, freedom to choose alternate behaviors, and girls recognizing specific aspects of their identity. Findings will contribute to devising a nursing care approach that subsumes the total experience of aggression rather than just the behavior.

The study findings are applicable to care of female youth in a variety of settings, such as middle schools and high schools, camps and community centers and other settings where youth congregate for recreation, socialization or education. These interaction-focused settings have a high potential for girl-to-girl physical or relational aggression. The findings from the study will help nurses working in these primary care settings to recognize all types of aggressive interactions, even those that are deceptive or under the radar. Exposure to the study girls' stories of how aggressive experiences unfold

and play out will help nurses encourage interaction styles that will be non-threatening for girls dealing with aggressive feelings and that will help to diffuse blossoming aggression.

Nurses can be catalysts for putting a stop to aggressive behaviors by pointing out the drama as they see it and setting limits on girls' behaviors that are either relationally or physically aggressive. Through the study descriptions of girls' experience in aggressive relationships, nurses will come to recognize the underlying needs and dynamics that occur in girls' relationships. Nursing interventions can then be directly focused on treating causes rather than results. Care can be focused on education to prevent aggression and to develop girls' personal attributes and identity. Findings from the study will add to nurses' understanding of the intricate balance between a girl's need for her own identity, yet need to belong to the peer group and the role that aggression may play in this process. Nurses can design strategies to help girls negotiate this developmental foray in ways that enhance relationships and build personal identity and self-esteem. Nurses can help girls recognize the reality that aggression is a potential problem in relationships, but educate them that it is within their power to choose alternative behavior that will strengthen relationships and limit aggressive tendencies.

The study may have particular implications for education in community health nursing. *Healthy people 2010* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000) has designated specific goals to decrease youth violence. Data from this study will help to clarify one form of youth violence, the experience of peer-to-peer aggression in females from marginalized groups. The results from this study may generate ideas for teaching nurses working with youth in community health settings how to circumvent girl-to-girl aggression and affirm positive peer relationships.

This study has significance for research in nursing and related areas. New knowledge on the experience of aggression between marginalized girls will provide a different lens through which to view relational and other forms of aggression. Heightened understanding of the life world of girls who experience girl-to-girl aggression may stimulate new research foci in nursing and other disciplines.



CHAPTER 2:  
LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

The earliest concept of girls' aggression was grounded in study of patterns displayed in boys, which are primarily physically aggressive behaviors. Thus, it appeared that girls were not aggressive, or at least not aggressive in the same way as boys. Research on gender-based aggression, however, revealed that girls' aggression is rooted in what girls hold most dear-- their relationships-- especially those with other girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational, social, and indirect are all aggression subtypes that attempt to capture the phenomenon of girls' use of relationships to hurt another. Studies on relational aggression reveal its characteristics, causative factors, effects, and suggested ways to interrupt this type of aggressive behavior. The immense focus on relational aggression has over-shadowed study of physical aggression in girls. With the rising incidence of girls' violence, the research lens needs to widen to include the whole continuum of aggression between girls. One finding about physical aggression in girls is that relational aggression may be an antecedent (Moretti et al., 2001). Girls' aggression to each other is hurtful and troubling, and it affects girls from all types of backgrounds. More research is needed about the lived experience of aggression in girls who are out of the mainstream, already identified for using aggressive behaviors in school.

This review analyzes the relevant literature, starting with gender-based models of children's aggression. Other focal topics include discussion of types of aggression such as relational and social aggression and bullying. The review analyzes studies of relational/social aggression with an eye to what research reveals about its place in girls' development, who uses it and why, and how it affects those involved. This review summarizes research on cultural perspectives on girls' aggression, physical aggression in

girls, and interventions for girls' aggression. Throughout the analytical review, gaps in the research areas are noted.

### Gender-based Models of Aggression in Youth

Stories and examples of aggressive behavior in children and teens have recently exploded in print and media venues. The media provides almost daily coverage of violent and aggressive behaviors such as school shootings, beatings between youthful peers, and gang attacks. In a recent study of high school students conducted by the Center for Disease Control, more than one-third of the participants reported being in a physical fight in the twelve months preceding the survey (CDC, 2005). The prevalence rate of physical fights for females in that group was 28.1%. Prevalence according to racial background for the females was as follows: African Americans 37.7%, Hispanics 32.5%, and Caucasians 24.7%. Once considered the domain of young men, aggressive behavior is now an equal opportunity phenomenon, with the incidence of female teen violence eclipsing that for males (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). As research has illuminated some differences in how genders manifest aggression, a changing perspective on girls' aggression is emerging.

In early empirical studies of aggression in youth, researchers found interesting gender-specific behaviors. Feshbach (1969) was perhaps the first to use the term "indirect aggression" to describe behaviors of rejection and social exclusion. In her observational study of first graders' responses to unfamiliar peers, she found that girls as compared to boys were significantly more likely to respond to the unfamiliar peer with indirect aggression.

Twenty dyads of girls and twenty-two dyads of boys were given time as a dyad to play in an experimental room while a concealed observer rated the children's interactions with each other according to categories of Direct Aggression, Indirect Aggression, and Approach (Feshbach, 1969). A week after the initial play session, the same dyads met in the experimental room for a play session. This time, after five minutes of play, a newcomer child was brought to the room. The concealed observer, who was not aware of the study hypothesis, recorded interactions every two minutes, using the established categories of aggression.

The findings showed that the initial response of girls to a newcomer of either gender was significantly more likely to be exclusion or rejection as compared to the response of the boys (Feshbach, 1969). However, the initial unfriendly response, while still in the same direction, dissipated to non-significant levels by the 16 minute mark of observation. Another interesting gender-related significant finding was that both boys and girls approached the same-sexed newcomer peer with more positive approach responses than they did the opposite-sexed newcomer (Feshbach, 1969). One limitation of the study is that the situation of the experiment likely influenced the type of aggression that the children had an opportunity to display. The situation was set up as a socially demanding encounter and there were no frustrating obstacles. In less social conditions, in a situation where aggression might be instrumental toward goal achievement, different types of aggressive responses might have occurred. However, one of the positive aspects of this study was the use of direct and unbiased observation in the method. In many subsequent empirical studies of gender-based aggressive behaviors, methodological approaches relied on peer and self-report instruments. Three studies (Bjorkqvist, Osterman &

Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988) using peer rating or self rating instruments found girls using more indirect aggression as compared to their male counterparts. One of these studies (Lagerspetz et al., 1988) of Finnish children aged 11-12 years used a combination of self and peer rating of aggressive behaviors. Findings showed that girls engaged in more indirect aggression, using a circuitous type of attack on others that amounted to social manipulation. Boys tended to use direct means of aggression. The participants rated the behavior of each of their classmates and themselves in reference to the question: "What do you/they do when angry with another child in the class?" The choices such as yelling, pushing, spreading untrue rumors, etc. were rated with Likert-type rating scales. A selected small group of participants (14 boys and 15 girls) also participated in an interview session in which they were asked to describe their behavior when angry and to comment on the meaning and importance of friendships. In reference to the importance of friendships, the social structure of the girls' friendships were rated closer than among the boys. The researchers concluded that this close friendship structure actually increased the opportunities for indirect social aggression among the girls (Lagerspetz et al., 1988). This finding, then, supports the assumption that indirect aggression is used within close relationships.

A study by Bjorkqvist et al. (1992) measured indirect verbal aggression as distinct from physical and direct verbal aggression. Finnish pupils in four age groups (ages 8, 11, 15, and 18) used only a peer estimation tool to rate their peers on the three types of aggressive behavior. Boys were peer-rated as physically more aggressive than girls, there was no significant difference between genders in regard to direct verbal aggression, and

girls were peer-rated as using indirect aggression more than boys. These findings lend support to indirect aggression as a type of aggression used by girls.

The term relational aggression actually was coined first by Crick and Grotpeter in 1995. Their research, using a peer estimation instrument, showed that girls were significantly more relationally aggressive than boys. The researchers chose the term “relational aggression” rather than “indirect aggression” to describe the type of aggression displayed by the females because the behaviors they assessed were of relational issues aimed at harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of peer relationships. Their research, done with 491 third- through sixth-grade children in a Midwestern town in the United States, included children of varying ethnic backgrounds (37% African American), thus supporting validity across ethnic groups of the gender differences in style of aggression. Their study added greater refinement to terms by using an instrument that did not confound relational aggression with nonverbal aggression. However, additional studies should be done to further refine terms such as relational and nonverbal. Recent reports from girls (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003) show that participants describing relational aggression include many nonverbal behaviors such as exclusion, looks and stares.

Other studies offer conflicting findings to those of Feshbach (1969), Lagerspetz et al. (1988), Bjorkqvist et al. (1992), and Crick and Grotpeter (1995) about which gender is higher on relational aggression. A study of second and third grade children found that boys scored higher than girls on both relational and overt aggression (Henington, Hughes, Cavell, & Thompson, 1998). The children used a peer-rating instrument. One possible explanation for the boys’ higher relational aggression score is their younger age

compared to the older children in the other studies. This finding is consistent with that of another study (O'Connell, Pepler, & Kent, 1995), where boys in the primary grades were found to use relational aggression more than girls in those grades.

A study by Tomada and Schneider (1997) using elementary school children in Italy also found that boys scored higher than girls did in both relational and overt aggression. However, in their study both peers and teachers rated the aggressive behaviors. In previously mentioned studies, teachers were not raters. These study findings illustrate the need for continuing research on gender differences in style of aggression, particularly in regard to the children's developmental level.

Empirical research has provided data that show girls are different in how they express their aggression. Yet, a deep and more thorough look at girls' aggression through the eyes of qualitative research is nearly absent from the literature. The Girls and Violence Task Force (Jones-Bamman, 2004), using focus groups of community-based organizations and girls from middle school through high school, confirms that pathways to violence are different for girls and require gender-specific prevention programming. Their findings reiterated the importance of relationships in girls' lives and suggested that problems with relationships, even at very young ages, can make girls' aggression more likely (Jones-Bamman, 2004).

Focus groups with girls affirmed empirical findings that girls are more likely to use alternative forms of aggression such as indirect, social, or relational rather than physical aggression (Jones-Bamman, 2004). Girls admitted to using bullying behaviors to gain friends and status. However, the girls also acknowledged that they do physically fight when it is needed to protect oneself, seek revenge, keep the peace, separate themselves

from other girls, or compete with other girls. Another finding from the focus groups was that girls' aggressive behavior is their way of expressing strong feelings that they do not know how to express in other ways. Girls stated that verbal, physical, and self-directed aggression was often linked to their conflict with boys, including competition with other girls over a boy.

The Governor's Prevention Partnership (Jones-Bamman, 2004) findings help to clarify girls' aggression using the voices of the girls themselves. One of the purposes of the planned study was to address girls' lived experience. Participants for this study represent a distinct group in that they are already known for their aggressive behaviors and are out of the mainstream youth population. Their experiences of girl-to-girl aggression will add an additional, perhaps different perspective to the task force findings.

#### Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is associated with bullying, a phenomenon that has gained increasing prominence as a behavioral problem among children worldwide (Griffin & Gross, 2004). Bullying itself is a concept that has a variety of meanings. Several common areas of agreement have emerged in definitions of bullying used by researchers (Griffin & Gross, 2004; Olweus, 1994). The commonalities include the bully's intent to inflict harm, the bully's perceived or real power over the victim, repeated nature of the aggression, non-provoking behavior by the victim, and the occurrence of the bullying within familiar social groups (Greene, 2000). Another important aspect in defining bullying is that it describes a behavioral interaction rather than just a person or just a behavior (Olweus, 1994; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). The overlap of the concept of bullying with relational and social



aggression is apparent in this description.

One of the constructs the literature on bullying discusses is the group-based aspect of the behavior, including perpetrators, victims, and bystanders (Olweus, 1991). Bullying is a complex inter-relational process that relies on and is fueled by behaviors and responses of more than one participant. Others who are included in the bullying process are the victim and the bystander. Victims may be passive and submissive or they may be submissive to a bully, yet engage in provoking and aggressive behavior toward others, thereby taking on a bully role. Bystanders also play a role in bullying, often as silent observers, but sometimes in support either of the bully or of the victim (Hazler, 1996).

Studies describe relational aggression as an interaction process that includes tactics aimed at harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2001). Relational aggression may involve behaviors such as starting rumors, slandering, making fun of someone, manipulating a relationship, ignoring, playing games or tricks on another, and refusing to be friends or allowing another into a friendship circle. The term “social aggression” also applies to these behaviors because they occur within the context of groups and involve people within one’s circle of friends. The term social aggression is perhaps broader than relational, as researchers include in their description non-verbal body language and facial expressions that convey contempt or exclusion (Underwood et al., 2001).

An attempt has been made to differentiate the qualities of relational aggression from those of overt aggression, as evidenced by the factor analysis of the peer nomination instrument in Crick and Grotpeter’s (1995) study. The behaviors that clustered together for relational aggression were excluding someone from a group of friends, refusing to

like someone unless he/she did what the friend wants, and ignoring and refusing to talk to someone. Other related terms have not been analyzed in this fashion.

### Relational Victimization

Like bullying, the construct of relational and social aggression is complicated by the various roles involved in the process and by the negative sequelae for both victims and aggressors. In Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) study of third through sixth graders, children who were the relational aggressors were significantly more rejected than their nonrelationally aggressive peers. The aggressors also reported significantly higher levels of loneliness, depression, and isolation. Studies about relational aggression also have examined the victim role (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Findings show that being a victim of relational aggression is linked to social-psychological adjustment difficulties, to negative feelings about oneself, and to general feelings of hurt, sadness, and worry about being victimized.

A self-report measure, the Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ), was used to assess both overt and relational victimization in a study of 474 third through sixth grade children of lower-middle class socioeconomic status (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). The children also responded to the Asher and Wheeler Loneliness Scale, the Children's Depression Inventory, and the Franke and Hymel social anxiety scale as a means of assessing social-psychological adjustment. Using correlation analyses, the researchers found significance in the relationship between relational victimization and loneliness, depression, social anxiety, and social avoidance. Results also showed that the majority of the victimized children (64%) in the study were victims of either overt or relational

aggression, but not both. The researchers felt this finding supported the importance of focusing on both overt and relational aggression to identify adequately all children who are being victimized (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

In a subsequent study of peer victimization, both self and peer report instruments were used for data collection about types of aggression and victimization, and the results were analyzed according to gender differences in peer victimization (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). There were 383 primarily Caucasian children from fourth and fifth grade in the study. The results of the study showed that relational aggression and relational victimization were moderately to highly correlated. Children who were victimized reported high levels of problems such as loneliness and emotional distress. They also reported significantly more self-restraint problems than their peers did. The findings showed that, for girls only, relational victimization added significantly to the prediction of self-restraint difficulties. The researchers postulate that victimized children may be inclined to retaliate or they may be involved in a cycle where retaliation causes them to be easy target for more provocation by peer aggressors. An interesting finding was that assessment of relational aggression and victimization showed that all rejected children were girls. Therefore, this study was particularly useful in showing the impact of both relational aggression and victimization on girls' social problems. The use of both self and peer-report instruments added a helpful dimension, as the findings showed that the most maladjusted victims were those identified through both self and peer report.

While differentiation of sub concepts of aggression remains murky, these empirical studies contribute a great deal in clarification of the victim role and the negative sequelae for victims of relational aggression. The particular vulnerabilities for female victims are

important considerations in the overall picture of girls' aggression.

Qualitative research methods yield similar concerns for the female victims of relational aggression. Seventy-six adolescents, primarily Caucasian ethnic background, from lower and middle-income families, participated in a study of experiences of peer victimization (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). The 39 male and 37 female participants had a mean age of 13.8 years. The researchers used a structured interview (the Social and Physical Aggression Personal Experience Interview) to elicit a detailed account from each participant of an actual victimization experience. Other data collection instruments included the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents and the Revised Social Experience Questionnaire (RSEQ).

Results showed that significantly more girls than boys described a specific experience of being the target of social aggression (Paquette & Underwood, 1999). Conversely, the number of boys who reported an incident of physical aggression was significantly higher than the number of girls who reported this behavior. The occurrence of social aggression was primarily within same-gender peer groups. A negative correlation of global self-worth with social aggression was significantly more negative for girls than for boys. Another important finding was that the experiences of social aggression were perceived by both genders as hurtful and as being intended to cause harm. For girls, frequency of experiencing social aggression was related to lower self-perceptions about her athletic competence, romantic appeal, physical appearance, close friendships, and global self-worth. The frequency of girls' experiences of physical aggression also was negatively related to self-concept, but only in the realms of behavioral conduct, close friendships, and physical appearance.

Findings from a qualitative study of seventh grade girls are similar in respect to the negative sequelae for girls who experience relational victimization (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). The twenty participants represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds and were from lower and middle class families. The participants completed the Social Experience Questionnaire to assess the type of aggression experienced, and also participated in an interview about victimization experiences. Results from the study showed that the majority of the girls (N=15) felt emotional pain including sadness, hurt, rejection, and unhappiness in response to victimization, which included both relational and overt types. A few of the participants also stated that being victimized impacted their feelings about themselves, for example reinforcing negative feelings they already had about self, or causing them to question their appearance and body-image. Some of the girls also described losing significant relationships due to victimization. In one instance, a close male friend rejected a girl following her victimization by others, apparently to show his support with the victimizers (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001).

The research gap related to the aggression subtypes is that there is not a conceptually strong basis that differentiates each of the subtypes. The meanings and definitions tend to overlap such that it is not clear which is the valid term. There is competition among the constructs. The behaviors may be reactive or proactive, depending on the way that the researcher is studying the behavior. Participants in the behaviors may be aggressors or bystanders or victims or both. Since relational aggression is recognized as an experience occurring over the course of relating to others, the tactics used to clarify the concepts and understand the aggression need to encompass the whole of the phenomenon. This is best accomplished by a qualitative approach. Casey-Cannon

et al.'s (2001) qualitative research sheds light on girls' experience of victimization. However, the girls in their study described victimization that was not gender-specific. Ten of their participants reported both male and female aggressors, six reported male aggressors, while just three participants reported that victimization was by a female peer only. One purpose of this study was to augment their research by focusing on girl-to-girl aggression. In addition, this study explored the whole of girls' lived experience of aggression, not only the victimization aspect. The girls participating in this study represent a different population from the girls in the Casey-Cannon et al.'s (2001) study in that they are identified as being aggressive girls.

#### Relational Aggression Across Girls' Development

While little research has explored the developmental origins of relational aggression, the literature reflects how it unfolds in tandem with developmental events. In Underwood's (2003) comprehensive review of the topic of social aggression in girls, she observes that girls' growth in social, cognitive, and emotional spheres reflects their development of changing styles in aggressive peer maltreatment. Preschool girls are likely to state their aggression directly, such as admonishing that they will not invite someone to a birthday party if the peer does not comply with demands. In middle childhood, as fitting in with the peer group assumes a greater priority, and understanding of emotional nuances is growing, aggressing techniques become more sophisticated (Underwood, 2003). Girls at this age will use exclusion, gossip, and tactics of friendship manipulation. For young adolescents, developmental needs include maintaining the boundaries of one's peer group, and preserving one's status within that group. Therefore, social aggression continues to focus on exclusionary tactics. For the older female

adolescent, romantic attachments assume more importance. In these circumstances, girls' social aggression often involves sabotage of a peer's relationship with her man (Underwood, 2003). Some of the questions that researchers continue to explore regarding the development of relational or social aggression in girls include how social aggression develops in girls, whether it is part of normal development, and what are the underlying causes of the behavior.

#### Relational Aggression in Girls: How it develops

Research suggests that for middle school girls relational or social aggression occurs as girls begin to recognize that this is an approach that is hurtful to female peers. Girls of this age realize that the relationally aggressive behaviors will allow them to gain control or retaliate against a girl. In their study of nine to eleven year olds, Crick, Bigbee, and Howes (1996) found that children associate relationally aggressive acts with mean or angry behaviors. Girls most frequently cited relational aggression and verbal insults as harmful behaviors. Boys, by contrast, cited physical aggression and verbal insults as harmful.

In Crick et al.'s (1996) study, the researchers were also interested in comparing the normative beliefs of relationally and overtly aggressive children relative to nonaggressive children. They used a peer nomination technique that involves children nominating up to three peers who they feel best fit the description of types of aggressive behavior. Four groups of children were identified: nonaggressive, relationally aggressive, overtly aggressive, and relationally and overtly aggressive. In individual interviews with these 60 children, the researchers asked open-ended questions that assessed normative beliefs about behaviors that are intended to be harmful. Findings showed that girls

viewed relational aggression as one of the most normative aggressive behaviors in their peer group, especially in girl-to-girl aggressive interactions. Girls' relational aggression against boys was also viewed as normative (Crick et al., 1996). One of the values of this study is that the interviews did not prompt the children with terms or descriptions of relational aggression. Questions such as "What do most children do when they are mad at someone?" clearly allowed the children to take the lead in describing behaviors. This enhances the validity of the study outcomes since these ideas about aggression came from the children's own thinking.

Adler and Adler's (1995) qualitative study of children of middle school age provides additional background on use of relational aggression by this age group. Their longitudinal study spanned seven years, and used participant observation and in-depth interviews to explore the inclusion and exclusion dynamics of children's cliques. The participants were Caucasian, primarily, from middle and upper middle class neighborhoods. The researchers, who were also parents of two children in the study, observed and interacted with the friends of their children and also performed in roles of coach, volunteer, and carpooler. The study provides fascinating data about the cycle involved in children's cliques. The cliques' formation and evolution, with their stratification hierarchies and shifting friendships and relationships, vividly displayed an almost ritualistic social aggression process. Regardless of gender, the clique process involved a leader cyclically building up and later cutting down followers, so that the clique members alternated between positions of high favor and subjugation. One conclusion about social aggression in the middle school clique dynamic was that girls



used aggression as a way to be vindictive, whereas boys used it to assert dominance (Adler & Adler, 1995).

Qualitative research with adolescent girls suggests that as girls mature, their relational aggression tactics may take on a dominance or power quality. Merten's (1997) ethnographic longitudinal study of Caucasian upper class junior high school girls revealed that popular girls displayed mean behaviors typical of relational aggression, such as manipulation, backbiting, and exclusion of others. The study examined how competition for popularity led girls to be mean. Merten's (1997) method included extensive interviews and observations of girls in a particular clique that was known for its popularity and power within the school. His findings bolster the importance of belonging needs for girls in this age group. It was interesting to note that the girls' meanness that occurred stayed within the clique, as the girls vied for position and prestige within their own group of so-called friends. Merten (1997) proposed that the mean behaviors were the girls' way of acting out their popularity and frightening others away from competing with them. By being mean and keeping others in the group off balance, they maintained their

Another study adds supportive data that suggest relationally aggressive behaviors may serve to enhance status and prestige in one's peer group during adolescence. Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) followed a group of 905 students from fifth to ninth grade and examined the interplay between perceived popularity and aggression. The researchers found that as participants moved from middle childhood into early adolescence, relational aggression led to higher perceived popularity. Reciprocally, the researchers also found that status led to behavior. Perceived popularity consistently predicted relational aggression, and low levels of liking, especially for girls. The relationship between

relational aggression and decreased social preference was especially strong for girls. Perceived popularity also predicted physical aggression for both genders. However, the concept of popularity itself changed during the transition from middle school to high school. “Popular” evolved from being well-liked as a fifth grader to being influential and powerful in the ninth grade. The researchers conclude that highly dominant adolescents are using both physical and relational aggression to maintain their high status once they have achieved it. Based on this study, it appears that power and prestige associated with perceived popularity outweigh acceptance and liking for this age group (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). In thinking about physical aggression between adolescent girls, these findings suggest that a girl who aggresses physically is recognized or carries a social reputation for that behavior; this aggressive demeanor not only becomes her identity, but also gives her an influential position among her peers.

Anecdotal accounts of girls’ aggression to each other, such as those reported by Dellasega and Nixon (2003) suggest that girls are particularly likely to use relational aggression against close friends rather than outsiders. This finding coincides with Merten’s (1997) data about the meanness that occurred within a junior high school girls’ clique. Extensive stories shared with Dellasega and Nixon (2003) by girls from middle school through high school illustrate a range of relationally aggressive behaviors used by girls. The girls’ stories provide a smorgasbord of intentions behind their aggressive strategies, including competition, building a sense of power, trying to please others, and needing to save face (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003). The girls also provided graphic stories of how relational aggression can escalate into physical violence. Similarly, Simmons’ (2002) interviews with a large number of girls about relational aggression showed that

girls use this type of aggression against their friends, often with underlying competitive motives.

These studies suggest several generalities about how relational aggression develops in girls. In middle school, girls show sensitivity to the hurt that occurs in relationally mean behaviors. Girls of this age feel hurt when they are aggressed in a relational way. They begin to use the behaviors in vindictive ways to get back at other girls, who they know will feel injured by the tactics. Girls themselves indicate that relationally aggressive behaviors are the norm in terms of how girls express aggression. As girls progress to adolescence, relational aggression is associated with perceived popularity and is useful for its ability to maintain one's dominance and place in the peer group. Additionally, some studies (Adler & Adler, 1995, Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Merten, 1997; Simmons, 2002) demonstrate quite clearly the social nature of girls' relational aggression.

The research on how relational aggression develops in girls contains gaps that need further exploration. Longitudinal studies of girls, tracing how relational aggression unfolds in different age groups are definitely needed. Investigation of family relationships in the lives of relationally aggressive girls might provide data on attachment issues or role modeling in the development of girl-to-girl aggression. Participants with diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds would help to fill a research gap. One purpose of this study was to address girl-to-girl aggression in girls at an alternative school, who comprise a diverse population. This study addressed lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression, and thus added details of how girls perceive the development of girl-to-girl aggression in their age groups and how family relationships factor into girl-to-girl aggression.

### Relational Aggression: Determining Normative Properties

Theorists disagree as to whether relational aggression behaviors are within the realm of normal child and adolescent development (Underwood et al., 2001). The significance of the developmental task of identity formation in the age group that is most prone to relational aggression cannot be overlooked. Researchers suggest that adolescent girls seem to formulate identity more in connection to others and at less distance from their families than boys do (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987). Based on this theoretical view, it is clear that for girls in the middle school/adolescent age group, relationships are a pivotal force for maintaining connectedness and ultimately consolidating identity. It would seem that relational aggression between female peers might threaten connectedness by jeopardizing relationships.

Behaviors of relational aggression come into play as girls try to preserve their spot in a friendship circle and prevent themselves from being abandoned or cut off from a peer group. The need to fit in is so strong during this period of girls' development that some girls will lose their voice, succumbing to cultural expectations of "niceness", all the while losing their authentic selves (Gilligan, 1982). Girls learn that there is danger in being authentic. They learn not to disagree, and not to fight in direct or confrontational ways. They learn that the way to keep friends is to be *indirect* about their true feelings (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

This deep adolescent developmental need for belonging also explains other behaviors associated with relational aggression. One of the hurtful behaviors of relational aggression is the exclusionary tactics that include shunning or refusing to let another into a peer group. By distancing herself from those whom she identifies as being "not like

me”, the teen ultimately can enjoy the status of feeling herself part of a select group, satisfying a basic developmental need to belong (Hazler, 1996). By choosing friends who look, talk, act, and think just like themselves, girls can avoid the fear of abandonment that is germane to this age group.

Ironically, these very tactics will ultimately threaten connectedness by jeopardizing relationships. A girl who excludes others from a group may eventually find herself being excluded by the group. There is evidence that relational aggression occurs *within* a girl’s friendship circle, whereas males tend to aggress *outside* their circle of friends (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Merten, 1997). Thus, girls who engage in relational aggression are in effect depriving themselves of a peer support system at a time in their psychosocial development when alignment with peers is critical for healthy relationships and personal growth.

It appears that girls are engaged in a complicated developmental battle whereby they want to feel connected, yet the methods they choose to accomplish this are detrimental to relationships and to their own self-esteem and personal growth. Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest that girls engage in relationally aggressive behaviors such as backstabbing a friend or joining in the ridicule and exclusion of a friend due to fear that the same fate will befall them. They realize that if they stop relationally aggressing their peer, they may be the next on the list to receive the treatment.

There is support for the idea that behaviors of relational or social aggression may serve positive developmental functions. Eckert (1990) proposes that the “girl talk” that goes on between girls is an attempt to examine and develop moral norms about the events that rule their worlds. Solving problems and negotiating identity are thought to rely to

some extent on behaviors such as gossip in the adolescent years (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). Since these are salient developmental outcomes, the emerging question is whether the behaviors of relational aggression are somehow inextricably linked with these aspects of girls' development.

Paquette and Underwood (1999) found in their study of experiences of victimization that girls who had experienced social aggression thought a great deal about how they could get the aggressor to be their friend. The researchers suggest that this behavior reflects the deep importance to girls of belonging. The aggression may serve in some manner as a way of maintaining a balance in the cyclical nature of belonging within girls' relationships. Perhaps the behaviors of relational aggression contribute some equalizing or balancing factor to girls' social and emotional development. Girls may learn about the dynamics of negotiation and compromise through these continually fluctuating relationships. A suggestion from this sole study does not provide conclusive evidence of relational aggression as a positive factor in girls' development.

Findings from another study suggest that engaging in indirect aggression is a skill that may be related to positive attributes in children (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). The 526 Finnish children in Kaukiainen et al.'s (1999) study were from age groups 10, 12, and 14 years old. A peer estimation technique was used in the completion of three questionnaires. The children were asked to evaluate their peers on a 5-point scale according to how often each classmate behaves in the way described by the item. The first questionnaire measured aggression using the "Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales". The second questionnaire measured social intelligence and the third measured empathy. Results showed that indirect aggression correlated positively and significantly

with social intelligence in every age group. Empathy correlated negatively and significantly with every type of aggression. Social intelligence was defined as accuracy in perceiving others, being able to accomplish one's goals, enacting desired behaviors, and flexibility in social situations. The researchers conclude that the children who are able to use indirect aggression are likely skilled in understanding human relations and skills that are applied in social settings (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). A less desirable conclusion is that the children who are adept at indirect aggression lack empathy toward others in their social settings.

These research studies suggest new and untested assumptions about ways to view the normality of relational aggression. Further research with normal samples of children is needed to add to the current proposals about relational aggression as a positive contribution to children's development.

#### Explanations for Girls' Relational Aggression

As discussed earlier in the review of pertinent research, many intertwining factors play a role in girls' relational aggression. Thus, explanations for relational aggression can take several broad paths, such as temperament, family relationships, emotion regulation, attachments, social cognition, and peer relationships (Underwood, 2003). Empirical research shows that explanations for girls' relational aggression may include faulty social information processing, hostile attribution bias, and negative self-representation. Qualitative research suggests factors such as need for protection, maintenance of status and prestige in the peer group, and other factors such as conflict over boys, and desire to create excitement.

Crick's (1995) study assessed the role of intent attribution, feelings of distress, and provocation type in children's relationally aggressive behavior. She asked 252 third through sixth grade children to nominate three peers who fit item descriptors for types of aggressive behavior. Using these scores, Crick identified three groups of children: relationally aggressive (19 children: 8 boys and 11 girls), relationally and overtly aggressive (45 children: 32 boys and 13 girls), and nonaggressive children (175 children: 92 boys and 83 girls). Intent attributions were assessed using a hypothetical-situation instrument. The children read 10 stories and responded to questions that assessed their attributions of the provoking person's intent as either instrumental or relational provocation. Results showed that the relationally aggressive group of children had significantly more hostile attributions for the relational provocations than did the nonaggressive group. Relationally aggressive children also reported feeling significantly more distress in these situations than did the nonaggressive children. Girls reported significantly higher levels of distress for relational provocation situations than boys did. Crick (1995) concludes that relationally aggressive children, when provoked by a certain ambiguous social stimulus, may tend to perceive hostility in peers when none is intended. Such an attribution bias about a peer may then set into motion a retaliatory relationally aggressive or exclusionary behavior as a way to get even with that peer.

Crick, Grotpeter, and Bigbee's (2002) findings were similar to Crick's (1995) study. The method was slightly different in that the group identifications were changed to high and low relational aggression and high and low physical aggression. The findings suggest that relational aggression is strongly associated with peer provocations that involve a relationship slight. The researchers conclude that the findings provide evidence



for the generalizability of the social-information processing model to relational aggression. According to social information processing theory, perceiving hostile intent in another person is likely to result in an aggressive, retaliatory response.

The findings from both Crick's (1995) and Crick et al.'s (2002) studies suggest that it is important to assess carefully the context in which children's aggression occurs. The social network of the child may contain factors that are initiating a hostile attribution in a child. Some children may perceive hostility where none exists, based on their social world that may be unsafe and unpredictable. It is not clear whether the participants in Crick's (1995) and Crick et al.'s (2002) studies were from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thirty-eight percent were African American. These studies provide valuable data about the role of provocation in children's relationally aggressive behaviors. The studies also propose that girls experience greater distress than boys do in relationally aggressive provocation situations. These studies are helpful for explaining the beginnings of relational aggression in children in this age group (grades three through six). However, the explanation may not apply to older children and adolescents. More studies are needed to examine specifically each gender's use of attribution bias in relational aggression.

Research with older children and teens suggests that girls' self-representation may be an explanatory factor in girls' use of relational aggression. Moretti et al.'s (2001) study examined predictors of different types of aggression in children aged 11-17 years. For girls, negativity of peer representations of self predicted significantly higher levels of relational aggression. For both boys and girls, negative self-representations predicted increased overt aggression and assaultive behaviors. The results from this research emphasize that a child's self-representation is clearly a determinant of aggressive

behavior for older children and adolescents. However, the findings must be considered in light of the children's troubled backgrounds. The participants may hold more negative views of self than children may from a less troubled population.

Moretti et al.'s (2001) research builds on findings from the studies by Crick (1995) and Crick et al. (2002) in terms of social information processing and hostile attribution, particularly for girls. The trajectory of girls' relational aggression may begin with a girl's negative view of self which then leads her to perceive that others have slighted her, which then progresses to her trying to punish, control, or manipulate those whom she feels have slighted her. In addition, if a girl believes that peers view her negatively, she may use relationally aggressive behaviors to control and contain the threat that she feels such peers present to her own social status.

For girls in Moretti et al.'s (2001) study, relational aggression was highly correlated with assaultive behaviors. Thus, the researchers conclude from their study that girls who engage in high levels of relational aggression may be at significant risk for engaging in overt aggression and violence (Moretti et al., 2001). It is also clear that youth who have a negative view of self are at higher risk for aggressive behavior, as are youth who believe that their peers hold a negative view of them. The fact that the girls in this study were from unstable home settings certainly may be a contributing factor to their negative view of self and negative perception of how others view them. The researchers propose that proper aggression risk assessment needs to include assessment of a youth's beliefs about self and perceptions of how others view him/her (Moretti et al., 2001). Since findings from Moretti et al.'s (2001) research suggests a cognitive problem (faulty

beliefs/perceptions), interventions that target these cognitive distortions and building of social skills should be researched further.

These empirical studies provide very interesting explanations about girls' relational aggression. They lend support to the notion that cognitive, social, and emotional factors are all relevant variables. The findings also point strongly to relational aggression as a process that unfolds within a relational experience. Yet, there are gaps in understanding about how this all fits together to contribute to relational aggression. Studies that examine the experiential nature of relational aggression in girls would add an important dimension.

Artz's (1998) ethnographic study of violent school girls in Canada is perhaps the only study to date that has looked at the lived experience of girls' aggression. Artz (1998) described her six participants as violent, middle class, white, school girls who were not part of a visible minority. Quotes and rich, detailed descriptions from the participants in Artz's (1998) research provide a glimpse of the many factors that help to "explain" aggression in the lives of young girls. Much of the described aggressions were of a physical nature, but a noticeable pattern involved the perpetrator feeling that she had been provoked to physical violence. Provocative behaviors included those that sound similar to what other studies have established as relationally aggressive. These behaviors are acting cocky to a peer, giving a look that is perceived as negative, moving in on a girl's boyfriend, calling a girl by a derogatory name, or otherwise stepping out of one's place or breaking the rules of one's place in a group. The aggressive girls in Artz's (1998) study felt that they needed to protect their turf by physical fighting. They shifted the

responsibility for their actions to the victims, and felt justified for their actions, confident that they were “doing the right thing”.

Results from Artz’s (1998) study give added support to the role of negative self-identity in the phenomenon of girls’ aggression. The impact of relationally aggressive behaviors as a prelude to physical violence is apparent, as is the notion of aggression as an unfolding process in the context of certain girls’ relationships. A new concept about girls’ aggression suggested by Artz’s (1998) research is the aggressor’s perception of victim as perpetrator who then deserves to be beaten. Artz (1998) noted that the girls’ sense-making of their behavior was reminiscent of how their parents explained their violent behavior toward their daughters. This study is similar to Artz’s (1998) in that it planned to explore the lived experience of girls’ aggression. The study addresses a gap in that the participants are girls from outside the mainstream and from culturally diverse backgrounds.

#### Explanation for Girls’ Aggression: Cultural Perspectives

One of the gaps in the research about explanations of girls’ aggression is the lack of diversity of the participants in terms of cultural background and socioeconomic circumstances. Most of the studies have focused on Caucasian, middle class girls. Some exceptions include Moretti et al.’s (2001) study, the Governor’s Prevention Partnership Task Force (Jones-Bamman, 2004), and a study by Lucas (2000) of Southern Appalachian Caucasian and African American girls.

In Lucas’ (2000) study, in which adolescent females from Southern Appalachia described the experience of being violent, a theme of self-protection emerged. The ten participants were ages 12-17 and had episodes of being violent. Many were involved with

the Department of Children's Services or had been in juvenile detention. Socioeconomic status was unknown. The girls responded to interview questions that asked them to describe their experience of being violent. Girls stated that they became violent in response to a stimulus that was a perceived injustice. The girls reported experiencing themselves as "good" until in the presence of a violent other, in which case the girls reacted with physical fighting to protect themselves against feelings of being attacked. The protected areas included self, relationships or reputations. While a few of the experiences described by the girls were encounters with other girls, Lucas' (2000) study did not explore girl-to-girl aggression specifically.

In both Lucas' (2000) and Artz's (1998) studies, violent girls used physical aggression rather than indirect aggression as a retaliation for a perceived injustice or to keep someone in her place. Lucas' (2000) study helps to explain girls' aggression, but it is limited to the experience of being violent. This study adds a different dimension, as it plans to address the lived experience of aggression between girls rather than violence in general.

A longitudinal study by Taylor et al. (1995) contributes a reference point for understanding female aggression in youth in specific cultural groups and in lower socioeconomic classes in the United States. Their study "Understanding Adolescence" spanned three years over which 26 girls were interviewed annually, from grade 8 to grade 10. The purpose of their study was to learn from girls about girls' experiences of becoming women near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The study is included here because some of the findings are pertinent to explaining girls' aggression. The girls were all economically disadvantaged, from cultural backgrounds including Black, Hispanic,

Portuguese, and Caucasian. The girls' interviews showed themes of desire for connection during eighth grade, and of the growing conflicts faced in relationships as girls matured. The researchers contend that white middle and upper middle class girls are socialized into an idealized feminine role in which anger and assertiveness are restrained. African American girls, however, are socialized less stereotypically and have less emphasis on restraining their assertiveness and anger (Taylor et al., 1995). One Black girl in the study spoke of standing up to those who started rumors and stories about her in grade nine. However, over time, the repeated betrayal of her trust by others left her using self-protective strategies of disconnecting from others who were relationally aggressive to her. While this strategy allowed her to stand out in some way as being confident and powerful, there was continued disengagement from school, and eventually she dropped out to have a baby in eleventh grade.

The researchers found that a repeated theme among their participants was that speaking up in response to hurtful comments, rumors, and unfair statements from peers only got them into trouble (Taylor et al., 1995). Many of the girls responded with self-protective strategies of staying to themselves, isolating, and generally avoiding contacts. Unfortunately, this sometimes meant that the girls dropped out of school. It seems that for the girls in Taylor et al.'s (1995) study, explanation for aggression is linked with cultural mores. Taylor et al. (1995) remark that in a culture where racism is a reality and in a school where everyday occurrences of gossip and rumors threaten relationships, survival strategies are the same. They involve, for girls, tactics of being tough, strong, and outspoken. It seemed that for the girls in Taylor et al.'s (1995) study, as in Lucas' (2000) study, self-protection was an important reaction to hurt or threat. However, the strategies

that might be labeled “self-protective” involved a certain amount of “disconnect” where the girls chose to isolate or go off on their own rather than engage in back-stabbing and rumors and hurtful comments.

These findings about girls from low socioeconomic status and diverse cultural backgrounds add yet another perspective for explaining girls’ aggression (Lucas, 2000; Taylor et al., 1995). While the theme of self-protection is still apparent, at least as an initial reaction, the response may dissipate to one of disconnection rather than continually fighting back. The small number of participants limits the findings. Further study of girls from diverse backgrounds is needed to clarify these initial findings.

As these studies suggest (Lucas, 2000; Moretti et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 1995), social class or cultural background certainly may influence the explanation for girls’ aggressive responses. In her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Payne (2003) presents concepts about how the class structure differences that exist in the North American population impact education, learning, and discipline of students in school settings. Her ideas are based on twenty-four years of informal data collection as she worked with students and adults from poverty, middle class, and wealthy circumstances. Her observations of behaviors among people from different economic backgrounds led her to a conclusion that the biggest differences between people in different economic groups are not about money. Rather, hidden rules and an unspoken cueing system that exists among members within a socioeconomic class drive perceptions, and therefore behaviors and reactions (Payne, 2003). Within the cueing system, beliefs and values held by one’s socioeconomic class influence one’s reactions to basic concepts such as love, time, education, worldview and driving force. Possessions, for example, are defined by

the wealthy as one-of-a-kind objects or pedigrees, while for the disadvantaged, possessions are people.

While not based on formal research, Payne's (2003) conclusions provide another overlay that bears consideration in examining the lived experience of aggression in girls from marginalized groups. The perspective on the hidden rules, along with findings from Taylor et al. (1995), Lucas (2000), and Moretti et al. (2001) validate the need to explore aggression in girls from marginalized groups. Aggression may have quite different meanings and purposes for those whose life world is based on values and beliefs that differ from the mainstream culture.

Adolescent females living in disadvantaged circumstances are faced with the identity challenges typical of adolescent passage, while also struggling with basic early childhood issues of safety and security (Musick, 1991). Behavior patterns among disadvantaged female teens that may seem self-destructive and dysfunctional to the mainstream community are, indeed, adaptations that ensure survival. Musick (1991) states that young women in lower socioeconomic classes are often enmeshed in a milieu of sexual victimization and interpersonal deprivation and have little psychic energy to invest in growth-enhancing relationships. It is hard to imagine that young girls struggling with urgent and powerful survival issues would experience aggression in the same manner as more privileged, middle or upper class girls.

These few studies do not allow for any general conclusions that might explain the role of culture and economic status in girls' aggression to each other. Yet, there are certain themes that seem representative of aggression in girls according to cultural background. For Caucasian girls, whose cultural value is to be "nice" and compliant,



aggression must be expressed indirectly, behind the back, concealed. For girls from other cultural groups, cultural values may permit more assertive and direct expression of aggression. A purpose of this study about girls' lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression using girls who are out of the mainstream population, is to address knowledge gaps about perceptions of girl-to-girl aggression in girls from diverse backgrounds.

### Physical Aggression in Girls

There are very few studies about physical aggression in girls. Empirical studies suggest that physically aggressive girls are more deviant than physically aggressive boys are. This phenomenon is termed "gender paradox" meaning that the members of the gender group least frequently ill with a disorder are the most severely disturbed (Eme, 1992). The theory behind the paradox is that the person who develops a gender-atypical disorder likely has many strong risk factors that will contribute to the development of other related problems (Underwood, 2003).

In a comprehensive review of recent research on the relationship between social information processing and social adjustment in childhood, Crick and Dodge (1994) found support for the hypothesis regarding gender-atypical aggression. Their review led them to conclude that, though few in number, physically aggressive girls experience the most significant adjustment difficulties. They surmised that, for both sexes, the social maladjustment that is gender-atypical is associated with social information processing patterns that are particularly deviant. This conclusion is congruent with other research that links relational aggression with hostile attribution bias and faulty social information processing (Crick, 1995; Crick et al., 2002).

The scant research that has examined physical aggression in girls reveals that peers (Lancelotta & Vaughn, 1989) and teachers see it as more deviant than physical aggression is in boys. In a recent study of 9-12 year old children, Crick (1997) found that those who engaged in aggression that was non-gender normative (i.e. physical aggression in girls and relational aggression in boys) were perceived by teachers as highest on internalizing and externalizing problems.

Hypotheses emerging from longitudinal research (Caspi et al., 1997) propose that girls who fight in childhood may be those who have earlier risk factors such as difficult temperament, impulsivity, or cognitive deficiencies that lead to negative outcomes. Another hypothesis is that physically aggressive girls are likely to associate with deviant peers, and this contributes to development of further problem behaviors.

Cairns et al. (1988) found in their study that aggressive girls tend to socialize with other aggressive girls. The researchers studied social networks and aggressive behavior in children in grade 4 and grade 7 in schools in metropolitan and rural areas. Findings showed that highly aggressive children were similar to the control group in terms of social cluster membership. Both groups were equally often identified as being nuclear members of social clusters. Aggressive children were named as “best friend” as often as were the control group and they also were similar to the control group in the probability of having their friendship choices reciprocated by peers. For girls in the fourth grade, there were low levels of similarity between best friends on the mean scores of the aggressive factor. In seventh grade, however, girls who were best friends were similar on the aggressive factor.

The study design (Cairns et al., 1988) is one of the few that compares a problem group (aggressive) with a control group. One area that was unclear was what constituted “high aggressive” behavior. While this study is not specifically about physical aggression, it contributes a perspective on friendships and belonging for highly aggressive girls. It appears that, as is typical in adolescent development, sense of belonging or fitting in is crucial, and thus the girls chose peers whom they perceived as being like themselves. Also of importance is that the highly aggressive girls were not ostracized from social groups. What may be happening is that very aggressive girls stick together in their own cliques in which their risk-taking and dangerous behaviors are the norm for that group. Much more research is needed on physical aggression in girls and the outcomes that are associated with physical aggression. The purpose of this study was to address the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Girls’ experiences are likely to illuminate the role and outcomes of physical aggression in their relationships with other girls.

#### Interventions for Girls’ Aggression

Just as the dynamics of girl-to-girl aggression are complex, so are the strategies for intervening on the multiple aspects and layers of girls’ aggression. One solution does not fit all the needs and problems. The research thus far provides a beginning framework for assessing and understanding girls’ aggression, particularly relational/social aggression. Research also points out the salient developmental factors that are intertwined with girls’ relational aggression. The research data have generated a concern for negative outcomes associated with girls’ aggression. Research on interventions, however, is in early stages. Very few published studies examine interventions.

Interventions for related problems, such as bullying, have been researched and outcomes reveal some successful strategies. Findings from research on bullying offer components that may be adapted to girls' social and relational aggression.

Empirical studies of interventions for bullying suggest that school-based interventions (Olweus, 1991) and strategies aimed at peer involvement, such as "befriending" (Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003), and peer support processes (Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & van Oost, 2000) may be effective to reduce bullying behaviors. The most efficacious treatments for bullying appear to be those that utilize the peer group in a supportive way to assist the bully or victims.

Olweus (1991) is considered the pioneer of anti-bullying programs in schools. His first intervention program, called the Bergen Study, was conducted in 1983 in Norway, with a sample of 2500 students aged 11-14 years. The anti-bullying intervention used in the study was a structured program that operated on three levels: school, classroom, and individual. While the self-report mechanism may threaten the validity of the method and findings, the anti-bullying program demonstrated an approximately 50% reduction in students' reports of bullying for all ages and gender groups (Olweus, 1991).

A study conducted with Italian middle school students in 1998 used a peer support model intervention called "befriending" to deal with bullying (Menesini et al., 2003). The study participants, numbering almost 300, were ages 11-14 years and were assigned to a treatment group or a control group. After receiving training on pro-social behaviors, several peer supporters from the treatment group were nominated to help "target children". Findings demonstrated that levels of bullying and pro-bullying behavior remained stable in the treatment group, while these levels increased in the

control group. Even though bullying behavior was not decreased or eliminated in the treatment group, the fact that bullying did not rise was considered a positive outcome in the study. The researchers conclude that befriending as an intervention is useful to prevent an increase of bullying behaviors.

Stevens et al. (2000) conducted a study using peer support as an intervention to decrease bullying in a Flemish school with children ages 10-16 years. The treatment group received training according to Olweus' curricular module. This training enhanced participants' understanding of bully and victim behaviors and generated solutions for bully behaviors and ways to aid victims. Results showed that in the treatment group the peer support interventions produced positive outcomes on post-test and on actual rates of interventions with victims (Stevens et al., 2000). The treatment group of students in the primary grades displayed a significant difference from the control group in seeking teachers' help and in heightening other students' support for victims. The researchers conclude that the programs that focus on the peer environment, including supportive resources for peers in tackling bully-victim problems, can be helpful to change bullying behavior and attitudes in the peer group.

In a fashion similar to what these researchers advocate (Menesini et al., 2003; Olweus, 1991; Stevens et al., 2000), Camp Ophelia™ and Club Ophelia™ are innovative strategies that function in a preventive mode for relational aggression in middle school age girls ([www.ClubOphelia.com](http://www.ClubOphelia.com)). These programs, developed by Dr. Cheryl Dellasega, a nurse practitioner, are designed to create safe environments for middle school girls to come and learn positive relational skills. The programs use an arts based curriculum and mentoring by high school girls in an ERI model: educate, relate,

and integrate. The programs address the relationship issues among girls of the middle school age group, while also recognizing their developmental need to gain healthy self-esteem, form an identity, and engage in self-expression through a variety of modalities. The camp and the club offer the girls opportunities to test out their relationship-building skills through role plays, group decision-making and problem-solving, videotaping of behaviors, art and craft projects, and talent show presentation.

These programs represent a valuable strategy from the nursing discipline to handle girls' aggression. Few nursing research studies have examined girls' aggression and types of interventions. Smith and Thomas (2000) explored perceptions of anger experiences, school, and relationships among violent and non-violent girls, ages 9-19 years. Their study was unique in that a questionnaire was posted on an Internet web site. The fact that the respondents had access to computers and the Internet may skew the sample toward higher socio-economic groups. From their findings, the researchers formed a composite picture of a violent girl. The picture depicts a girl who does not get along with her family, feels lonely and sad, dislikes school, has a more generalized and intense anger reaction as compared to a non-violent girl, and may be suspended from school for fighting, making threats, or cursing at teachers.

Thomas (2003) asserts the need for school-based interventions that can be immediately accessible to at-risk children. She proposes that psychiatric/mental health nurses serve in consultative roles to help schools with violence prevention programming. Thomas (2003) suggests that school nurses present emotional literacy programs that use cognitive restructuring techniques, emotion management, and assertiveness concepts.

Emotional literacy as an intervention is congruent with what other researchers have identified as a problem with faulty social information processing and hostile attribution bias in the child's development of relational aggression (Crick et al., 2002; Crick, 1995; Moretti et al., 2001). Cognitive strategies pose promise as a way to help children appropriately interpret and process social cues (Moretti et al., 2001). The strategies used by Dellasega in Club Ophelia™ likewise use a cognitive approach to educate girls about relational aggression and to help them identify more appropriate social behaviors. Her strategies also combine the mentoring and peer support processes suggested in the bullying research (Menesini et al., 2003; Stevens et al., 2000).

A purpose of this study was to add to the body of nursing knowledge on girls' aggressive behaviors by describing girls' experience of girl-to-girl aggression as it is lived. The phenomenological method brings forward subtleties and concealed aspects of girls' aggressive behaviors. This study planned to address girls who are out of the mainstream population, and recommend particular nursing strategies for this population.

Dellasega developed Club Ophelia™ and Camp Ophelia™ several years ago in response to a deeply felt need to do something about the serious and negative effects of relational aggression. Club Ophelia™ is an after school program set up at a requesting school and meets once weekly for ninety minutes for 12 weeks. Girls may self-select for the program, or may be referred by teachers or counselors. The club directors are two adults who have counseling backgrounds. In addition, a community volunteer and five or six junior mentors participate in the sessions. Camp Ophelia™ is a summer camp that runs daily for five days, with participants coming from a variety of school districts. Participants for either the camp or the club are in grades 6-8, and each club or camp can

accommodate about 30 girls. Each camp and club is evaluated using a tool developed by Dr. Dellasega.

Forty two girls of diverse cultural backgrounds at two middle schools participated in a recent study of the 12-week Club Ophelia™ program and the ERI model (Dellasega & Adamshick, 2005). To assess the impact of the program on relationship skills of the participants, The Girls Relationship Scale (GRS) was administered. This scale was developed using a previous evaluation tool from Club Ophelia™. The scale measures Knowledge About Relationships (4 items), Beliefs About Self (4 items) and Beliefs About Relationships with Others (10 items). All scores changed in a favorable direction, except for the item “feeling safe with other girls is important to me”, which girls rated as slightly less important. The most noticeable improvements were on the items “getting involved when a girl saw a peer being hurt” and “benefiting from mentoring”.

The study (Dellasega & Adamshick, 2005) is limited by the small sample size. However, the study findings lend support to those of Menesini et al. (2003) and Stevens et al. (2000) regarding the value of peer support in the form of a mentor to help girls feel empowered against relational aggression. The findings suggest that girls may need prompting that it is necessary and “okay” to report relational aggression and to seek support to deal with it. Older girls may represent safe persons who have perhaps been through the same experiences and can provide a listening ear and guidance.

The listening and the modeling came through as important interventions listed by girls in the focus groups of the Governor’s Prevention Partnership (Jones-Bamman, 2004). In every focus group, the girls emphasized the role of friends as resources for talking, supporting, watching one’s back, and getting help. The girls also remarked that



many adults do not know how to listen or act as good role models. Girls voiced a need for opportunities to be listened to by peers, mothers, and other adults within the context of caring relationships. A common theme was the girls' desire to feel connected through positive relationships.

Based on their findings, The Girls and Violence Task Force (Jone-Bamman, 2004) recommends gender-specific programming for girls that meets their unique needs and builds on strengths of girls. Some aspects that are particularly essential for programs aimed at prevention of girls' aggression include involving girls in the program planning, educating girls about relational aggression and their role in it, teaching girls how to process and appropriately express feelings of anger and frustration, building on cultural strengths, educating about protective factors such as role models, communication skills, and positive alliances, and learning about healthy boundaries in relationships. It is also important to remain non-judgmental and supportive of the "mean" girls who are in the thick of aggressive behaviors. In the cyclical nature of girls' aggression, these girls are no doubt also victims. Their strength as leaders may make them effective mentors, once educated about the cycle of girls' aggressive behavior (Brown, 2003).

Based on the current knowledge base about girls' aggression, further research on interventions should focus on several areas. Since the research points to the unfolding of relational aggression with girls' development, the most viable strategies should consider this. Underwood (2003) suggests that research with preschool children should examine interventions that will empower children to recognize that relational aggression is wrong and hurtful, and to seek adult help when they are victimized. Research on interventions for older girls should test social-cognitive strategies and assertiveness training. Other

interventions that should be researched include finding ways to help girls belong, getting girls involved in structured activities, teaching girls to defend victims, and teaching girls to disengage from gossip. Further research on how relational/social and physical types of aggression unfold in girls' relationships will be extremely helpful in terms of finding effective interventions. This study hoped to fill a gap by addressing the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression and in that way reveal more about the continuum of girls' aggression as it occurs.

### Summary

The current understanding of girl-to-girl aggression developed primarily from studies using the conceptual frameworks and methods used in studies of boys' aggression. However, as the construct of relational/social aggression is better defined and developed, it is apparent that such approaches are not congruent with the concept. Girls' aggression is an evolving type of process, often occurring in the context of groups, often behind the back, and generally playing out over several days or weeks (Underwood et al., 2001). This research gap dictates that studies need to examine girls' aggression in a way that will allow the experience to show itself and its meaning in the lives of the involved girls.

Aggression in girls is not limited to relational types. The trajectory may include relational aggression as the catalyst for physical violence between girls. The research is not sufficient in this area. Girls' physical aggression toward other girls is barely studied, though in a recent survey involving nearly 16,000 students, 64% of middle school girls and 61% of high school girls admitted hitting another person within the last year because of anger (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2001).

Participants in the studies about girls' aggression are primarily white, middle class girls. Girls who outside of the mainstream, marginalized in some way, have not been included in studies. This is a gap that further research should address. Despite the increasing incidence of girls' violence and the opportunities that nurses have to interface with young girls, nurses have not taken an active research role in investigating girl-to-girl aggression. This study addresses these gaps by examining girls' lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression in girls in an alternative school, marginalized and out of the mainstream population of girls.

CHAPTER 3:  
STUDY DESIGN

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression for girls in marginalized groups. This chapter includes a description of the study design, background on phenomenology, the process of sample selection, the measures used for the protection of human subjects, a description of the pilot study, the procedure for data collection, and the process of data analysis, including mechanisms to ensure the rigor of the study.

This study used a phenomenological strategy of inquiry. The task of phenomenological research is to construct the nature of the lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). For this study, the essential aspects and meaning structure of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression emerged through the participants' description of their life-world. A linguistic account of the phenomenon captures the nature and significance of the experience and creates a deeper and fuller understanding of what the experience of girl-to-girl aggression is like. Since the process of data collection in phenomenological inquiry involves open-ended questioning and unfolding of the interview in flow with the participant's responses, the method allowed for emergence of the issues of importance to the participant (Van Manen, 1990).

### Background on Phenomenology

Phenomenological philosophy is a particularly salient paradigm for nursing research because the perspective in the human sciences is from the inside out, seeking meaning, understanding, and interpretation of experience (Munhall, 1989). Experience, imbued with meaning, is different for each individual and is the reality for that person as it is being lived. Yet, this meaning takes on a universal application, explicating the

essence of experience not just for the individual giving a personal description, but having relevance as a shared human phenomenon. This study sought the meaning, understanding and interpretation of the reality of girls' aggression as experienced in the relationships of girls in marginalized groups. Therefore, the phenomenological paradigm is congruent with the purpose of the study.

The phenomenological strategy of inquiry is based on the philosophy of phenomenology. Kant and Hegel were two philosophers who referred to phenomenology as a science that describes perceptions and senses in one's experience and awareness, thus leading to heightened consciousness and knowledge of the "absolute" (Kockelmans, 1967). Husserl (1970), considered the father of phenomenology, recognized that truth consisted of more than facts, and rejected the idea of the purely positivistic approach to acquisition of knowledge. Husserl believed that the nature and meaning of things could be discovered by looking at the self and one's perception of surroundings and events. He proposed that through the study of human experience one could perceive meaning. Husserl's phenomenology was concerned with the description of the meaning of an experience. He believed that such a description of meaning is essential to the experience regardless of the person giving the description (as cited in Cohen & Omery, 1994). Thus, the essence of meaning of an experience could be applied universally.

Phenomenology has been defined as the description of things as one experiences them (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991). The concept of "phenomenon", meaning "that which shows itself", leads to the adage of phenomenology "To the things themselves" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Phenomenology as described by Merleau-Ponty (1958) and Heidegger (1962) may be used as a framework to explore aggression in girls'

relationships. The phenomenological approach supports examination of both the lived experience of aggression and the meaning of the experience.

*Letting Things Show Themselves and Self as Intentional Object*

The phenomenological method is the attempt to uncover and describe the meaning structures of lived experience and thus reveal the essence (Van Manen, 1990). In this study, phenomenology asks the nature of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression, and illuminates the perceptions of the girls. Merleau-Ponty (1958) says that the essence of perception is one of the foci of phenomenology. Since perception is the heart of experience, the data thus revealed form the descriptive panorama of the essence of the experience. When one perceives, one also perceives oneself. One's body is projected into the environment and everything is something with which the body can engage. The body provides access to the world. Perceiving is to anchor in the object and inhabit the object. Thus, the girls' perception of their experience consists of their inhabiting that experience. They have an intentionality of consciousness about themselves in that experience of aggression, and the intentional experience is contained in their consciousness based on memory, image and meaning. Their descriptions give access to the truth about themselves and their experience. It doesn't matter if aggression occurs; what matters is the meaning of that experience for the girls. Whatever calls out to the girls and receives their attention in the environment has meaning for them. Only in the world does one know herself---she emerges.

Phenomenon is what is manifest, or what shows itself in itself. As applied to girl-to-girl aggression, the phenomena are the essences that occur across the relationships with emotional currents in space. Nothing stands behind when there is a phenomenon.

Thus, even the concealed, background, or distorted qualities of girl-to-girl aggression were brought forward and showed themselves. The meanings that emerge have an ambiguous essence, something that cannot be defined or limited by words. The meanings that emerge from the girls' perceptions are inexhaustible because the world itself is without universal certainties. Their field of experience allows for an indefinite number of perceptions. Meanings that emerge in a phenomenological study are the structure of the experience itself as lived by the girls in this study. The outside observer cannot construct the meaning.

#### *Being-in-the-world and Intersubjectivity*

Being-in-the-world is a phenomenological idea that gives access to data about girl-to-girl aggression. Seeing the whole, the ontologic dimension of being, is integral to Heidegger's (1996) philosophy. Understanding of being requires openness to the thing, relatedness to it, and allowance of disclosure. As applied to the girls in this study, the ontologic perspective included collecting all that is known about aggressive interactions, listing and reviewing them, then looking again with depth and collecting more data and reviewing to make a new whole. This is referred to as the hermeneutic circle. The process involves seeing the whole, then a part, then from a part back to a new whole. The final ontological dimension is conveyed through presentation of the existential meaning of the experience. The meanings that emerge from this process are truly then the meaning of being of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. It provides the full depth of the experience. The new whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Intersubjectivity refers to Being-in-the-world with others, or *with world*. There is in intersubjectivity an understanding of the existence of beings other than oneself.



Heidegger (1996) describes intersubjectivity as finding oneself with others like oneself, not as equipment or something *at hand* in the world, but as other humans. Concern for these others can take a positive mode or an indifferent mode. Heidegger says that this *being with* others is a relationship prior to knowing, an openness to the possibility of others. What makes up the relationship, then, is all the accoutrements of the situation, as well as the deeper level of meaning. The phenomenological idea of intersubjectivity gives access to a dimension of data from the girls in the study because the study is concerned with their relationships with other girls, to whom they have opened themselves. The meanings that emerge are their perceptions of the experience of aggressive relatedness to the others that they are *being with*.

#### *Language as Co-being or Co-disclosure of a World and Gestural Meaning*

In examining girl-to-girl aggression, the phenomenological idea of language as co-being allows us to *see* what is being talked about. There is a co-disclosure of a world with the person with whom language is disclosed. One can enter into the experience of another being and of the world through language.

Speech is thought, they are interwoven. The speaker does not think of the sense of what he is saying. Sense is held within the word and the word is the external existence of the sense. The word and speech become the presence of thought in the phenomenal world. The girls who spoke and told of their experiences of aggression expressed the presence of their thought. The process of their expression brought the meaning into existence that is at the very heart of their experience. In bringing to life this organism of words, they create for the listener a new sense organ that opens a new dimension to other's experience.

The power of expression is not the words but the disclosure and the meaning that is inherent in the expression. Merleau-Ponty (1958) discusses the power of expression in music. The musical meaning is inseparable from the sounds, which are merely its vehicle. One does not carry away from music an analysis of it, but one's moment of experiencing it. Thus, as applied to the girls who shared their experience of girl-to-girl aggression, words provide the disclosure, but they are merely the vehicle that disappears as the experience becomes visible and the meaning that is inherent in that experience shows itself. In the sense of co-being, one is able to enter into the experience with the other. Merleau-Ponty, speaking of aesthetic expression, states, "No will one deny that here the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it" (p. 213).

Gestural meaning is important in the conception and conveyance of meaning in language (Merleau-Ponty, 1958). One consciousness constructing words and passing them to another consciousness who also understands those words does not really allow anything to pass between them. However, when one enters into the meaning of thoughts, these thoughts combine to form new thoughts that transform one to a new place. One's thinking is enriched by this process or thinking *according to others*. Entering into the meaning of thoughts is what Merleau-Ponty calls gestural meaning, for the meaning is gained not from the words themselves, but from a lived emotional meaning of the world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1958). In lived meaning people broaden their understanding of their world and come to know it. Eventually the thought secretes its own meaning. Gestural meaning formed the basis for entering into the girls' experiences of peer aggression and connecting with their thoughts that secrete the meaning of their experiences. As depicted

in the girls' sharing of the experience, nonverbal behaviors were often the most essential aspect. The girls' statements revealed ways of knowing their world that capture the meaning of the experience in a different way than assigning a quantitative number to their reactions.

### *Freedom as Response to Situation*

In examining girl-to-girl aggression, freedom in response to situation opens a view to the girls' experience. One has the freedom to enter into the situation that is the girls' experience. Freedom is one's current situation and one's being in the world at this moment in time. Freedom is not something to strive for, as it already is. In living fully now, one knows freedom. Merleau-Ponty (1958) states that freedom is always situated. Within a given field of possibility, one can choose personal actions, commitments, and

In looking at freedom as response to situation for the girls, meanings emerged in the context of what makes up the things and connections of their world. In their connection to the world through their bodies, perceptions and meanings emerged.

### Sample

The aim of the study was to capture the experience of girl-to-girl aggression as lived by girls in marginalized groups. A purposive sampling strategy was used to gain participants for the study. Therefore, participants were chosen who best informed the problem and helped the researcher to understand the experience (Van Manen, 1984). According to Van Manen (1984), existential investigation is the part of the research process that includes "the educational development of the researcher" (p. 50) and involves a thorough exploration of the scope of the lived experience in order to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of the phenomenon. The researcher must be sensitive

to the ways in which the material begins to speak, and remain open to new material and other interpretations of it (Van Manen, 1984). The number of study participants, then, was guided by the attainment of this level of understanding about the phenomenon of girl-to-girl aggression in the context of a marginalized group. Van Manen (1984) proposes that researching the phenomenological question is an interwoven process of continually exploring and interpreting material, which includes data from participants, artistic and literary sources, personal experience and colloquial phrases. The emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience. Thus, each girl's experience of girl-to-girl aggression is understood as an aspect of that girl's life, and, by extension, reflects an aspect of being human (Van Manen, 1984). Material about the phenomenon was collected until no new information was obtained and the descriptions were repetitive.

#### *Sample Criteria and Selection Process*

Criteria for participation in the study were being female, age twelve to seventeen years, and attending an alternative school due to previous aggressive behavior in their public school. The term marginalized was applied to the girls because, by virtue of attendance at an alternative school, they were out of the mainstream population of other youth. The participants themselves did not indicate that they considered themselves marginalized. The selected age range is based on congruency of developmental issues within these years, especially the formation of identity.

Six girls, from African American, Caucasian, and Native American backgrounds, participated in the study. During the time of the study, they attended an alternative school in central Pennsylvania. The school is a therapeutic education center that provides a non-residential, community-based alternative for adolescents in grades seven through twelve

displaying behavior problems. Criteria for referral to the school include conditions such as:

- Disregard for school authority, including persistent violation of school policy and rules.
- Display of or use of controlled substances on school property.
- Possession of a weapon on school property.
- Violent or threatening behavior on school property or during school-affiliated activities.
- Transition program for students returning from out of school placements.
- Commission of a criminal act or expulsion under school policy.
- Habitual truancy.
- Misconduct meriting suspension or expulsion.

Referrals to the alternative school are from public schools, juvenile court, children and youth systems, and mental health systems. Girls enrolled in the alternative school fit the criteria of being out of the mainstream youth population. The majority of the girls are referred due to their aggressive behavior at school. There are approximately thirty girls enrolled in the alternative school during a typical school year. Students do not necessarily remain for an entire school year or semester, depending on the individualized plan for each student. The girls are situated on two floors in the school, with middle school students together on one floor, and the high school students on another floor. All classes are gender-mixed. The girls within each of the school groups (middle school and high school) know each other well, and relate frequently with one another, as might be

expected with the small numbers of students. Girls from the middle school and high school also know each other, as they may mingle during recreation or other school activities.

The researcher's initial entry to the school was established through a formal letter to the school administrator stating the purpose of the study and requesting access to students (See *Appendix A*). The researcher spent a day at the alternative school observing the environment, students, and staff. The researcher discussed with the clinical coordinator, who is a counselor for the students, the process for obtaining informed consent from study participants and parents.

At the beginning of the school term, letters explaining the study were sent to the parent/guardian of all female students who fit the sample criteria. Thirteen letters were sent. A consent form and a copy was included with the letter and the parent/guardian returned the signed consent form to the school. The parents maintained the copy of the consent form for their records. The investigator received the signed consents from the clinical director of the school. (See *Appendix B* for a copy of the letter to parents and the informed consent form).

Five parental consent forms were received within the first two weeks after being sent to the homes. The researcher approached these girls individually and invited their participation in the study. All of the candidates were interested in participating, and signed a child informed assent form (See *Appendix C* for a copy of the child informed assent form). Parental consent for the sixth participant arrived one month after the initial five consents. She gave informed assent to participate in the study. Four girls meeting the study criteria were admitted to Manito within a few weeks after the study began. Letters

were sent to the parents, but none of those parents returned the consent forms, despite the fact that the girls stated their parents were willing for them to participate and the girls desired to participate.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

The Application for the Use of Human Participants was submitted to The Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board and permission was given to conduct the study. Since the participants were recruited through a school, the school was also contacted regarding their review process. Permission was received to conduct the study at the alternative school. (*see Appendix*).

The participants were advised that they were not required to participate in the study and that they could drop out of the study at any time without fear of repercussions. Anonymity and confidentiality was explained to the participants.

The level of risk for participants in this study was considered minimal. The main areas of potential risk were to privacy, psychological risk, and inconvenience risk. Measures were taken to minimize these risks as much as possible. Each participant was given a pseudonym in the report of the findings. During the recording of interviews participants were referred to by code numbers to assist with tracking of data. Tapes, consent forms, demographic data, and transcribed interviews were maintained in a locked file cabinet. The only persons having access to the tapes were the researcher and the transcriptionist. The clinical coordinator had access to the self-tapings made by the participants.

The investigator kept a demographic profile of each participant, including name, age, grade in school, ethnic background, length of time at the alternative school, and

reason for referral to the school. This demographic data are in the researcher's locked file cabinet. Only the investigator had access to this identifying information. All tapes and transcriptions are destroyed by shredding within five years of completion of the study. The interviews were audiotaped and conducted in a private room at the school, and involved only the researcher and participant. The recordings made independently by the participants at the school were kept in a lock box in the office of the clinical coordinator. The clinical coordinator passed the Penn State Training on the Protection of Human Participants.

A psychological risk was the potential for emotional distress as participants discussed experiences of aggression involving peers. In order to minimize this risk, participants were advised that they need not respond to any question felt to be too troubling or upsetting. In the event that a participant became unduly upset during an interview, or later, in association with the interview discussion, the participant would have access to counseling services through the alternative school. The investigator discussed such possibilities with the clinical director of the school, and it was decided that the school protocol for counseling referral would be followed. The investigator carefully monitored the participants during the interview and in subsequent interviews for any untoward responses. Referrals for counseling in relation to the investigation were not required by any of the participants. Inconvenience risk due to time commitment requirements to participate in the study was a potential risk. Inconveniences were minimized to the extent possible by scheduling interviews at a convenient time during their school day.



During interviews there was potential for a participant to reveal being a victim of physical aggression from another girl at the school or to verbalize threats toward others. The researcher reported any such information to the clinical coordinator immediately after the interview. The school protocol for intervening on such behaviors was followed.

In the event that a participant, in an interview or a tape recording, shared information that reflected her involvement in illegal activity, such as being a victim of child abuse, the investigator would report this information to the PA Department of Children and Youth immediately. None of the participants spoke of situations of current abuse. If the participant described specific intent to harm others, this information would be reported to school authorities for handling according to school policy. Third parties who are the object of the threats would be notified. Informed Consent and Assent forms indicated to the participant the investigator's requirement to report issues of abuse or threats to harm self or others or the girl's use of drugs or alcohol. The principal investigator picked up the girls' self-tapings each week from the lock box and listened to them in private on the day of pick up. By following this procedure, the investigator had timely access to the girls' remarks about aggressive relationships, and was able to intervene if a participant revealed a problematic situation in the self-taping. On one occasion in a self-taping response to a reading, a participant stated that another girl had told her "go hang yourself". The researcher immediately reported this to the clinical director, who stated she was already aware of the situation.

#### Phenomenological Procedure

Max Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach was followed for this study. Making sense of certain aspects of human existence and gaining a fuller

understanding of what it means to be human are integral features of his approach (Van Manen, 1990). Study of one's "life-world" or one's world as she experiences it provides a deeper understanding of the meaning of everyday experiences. Van Manen (1990) has called the phenomenological research process the attentive practice of thoughtfulness. One becomes mindful, caring and attentive to the project of living, the everyday experiences, the taken for granted phenomena. For this study, the phenomenon of interest was the experience of girl-to-girl aggression as lived by girls in a marginalized group. Girls were asked, "What is it like to experience girl-to-girl aggression?" and "What is your experience when girls don't get along?".

In the exploration of a phenomenon, all presuppositions and common sense knowledge that may prejudice one's understanding and version of an experience must be acknowledged. Van Manen (1990) states that the researcher must first recognize, then hold in abeyance or suspend these beliefs while investigating the phenomenon. The researcher's assumptions about girl-to-girl aggression are stated in Chapter 1. The literature review provides background on girls' aggression. The researcher used "bracketing" during the investigation. Van Manen (1990) describes this as suspending one's beliefs in order to freely and spontaneously discover the essential structure of the life-world of the phenomenon under study. The researcher did this by approaching the alternative school and the participants with an open mind, open eyes and ears, and open heart. The researcher went into the setting without any expectations of what might be going on in the girls' experiences. She listened to their thoughts, asked for clarification, and followed along as the girls constructed the life-world of their experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

### The Pilot Study

In May, 2005 the researcher conducted a pilot study at the alternative school to determine whether the phenomenological approach would achieve the outcome of description of the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression in girls in a marginalized group. Due to the formality of the informed assent forms, including the necessary caveats that suicidal and/or homicidal intents must be reported to authorities, there was concern as to whether participants would freely share their experiences. The other purposes of the pilot were to identify any problems with access to participants, and to critique the suitability of the interview process and other methods of data collection. Parental consent and child assent were immediately obtained for five participants, who comprised the total number for the pilot. Participants in the pilot study were two eighth grade girls, and three twelfth grade girls. Ethnic background included two African Americans, one Latino, one Portuguese, and one Caucasian.

#### *Data Collection for Pilot Study*

An in-depth unstructured interview was used for data collection. The interviewer began with a broad description of the types of aggression that often occur among girls. The participant was asked to think about what it was like for her when she had these types of experiences with a girl friend; the participant was encouraged to think in terms of a particular relationship. Once this line of thinking was initiated, the interviewer asked the participant to expand her thinking and consider all the aspects of relationships with girl friends and to describe what it is like when girls *are* getting along and to what degree she feels accepted by girl friends. Additional interview questions and probes then explored aggression in the participant's relationships with other girls (see *Appendix D*).

The interviews lasted about one hour with each participant. The girls who participated in the pilot study spoke readily and openly about their experiences of girl-to-girl aggression. They gave detailed responses and shared personal information about self, friends, and family.

At the end of the interview, the researcher explained the process for self-tapings. The researcher told the girls that because relationships are a living, on-going experience, the girls' encounters of aggression in relationships are important to capture as they are happening. Thus, the participants were asked to make self-tapings about experiences of aggression with other girls as they occurred during the course of the research study. (see *Appendix E*). The tape recorder and blank tapes were kept in the office of the clinical coordinator. When a participant wished to make a recording, she obtained the recorder and a blank tape from the clinical coordinator and went to a private conference room to make the recording. The participant labeled her tape with her name and dropped it into a lock box in the clinical coordinator's office when she returned the tape recorder. The participants were instructed to use a new tape for each self-taping. The researcher listened to the tapes on a weekly basis.

Three of the five participants in the pilot study did self-taping at least once during the four weeks of the study. One participant self-taped on three occasions, while the others taped once or twice. The two participants who did not self-tape (both seniors) stated that they did not think about/remember that they could do self-taping.

#### *Recommendations from Pilot*

The findings from the pilot study illustrated that the unstructured interview was effective to elicit descriptions from the girls about their experience of girl-to-girl

aggression. The responses of the girls showed that the interview encourages broad descriptions of girl-to-girl aggression as it is lived in various life situations, not only in their school encounters. Despite the necessary caveats in the assent form (that suicidal and/or homicidal intents must be reported to authorities), the participants spoke freely about girl-to-girl aggression. The self-taping by the girls was included as an avenue to gain more specifics about girls' experiences of aggression as it was actually happening in daily situations. Van Manen (1990) notes that literature, poetry, diaries, journals, and art may all be sources for investigation of experience as we live it. For the study, the researcher decided to include additional data sources to provide richer and fuller descriptions of girls' experiences. This is explained further in the next section.

#### Data Collection in the Study

As noted in the sample description, there were six participants in the study. Four of the six participants participated in both the initial interview and the summary interview. The two participants who did not participate in the summary interview were no longer at the school at the time of the summary interview. One of the girls had been referred to an outpatient psychiatric partial hospitalization program, and the other was truant from school for several consecutive days. All of the girls participated in some type of self-taping or response to literary sources, the range of participation varying from two times to nine times.

Each participant for whom parental consent was received was approached individually by the researcher and asked for her assent to participate in the study. The researcher and the participant met in a private conference room in the school. The researcher recorded demographic data, and then proceeded with the interview. The initial

interview lasted about one hour and was tape recorded on an audio cassette, using a code number to identify each participant. A broad opening statement was shared with each participant, explaining the desire to gain an understanding of what their experience of girl-to-girl aggression, or girls not getting along, was like. A beginning question posed to each girl was: "What is your experience of girls not getting along?" The direction of the interview flowed according to the girls' responses. Probes were used as necessary to gain additional information about how girls' aggression gets started, develops, and changes, and how girls interact when they are getting along, and the degree to which they were satisfied with relationships with other girls. An in-depth, unstructured interview guide is found in *Appendix D*.

At the end of the interview, the participant was given the instructions for self-taping as described under the pilot study description (see *Appendix E*). The girls were instructed to tape weekly for the next two months. Based on the recommendations from the pilot, the participants were given an additional option or suggestion of data they could include in their weekly self-tapings. They were instructed that they could look for something artistic, such as a piece of art work, a poem, a story, movie or TV program that reminded them about something in their own experience of girl-to-girl aggression. They could either write up or record their comments and submit them to the lock box, or they could bring their written comments to our summary interview (see *Appendix F* for the instructions).

The researcher returned weekly to the school to conduct initial interviews and to listen to the self-tapings. After two weeks, only one of the five girls who had been interviewed did a self-taping. Her self-taping was a summary of an interview she did with

her foster mother and foster sister about girl-to-girl aggression. She included in the lock box a hand-written page with some of the questions and their answers. A second participant stated that she had experienced girl-to-girl aggression and wanted to self-tape, but could not find the clinical director in order to access a tape on that day. She subsequently made a tape on the day that the researcher was at the school.

The researcher explored with the clinical coordinator reasons for the girls' lack of self-taping and different options to facilitate taping. Some mitigating circumstances were inconsistent school attendance by participants, forgetting to tape, distraction of other school activities and requirements, and the clinical coordinator's availability. In order to maintain the pilot recommendation of obtaining girls' responses to literary or artistic representations of girl-to-girl aggression, the researcher decided to bring the literary works to the girls each week and allow them to self-tape their responses. For the remaining weeks of the study, the researcher brought examples from literature and popular press that depicted situations about girl-to-girl aggression or girls' relationships. The girls were called to the conference room individually, and were asked to read a brief passage, and then tape-record their response to it. The literary works included passages from *Girl Wars* (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003), *Mean Chicks, Cliques, and Dirty Tricks* (Karres, 2004), and *Cat's Eye* (Atwood, 1988) and also a poem *Nobody* written by a girl who had attended a Camp Ophelia session ([www.Campophelia.org](http://www.Campophelia.org)). See *Appendix G* for the passages to which the participants responded. This did not require any additional time commitment from the participants than if they had gone to the office and self-taped each week. The participants identified themselves by their code number on the tapes. All tapes were taken by the researcher and were transcribed by the transcriber.

After listening to the self-tapings, the researcher often found that the girls' responses were confusing and needed further clarification. On a few occasions, participants admitted that they had difficulty reading the passage or didn't know the meaning of some words. Therefore, the researcher stayed with each participant during the self-taping, reading the passage to the participant if needed, and used a few probing questions for clarification. These interactions were brief, and did not take any more time from the participants than that needed for a self-directed taped response. All tapes from girls' responses to literary works were coded and were transcribed by the transcriber.

A final or summary interview was held individually with the four participants who were still attending Manito. The purpose of this interview was to share with each participant the emerging themes and to verify and clarify whether these were true to their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. The participants were invited to give any additional thoughts about their experiences. The girls' responses were tape recorded. At this time each participant received a thank you note and a gift card for a bookstore as a compensation for participating in the study. The notes and gift cards were mailed to the two participants who were no longer enrolled in the school.

Throughout the data collection period, the researcher maintained field notes. These were descriptive notes about the school, the participants, nonverbal qualities of the interviews, and interactions with the clinical coordinator. Immediately after interviews, the researcher also tape recorded reflective thoughts, such as problems, impressions, and personal reactions about the interview experience. Notations were made as to words or topics that needed further clarification with the participants. The tapes were transcribed by the transcriber and kept in the researcher's locked file cabinet.



## Data Analysis

The researcher followed Van Manen's (1990) method of "hermeneutic phenomenological reflection" for analysis of the data. Through this reflection, the essential meaning of the phenomenon can be grasped. The researcher began by reading the transcripts and field notes in their entirety after the interviews. As new interviews were initiated, topics that had surfaced in earlier interviews were raised with the next participant. Themes were identified as described in the subsequent section.

According to Van Manen's (1990) approach, in order to arrive at the essence of a phenomenon, one must use a "process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of lived experience" (p. 77). Conducting thematic analysis is central to this process because it involves examining the data sources and identifying meaning structures of the experience. The researcher elected to use Van Manen's (1990) selective or highlighting approach to isolate thematic statements. Initially, the researcher read the transcripts completely for clarity and identification of any missing phrases or mistakes in transcription. Often, the researcher went back to the tapes to listen and clarify unclear transcripts. Transcripts were returned to the typist for corrections as needed. The researcher read the finalized transcripts in their entirety at least three times to allow for reflection on the whole of the data, and to experience it as a gestalt.

In subsequent readings of the transcripts, the researcher highlighted statements that seemed particularly essential or revealing about the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. From these thematic statements, themes were identified. The researcher recorded ideas for themes on sheets of paper and noted places in the transcripts that

supported the theme. Similar ideas were clustered together into a broader theme. The final themes were determined based on the continuity of the theme among most participants, and the intensity of the participants' responses relative to a theme. The researcher met with the participants in summary interviews to review the emerging themes and to clarify whether the description accurately captured what the experience of girl-to-girl aggression is like and what it means.

Phenomenology is concerned with the nature of the thing studied, that which makes it what it is. The essence of the phenomenon is the universal that makes a thing what it is, and without which it would not be what it is (Merleau-Ponty, 1958; Van Manen, 1990). A final rendering of the essence of the girls' lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression evolved from the process of dialogic reflection with the participants and analysis of themes.

The process of writing up phenomenological findings is referred to as hermeneutic phenomenological writing (Van Manen, 1990). It is a descriptive rendering that is attentive to letting the things speak for themselves, and is also interpretive by the fact that it is captured in language or written text. Van Manen (1990) describes options for structuring the written work thematically, analytically, exemplificatively, exegetically, and existentially, or a combination of these. The researcher organized the phenomenological writing thematically, analytically and existentially. The text evolved thematically with the identification of the themes and identification of the essence of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. The researcher consulted notations and ideas that she had recorded in field notes after interviews with the participants. These notations were compared with the thematic statements and analyzed for related ideas. The ideas

and notes were then synthesized into paragraphs that captured descriptions of the themes. The themes were illustrated with the participants' quotations gathered in the interviews.

Van Manen (1990) suggests that the life-world existentials of lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived relation serve as guides in reflecting on the themes. The researcher used these in the phenomenological written analysis of the girls' experience of girl-to-girl aggression. The researcher also traced etymological sources of the word aggression and included experiential descriptions of girls' aggression from literary sources. These latter references are discussed in Chapter 5. The responsibility of phenomenology is to "poetize" and bring to a common understanding through language that which the participants have identified as their lived experience (Van Manen, 1984). Activities of writing and rewriting led to new insights, greater abstraction, and ultimately a universal illumination of the meaning of the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression for girls in marginalized groups.

#### Rigor of the study

Sandelowski (1986) has proposed four criteria for judging the rigor of a qualitative study. These are credibility, fittingness, auditability, and confirmability. Member checking with the participants achieved credibility for this study. Member checking refers to taking preliminary drafts of themes and descriptions back to participants to validate whether these accurately represent the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Credibility was achieved as the members recognized the descriptions of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression as their own. The inclusion of detailed descriptive reports including direct quotations ensures that data convey the true meanings and perceptions of the participants. This further enhances credibility.

Fittingness refers to whether the findings fit into contexts outside the study situation. For this study, fittingness was illustrated by comparison of the study findings with results and findings reported in other literature and with discussions in popular press and artistic sources about girl-to-girl aggression. Fittingness was achieved by the similarity of the representation of girl-to-girl aggression by the girls in this study and the experience of girls in similar circumstances.

Auditability refers to whether another researcher can follow the decision trail used in the study. Others reading this study will recognize a process of inquiry flowing from literature review to identification of a problem, its significance, and generation of a purposeful exploration of the topic through phenomenological methods. Readers will follow the steps in data collection and understand how decisions were made. The reader will appreciate the steps in data analysis and how themes were derived and how the essence and final rendering of the description of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression in girls in marginalized groups was achieved.

Clarification of the researcher's bias is integral to the phenomenological approach as described by Van Manen (1984). The researcher has identified particular personal assumptions about the topic. She also committed to a process of self-reflection throughout the study to continually bracket her own presuppositions about the experience of girl-to-girl aggression in girls in marginalized groups.

Confirmability of qualitative research is achieved when auditability, fittingness and applicability are established. Therefore, for this study, confirmability has been addressed through explanation of these aspects of rigor.

CHAPTER 4:  
STUDY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

## The Study Participants

The sample for this study were girls from a specific population, marginalized in the sense that they attended an alternative school, and were identified as aggressive girls. The participants' norms of relating included behaviors such as physical fighting, wrestling, and bullying that were sometimes essential to defending the self or fitting into one's surroundings. In some cases their family situations tolerated behavior that was aggressive in nature.

Six girls, ages 13-17 years, participated in the study. In order to maintain anonymity, each of the girls is given a pseudonym that is used throughout the report of the findings. A brief background about each girl follows.

### Participant #1: *Angie*

Angie is a sixteen-year-old Caucasian girl. She was at the alternative school for two and one-half years and was referred to the school due to fighting, skipping school, and attitude problems and arguments. She is from a family of four brothers. She is considered a "cute" girl, dresses fashionably, and maintains an attractive appearance.

### Participant #2: *Hannah*

Hannah is a seventeen-year-old Caucasian girl. She was at the school for the past three years due to verbal aggression and arguments. Hannah inserts herself into others' business, which sets her up as an instigator in some situations. Her father is her primary caretaker, and he recently declared his bisexual status. Her mother has not been in her life for several years. Hannah is primarily a victim at the school and has no friends at school, but at least one close friendship outside of school. Her appearance reflects marginal attention to her self-care and hygiene.

Participant #3: *Sarita*

Sarita is a sixteen-year-old girl who identified herself as half African American and half Native American. She was referred to the school due to fights and arguments, not listening, and talking back to authority. She has been at the alternative school for four months. She grew up in a family where she lived with several brothers. Sarita has one older sister who was living outside the home, and a large extended family of many cousins. Sarita's language skills were limited, and she used a mixture of slang and street terms in her conversations. Sarita described herself as a bully during her younger years. She has experienced being a victim as she got older.

Participant #4: *Tynecia*

Tynecia is a thirteen-year-old African American girl. She was at the alternative school for four months due to problems with teachers at her previous school. Tynecia's mother is highly influential in Tynecia's life and supported moving Tynecia from traditional school to an alternative school. In recent discussions with school authorities Tynecia's mother has suggested she now is considering moving Tynecia to a facility with all African American staff, as she feels Tynecia is experiencing racism. Tynecia is oppositional at school and uses manipulation to avoid taking responsibility for her behaviors. Oppositional behavior included tactics such as being non-compliant with any requests, not responding to limits, and being confrontational with everyone. Tynecia is attractive and attentive to her hygiene and appearance. She is sophisticated beyond her years and carries herself with a confident attitude. She is a bully, a "*Queen Bee*" (Simmons, 2002), at the school even after her short time there.

Participant #5: *Barbara Ann*

Barbara Ann is a fourteen-year-old girl who identifies herself as half Caucasian and half Native American. She was referred to the alternative school due to aggressive behaviors in traditional school, and has been at the school for six months. Barbara Ann has had a series of foster home placements. Near the end of the study period, she was moved from the alternative school to a day treatment psychiatric center. The move was necessary due to the severity of her behavior problems and concern about a co-morbid psychiatric diagnosis. She was both victim and bully, and suffered from very low self-esteem. She demonstrated poor hygiene and self-care. Barbara Ann had some intellectual deficits, including poor reading skills.

Participant #6: *Brianna*

Brianna is a fourteen-year-old girl of Caucasian and Native American heritage, slight of build and attractive. She has been at the alternative school for one month and was referred to the school for fighting and arguing at school, truancy, and oppositional behavior. Brianna struggles with academic work and says that she has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. She has little parental guidance and is being raised by a single mother who is marginal in terms of her own functioning. Brianna was in anger management therapy as part of her treatment plan prior to the alternative school.

#### Language of the Girls' Life World

Language is the way that one can bring experience into a conversational relation (Van Manen, 1990). Therefore, one must be sensitive to the way the language reveals and speaks about the phenomenon. Language spoke about the things of the girls' life world and the meanings of those things. Aspects of language such as words, phrasings,



emphasis, undertones, and silences all contributed. The language of the girls' life world was more than words. Girl-to-girl aggression included gestural meanings such as fighting, looks or stares, eye-rolling, and other behaviors that spoke the messages of the experience.

Essential features of the spoken language were the creations or embellishment of phrases that gave meaning to the girls' experience of particular situations. Girls used the term "girl drama", a creative description of influential events in girls' lives that grew into weighty, emotional, consuming storylines that demanded attention. "Running the mouth" described how drama was created. Girls would pass along a story or bit of information they had learned, sometimes adding more information. Girls were kept busy running this information by each other. The language of rumors was imbedded in girl drama and formed an immediate connection for the girls of the reality of a two-faced person. Being two-faced was the same as being fake. Girls operated on the reality that "all girls are fake sometimes"; therefore, fake was actually a feature of all real girls in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Girls knew and expected this about girls' ways of relating, but the knowledge did not lessen its impact when it came into their life world.

The language of "secrets" was one attempt to preserve some sharing that was sacred and untouched by fakeness and rumors. Friends were those who could be trusted with secrets and not turn them into rumors and girl drama. The language of friendship was fraught with gestural meaning in the girls' life world, such as physical fighting, protecting, and watching one's back. Girls in this population approached friendship through a different door, testing for safety in ways that they had learned and perfected in their life world.

Girls had private interpretations of common language as they related it to relationships. Thus, “ignorant” described someone who bullied another and tried to get her to do what another desired. Someone who was a “punk” took advantage of others. Someone “sleeping on you” thinks that you are soft or easy to fool. Girls who were “nasty” were engaging in sexual intercourse.

The girls’ backgrounds added another dimension to discourse with the girls about their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Language was a rich mixture, including elements of the speech used in one’s family, speech used on the street with one’s friends, and the speech and English as learned in school. Silence, pauses in speaking, looks, voice inflection and tone were all essential aspects of the language of the experience as the girls described it.

#### Identification of Themes

Perspective allows for varied interpretations of an experience. Slight changes in the way one is situated in the world alter all the sensations that register or catalogue that experience. Thus, exploring the experience of girl-to-girl aggression as it is lived required openness to the perspective of those who are situated in its life-world. Six adolescent girls were willing to share their perspective on their experience. While each girl’s perspective is uniquely her own and is influenced by her particular way of being situated in the world, there were themes that captured the essential nature of what it means to experience girl-to-girl aggression. There are no facts that define girl-to-girl aggression; rather, there are meaningful experiences. Through interpretive analysis, the text attempts to portray the essences of the experience.

Six major themes emerged as the structures of the lived experience of girl-to-girl

aggression for the participants in this study. Paradoxically, perhaps, the themes are not centered exclusively on the harsh interactions and troublesome features that one might associate with aggression. Rather, the themes reflect the underlying processes and development that girls work through as they encounter life with one another. The themes reveal the meaning of the experience as it was for the girls. The six themes are:

- *Feeling discomfort: finding ways to interact with girls*
- *Fitting in with the group hierarchy*
- *This is how girls are: girl drama*
- *Feeling betrayed by inauthentic and untrustworthy girls*
- *Defining self in relation to other girls*
- *Growing up*

Each of these themes is understood in terms of the phenomenological framework that guided this study. Phenomenological human research is concerned with exploration of the human life world and its fundamental structures of lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). These four existentials guide the reflection on the lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). The discussion of each existential as it relates to the data are considered individually; however, the existentials are integrated components of the life-world, and thus one existential cannot be separated from the other aspects. The themes are the tools for understanding the phenomenon of girl-to-girl aggression as it is lived and are analyzed through the narratives of the participants. The themes form the meaning structures or the essence of the experience.

### Analysis of Themes

All themes shared similar depth of representation in the data. There is no particular priority of the themes, as they are all significant in explaining the meaning structure of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

#### *Feeling Discomfort: Finding Ways to Interact with Girls*

Narratives from all six participants revealed that girls were trying out ways of interacting in response to feeling uncomfortable with other girls' behaviors. In every interview, the girls spoke of some aspect of their relationships with other girls. The girls' descriptions revealed discomfort or discontinuity that they experienced in their relationships when they did not know the other girls very well. The girls experienced a need to find a way to deal with or interact with girls whose behaviors made them feel uncomfortable or threatened.

The behaviors girls discussed covered a range from "girls hating on you" and "being mad for something", fighting, controlling or bullying, to being "fake" or "two-faced". Participants acknowledged that there was unpredictability about their relationships, evidenced by girls' comments as to "people not liking you for some unknown reason."

Angie's description of a summertime scenario between her group of friends and another group of girls reveals the challenge of girls' relating when the cause of the "hating" is unknown. As the experience illustrates, the drama escalates from "running the mouths" to physical violence. The description also shows the significance and power of the friendship group in response to a threat to one of its members:

Hating means like they're mad, they're mad at us for something so they're just gonna start runnin' their mouths about us. And then, and there's just gonna be, there's just gonna be some problems whoever that is and with us. Cause like you gotta worry about, in the summer you gotta worry about watching your back 'cuz like one of my friends got jumped by all these girls so, so there is a lot of stuff going on between us and them girls or whatever and now we had, we had to worry about watching our back, so we, like whenever we go whatever, like basically we all stick together and it's just, it was just a little of us and a lot of them, so we had to watch our back. Sometimes you're not even sure why, like, a lot of stuff that happens between girls like, one of the girls, what happened with us this summer, that was the most beef that we had with the girls. Like it was, it was because, it was basically because they didn't like us for some reason. They didn't like us so they were making up all this stuff. They was making up all this stuff so, so they had a reason to come at us.

In further discussion about her relationships with girls who are not her friends, Angie describes herself as being "fake" and making up something so that a fight would ensue between her and another girl. The fighting seemed to be Angie's way of getting to know this other girl and trying out a connection between them. In the following scenario, Angie's situation demonstrates aspects of lived space and lived relation. She displays a need to set up a boundary and defend her space by creating a fight that may keep someone out of her space or allow her in if she passes the fight test. Fighting occurs as something spontaneous that has little basis in terms of the relationship. Similar to the

previous scenario, Angie was making things up to have a reason to fight the other girl. As Angie's situation illustrates, there seems to be a need for girls to test out themselves in relation to other girls.

In their neighborhoods and in the alternative school, girls felt a need to control the situation by asserting their dominance, usually by fighting, a familiar behavior in their life world. In school there was very little they could control. Cell phones, headphones, and compact disc players were all taken and locked away as soon as students walked in the door. Bathrooms were locked throughout the day and accessed only at specified times or with permission. Meals were standard fare, identical for all students, and served on paper plates with plastic utensils. Students ate in their classrooms at specified times. Relationships were one area in which the girls tried to assert their own control. They could attempt to define the rules by testing out behaviors that ranged from verbal sparring and taunting to making things up, to physical attacks on other girls. Even if caught or reprimanded for these behaviors, they nonetheless had asserted their identity and proclaimed a message of dominance.

For the participants, girl-to-girl aggression was not bound by particular rules of fairness, reciprocity, or rationality when a friendship was not involved. Rather, it seemed to be in response to some unidentified threat, discomfort, or the need to be in control. It also seemed to be a girl's way of making a connection with another girl. Angie's comments capture this idea:

I ain't gonna lie. I been fake a few times. Like, all right, like some people, some people just, like some people just don't like somebody so they're just gonna make up something basically. Because, like, all right, I don't know. I

had no reason at all that I don't like them. But that's how some people, some people, a lot of girls had at least some time when they was like that. I really had no reason. I just, some people like, I don't know, some people just get in fights like get in fights for a while so they be like 'Oh, I haven't fought in a long time. I'm ready to get in a fight.'

Another participant, Brianna, shared an experience where she was the target of someone who hated her and Brianna had no idea what the hating was about. Similar to Angie's explanation of her desire to fight, the girl who wanted to fight Brianna seemed to have a private interpretation of Brianna, and thus felt the need to fight her.

Like this one chick, Clancy or Chauncey, or something like that, she hates me. I don't know who she is and stuff. So, like, Tammy, who goes here now, she's a new student, she'll go and, like, ask her why she hates me.

Chauncey will be like, 'I don't know her, I just hate her and stuff.'

Brianna's description suggests an underlying dynamic about how girls approached other girls. Instead of conventional greeting and introducing the self, girls described a life world in which they would set up the meeting as a challenge that often included plans to fight. It was apparent that girls needed to test, to be tough, to be haters, in order to ensure their dominance over other girls, especially when girls were the newcomers to a situation. Once the meeting and aggressing took place, and identities were revealed and respected, attachment might follow.

Angie described another experience of girl-to-girl aggression where she was challenged by girls who wanted to fight her after she moved from the west side to the east side of town. In that experience she felt she was cornered into a space where she had to

“defend” herself and “get respect” so that she would “fit in.” Angie’s description shows that the lived time of growing up seemed to come to a pivotal intersection with her new spatial and relational encounters.

When I lived out west everything was okay. I was just a little girl hanging around with my little friends, running the streets, having fun, playing with toys and stuff still. And then I moved out here and everybody was acting all grown and like since I am a little white girl, everybody was just sleeping on me [thinking that she is soft]. So, all these girls were just hating on me since I moved out here so I started getting into a lot of fights. I can’t just sit down and let them just talk about me, say “I want to fight her, I want to fight her”, and not just do nothing ‘cuz then people, that’s how people bully you, that’s how you get bullied. If you stick up for yourself, you are not going to get bullied.

For Angie, the changes in her surroundings contributed to her discomfort with the new relationships in her life world. In her efforts to establish her space and her identity with other girls, she relied on fighting, which seemed to be the expected behavior in the life world she occupied at that time.

All participants discussed fighting as part of their experience. Fighting served a purpose of marking one’s territory or space, giving a message as to one’s strength and power. Being able to fight was very important to all of the participants. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being most important), Sarita ranked “being able to fight” as an “8 to a 10”. She gave the following rationale:

It’s important cause if you’re by yourself somebody might come up to you



and want to fight you and if you back down, saying, “Oh, I don’t wanna fight you’ cause you don’t know how to fight, then they tell everybody that you don’t know how to fight and you’re scared and people start making fun of you.

Hannah also discussed that she wished she could be a fighter: “Sometimes it makes me mad because I want to fight, and I don’t know how to fight. So, it makes me mad because I don’t know how to.”

These descriptions illustrate the degree to which fighting was integrated with identity for the girls in the study. One had to convey the persona of fighter, lest one be made fun of for this inadequacy. Contrast this with mainstream children who are challenged to portray a different persona such as smart or athletic or wealthy, lest they be made fun of for not fitting in.

Fighting was one way of responding to uncomfortable relations with non-friends. It was often mentioned as the sequelae to situations of extreme frustration, humiliation, being left out or needing to defend oneself or one’s friends. Such fighting was also significant in terms of lived space, as girls attempted to figure out where they stood in a relationship, their space, boundaries, and personal limits.

Sarita’s experience with a girl who challenged her to fight illustrates that sometimes the situations in girl-to-girl aggression are full of misperceptions and miscommunications. In Sarita’s case, it was not even clear to her whether the girl who wanted to fight her was a friend or potential friend. The scenario reveals the bewilderment felt by Sarita about how to relate to this girl.

It was a while ago, like my friend, like before when I didn't know how to fight, I didn't know how to fight and I was scared of people. Like I was at the skating rink the one time when a girl came up to me and she like, first we were supposed to be friends, we were supposed to be friends, but we never hung out. Like every time she'd see me, she will call my name and one day I seen her at the skating rink and like she came up, like her friend came up to me and said, "Aw, Sarita, she's looking for you." And I went over there and I was like, whatever, she's not even looking at me when she's talking about me. People went back to her and said I was talking about her, but I wasn't. She said she believed the people, and she tried to fight me and stuff. But instead it was the same thing where I couldn't tell nobody, but like she tried to fight me and stuff, but like I walked away first. But, then, the way I walked away first, like every time she sees me she had tried to run up to me and she'd be like, "Aw do you wanna fight? I wanna fight you cause you were talking about me." And like I would sit there and I'd be like, "But I wasn't talking about you." She was like "All right." So she believed me at first, then she sat there and was, "All right, I believe you. You don't gotta be talking about me, but I don't like you anyway. I don't like the way you act." So then I sat there and I walked away again cause she was about to fight me.

Sarita's experience of being approached in this manner and being uncertain about another's motives provides a basis for understanding the high priority she places on being able to fight. Fighting would help her to fit in and not have to be scared of people. In this

population of girls, fighting with girls was one's entry ticket to being able to relate, just as mainstream girls might use some other behavior or symbol to help them fit in and relate. The fighting, aggressive behaviors were a culturally comfortable way to approach and to begin relating to other girls.

The following vignettes reveal the type of fighting that occurred in two other girls who were pushed to the limits of their space. Both girls were victims of incessant bullying and ridicule. Hannah responded with the following description of how she interacts when she is feeling uncomfortable with other girls' behaviors:

What happens to me is that I'll curse like the kids out, or anyone out, like I don't care who you are, I'll cuss you out, and I won't do what you say. Like, you gotta say exactly like what I want you to say, [or] I ain't gonna do it. Like, you tell me to go over here, I'm not going to do it. I won't go over there, because I don't want to do it. And whenever I explode, it's like me freakin' out on someone. I won't punch 'em, but some of the girls do. Like they can't control it, they say. But deep down inside, you can't control everything. Because if they can't control it, then why am I controlling mine right now?

Even as she realizes that she gets close to the limits of her control, Hannah recognizes that she is able to keep from hitting others, to remain in a space that defines who she is. While Hannah had been hit by other girls, she had never hit them. As she noted, "I just can't control my mouth, and that is what really gets me in trouble. I can control my hands, I can't control my mouth." Hannah voiced a concern about not being a fighter, and wishing that she did have this skill. She went so far as to spend time observing fights so

that she could see how punches were thrown, and how to stand when fighting. It seemed that Hannah, while a member of a group known for their aggressive behavior, did not fit in because she was not able to assume the identity of a fighter. It is interesting to note that she did not come from a family where fighting was normal or expected behavior, as that described by Angie, Sarita, and Brianna. Apparently recognizing this variation between herself and her peer group at the school, Hannah remarked that she felt “fighting might be in your blood.”

Barbara Ann experienced on-going aggression with a girl at school. The description clearly illustrates the defensive reaction when space, territory, and body were threatened. Both girls are fighting for a space of power and control over the other. A recurring theme, as seen in previous descriptions, is that girls “want to get in a fight.”

On Monday I got in a fight with Gina because she tried to stab my face with a pencil. Um, I told her to sit down in her seat, and she told me to get up and I said, “I don’t wanna get up.” She’s like, “You don’t get up I’m gonna stab your face with a pencil.” I still didn’t get up. It’s mostly my fault for that one. Then she said I’d better leave the seat for her for her best friend to sit. And I got up and moved and she’s coming after me and I wanted to hurt her, and I punched her in the arm. On Wednesday we got in another fight because Gina said she wanted to get in a fight. And I said, “Why you always gotta start problems?” And then I got up and I was like you love punchin’ my face so much just punch my face cuz she said she loves to. I was getting pulled back cuz we were about to hit each other.

Barbara Ann's description portrays something of the dance of aggression that occurred between her and another girl at the alternative school. Their style of approaching each other was to initiate a fighting behavior, to start something between them. This served to make a connection between them. Mainstream girls also try to make connections, but in ways that are accepted by the mainstream culture. Given her lack of continuity in parental guidance, Barbara Ann may not have a large repertoire of behaviors that are acceptable ways to relate and connect with a peer. Her need to connect is so strong that she persists in using the behaviors until someone pulls her off the other girl.

The participants described controlling or exploitative behaviors that illustrate girls feeling uncomfortable and finding ways to interact or respond in that relationship. The use of money or favors to preserve a relationship seemed a common practice both among the participants and among other teens. Hannah denied that she had ever paid anyone to be her friend, but acknowledged that other kids in the school had suggested this to her:

Everyone says why don't you pay people to be your friend cuz I only have so little of them. Like you don't get friends from buying them, you get friends from how you act. That's how you get friendship. I hear a lot of kids talking about like you better buy your friends cuz you won't have any in life and stuff like that. The little white kids that have [money] and they are like why don't you just buy your friends and it would be so much easier if you get friends this and that, whatever they ask for. I'm thinking you don't need to buy friends. I don't need friends in school cuz I might never see you again, whenever people say that to me. One, I'm not probably going to see you again or ever will see you again, so I don't

need to buy anybody's friendship in school and I don't need friends in school.

Other girls, however, actually did participate in behaviors in which they paid money or did favors in exchange for being accepted or included. Sarita paid someone to be her friend when she was in middle school. She also described that people will pay someone to stop bullying them, but that, in her experience, girls were often more likely to just hit back than pay someone to leave them alone.

If someone hits a girl they are going to hit the girl back, they are not going to sit there and pay them to leave them alone. Usually the people that don't have the ability to fight back or something, then they might go and pay the person, but that's not usually around now, that's usually the younger kids at elementary.

Brianna's experience of girl-to-girl aggression illustrates that girls may vacillate between a space where they are a victim and a space where they are the bully, depending on their level of comfort with the other girls in a situation. Brianna's discussions reveal her identity as being a fighter, being quite concerned about this aspect of her "self" and having the ability to defend against others. In situations in her neighborhood, she describes having fights and being challenged to fight other girls. In those cases, she was the bully.

I'm aggressive toward this one chick in seventh grade named Amy. She goes to another junior high school. She lives down the street from me and her one friend Leah wanted to fight me and I've known Leah, I used to be friends with Leah for three years—and I knew she couldn't fight 'cuz she

didn't know how, so I just said, 'Sure' to see if she'd show up and when I was supposed to fight her all of a sudden Amy comes and she's like "Leah's not fighting anybody. She doesn't know how to. If you want to fight somebody, fight me."

Brianna's value system included a desire to be recognized or identified as a fighter. In her willingness to fight her former friend, Leah, there seems to be a realization for Brianna that she will reinforce her identity as a fighter, because Leah does not know how to fight. She will also reaffirm an aspect of her relationship with Leah.

At school, however, lived space and relation takes on a different perspective for Brianna, and thus she has to figure out how she can relate with peers in this situation. In trying to find her space in the girls' hierarchy at school, Brianna's lived relation is as a victim. This may be attributed to discomfort and vulnerability in terms of her lived body, as she is small and slender, whereas girls in her grade at school are more developed than she is. The clinical director shared that Brianna paid snack money every week (about \$1.00) to Tynecia to leave her alone and not bully or victimize her.

Barbara Ann, also a fighter in her own rite, explained that she had done things to become accepted and popular with the other girls at the school. She admits to being both bully and victim. In the following situation, she experienced being used by another girl at the school:

She's kinda using me. She usually asks me for money, um, asks me to do things for her, and stuff like that. Like asking me to get her paper. Can I have a pencil, marker, or something, um, very simple things, that persons were issued, though. I used to always be there for her. Then when I

wouldn't be there for her, she will, ya know, start yelling at me. Whenever I have perfect attendance, we go out to eat, me and the school and some other students. I used to sit by her boyfriend and talk to her boyfriend for her and give her boyfriend a note. But I ain't giving her boyfriend notes no more.

For Barbara Ann, lived time was uniquely affected by her space and relationship with others. The space she inhabited as "being bullied" seemed to overwhelm her entire future and her expectations about relationships, as suggested by this comment: "I was told you become popular by being bullied all your life." She added that being popular meant having friends and that she did not have many friends at school. In her acute desire for friends, she apparently was willing to accept being bullied at this point in time. Barbara Ann's description of her life world accentuates the importance for her of connecting with someone. She has not had consistency in parental figures. In the absence of role models for bonding and attachment, she seems to be trying on different behaviors and approaches to getting close to other girls. In the context of the alternative school, Barbara Ann found that physical aggression brought negative consequences, such as in-school suspension. She now tries to become "popular", thinking this is the route to attachment. This behavior, however, also has consequences, as she feels used rather than connected and belonging.

In the experience of girl-to-girl aggression, girls were aware of each other's feelings of discomfort and their vulnerabilities. In terms of finding ways to interact with girls, this became another mechanism by which to exploit someone, to confine her to a certain space or within boundaries. All the girls spoke about relatedness where they felt



control was an issue in the relationship, such as being made fun of or being left out, being held hostage over having to choose between one girl or another, or having a girl “push her buttons” to have the girl lose control. All of these were situations of discomfort for the participants and they struggled to find ways to interact and to preserve a connection.

In cases of being made fun of, the girls who experienced this were picked on for issues related to one’s body or clothing. For two of these participants, there was a sense of suspended time, in which they would have little reprieve from the hurtful effects of mean comments. The participants who experienced this viewed themselves as trapped in a victim space that defined them and their status. Hannah commented:

Like everyone picking on me, yeah, like I’ll be scarred for life. That’s the thing. I can never get over it. Like, you go to school and all you think about is what’s like, school like, coming here. I think about it when I wake up. Do I want to get up and be made fun of or do I want to go hang out with some friends and skip school? It depends what you want to do, and right now I have to come here, because I have to get my education. So I have to come here everyday and get picked on and listen to what all the kids have to say.

In the context of the alternative school, Hannah lacked some of the behaviors that were used by others as their approach to getting or keeping connections. She did not physically aggress other girls. Though these aggressive behaviors were punished, they nonetheless established the pecking order for the girls. By not fitting in with the accepted ways to meet and attach to others, Hannah struggled with fit, and experienced feeling outside the group. Fitting in was further compromised because her identity was at odds with what the

other girls identified with, such as clothing and appearance. Hannah described that others who sat behind her in class proclaimed that she was “skanky”, a term describing her body odor. She was defensive about these comments from others, arguing that they could choose to sit in another seat. Hannah identified herself as a “poor kid that others look down unto”, but seemed to accept and value this part of her identity just as other girls accepted and valued their identity as a fighter. However, her lack of fit in the school also precluded any attachments and made life in school uncomfortable.

Barbara Ann experienced many episodes of being picked on regarding her weight, her looks, not having a boyfriend, and negative comments about her foster mother. She tried to create a space for herself where she could ignore the behaviors and distract her mind from the meanness. However, this caused others to tease her more, and she remained in a space from which she found no escape.

I just keep on ignoring them and I just keep on saying, ‘No. Don’t say nothing back. Just ignore them. Keep on ignoring, keep on ignoring and keep on ignoring. If they say something, just blur them out. Just like close your eyes.’ Ya just keep on, like, ya close your eyes and think of something else. And you just keep on saying it over ten times. But if I mess up and say the wrong thing, it’ll start up again, the teasing, the disrespect. I’m nothing.

Similar to Hannah, Barbara Ann struggled with finding ways to create and keep attachments with other girls. In her experience of girl-to-girl aggression, she was a target for some girls because she lacked the clothing, appearance, and boy friends that other girls valued. She felt completely without attachment at times, which led her to try to buy

her way into acceptance. She found that she fit in as a fighter and that when she was physically aggressive to other girls, she did achieve a connection. However, her extremes of anger caused her to be placed in the in-school suspension program.

Sarita described a few situations in which feeling vulnerable and lacking control was an underlying dynamic of her relatedness with girls. She experienced the wavering boundaries that appeared between girls when one is fake, making fun of you one moment, then acting nice in the next moment. She is torn between wanting to leave the space, escape and get help, and being cajoled by the fake girl to stay in school and “be nice”. In the following scenario, a boy was initially cutting on Sarita by calling her a “monkey”, and then a girl also joined the attack:

She's like, 'Aw, she's the monkey, the monkey, put your hands up. Do you like climbing trees? Are you hungry? Do you want a banana?' I got tired of it cause it happens every day I go in that class. I got tired of it and I just snapped out on him and I got sent out of class. I started, I was cursing at her too, so I got mad and called her a fat B. I was calling her a fat B and stuff like that. But then she tried, she tries to like, I got so mad that I walked out of class and I took my, I picked up my coat up out of there because I was so close to walking out. I'm, I was tired of hearing it from him every day, so I was just gonna walk around the corner to get my cousin. But then like she tries to, she came down the hall and tried to give me some advice, “Sarita, it's not worth going out of school. Don't walk out cause you won't go to your next class. Just try to sit there and be nice and stuff.” After she was just cutting too [said with great disgust]. That's

what we call girls fake when they do stuff like that.

In this case, aggression between girls was relational rather than physical. The relational types of aggression, such as being fake, did not seem to represent efforts at connection, as did the physical aggression. Instead, relational aggression for this population of girls appeared to be linked with betrayal of a connection. Sarita's comments about the girl being fake reflect the betrayal and loss she feels.

Three participants discussed their experience of discomfort and how they reacted when girls "pushed their buttons". The girls stated that other people wanted to see girls lose control and to see girls fight. Lived body, space, time and relation all intersected simultaneously in such a fight. One participant's description provides a perspective on the sense of the body as being detached from the self and under control of unidentified others in the gathering crowd. Dimensions of space and time also took on a different quality, as Sarita described: "So when you're not looking, like someone will push you into her. You'll start fighting." In Sarita's experience, a boy that she was going with got his sister to start a fight with Sarita:

Yeah, someone wants to see a fight. That's what happened to me like, um, at my old school. It was a while ago back. I was arguing with a girl, but it wasn't over no boy. It was over her brother, cause I was going with her brother. He got his sister on me. We sit there and we was arguing. I'm like, "Whatever. Hit me." And she said, "I'm not gonna hit you unless you hit me first." And like we drew a crowd and they said, "We want to see a fight." And like I wasn't looking, we was not looking, like she turned around like this [participant moved her body and head quickly as a

unit] and I turned around and all of a sudden we just hit each other.

Someone had to push us first to hit each other, and, like, I thought she

hitted me and she thought I hit her, so we just started fighting.

Sarita's experience of girl-to-girl aggression suggests that accountability for the fighting rests with the crowd who carries them into each other, rather than with the girls themselves. Blame is also assigned to those who push the buttons or get the girls together. In Sarita's life world, fighting is something to be proud of, a necessary skill, and a connection between girls. A fight is a place for others to gather around and watch, much as mainstream girls might watch a sporting event or a cheerleading or gymnastic practice. In Sarita's fight with her boyfriend's sister, the influence of family background or expectations is apparent. The statement "he got his sister on me" suggests that it was necessary for the boyfriend to test Sarita's fighting ability. The fact that he chose his sister for this suggests that through the fighting he expected that the girls then would be united or connected.

Tynecia describes a different experience of having her buttons pushed. From her perspective, she has not lost control, but instead takes control of the competitive space between herself and another girl, Ellie. By setting limits about their interaction space and refusing to let her anger show, she tries to have the upper hand in the relationship. She also has figured out what she believes to be an underlying dynamic in their relationship.

People like to push my buttons, and I don't like to be pushed, and so then

I just have to let all that out, all my anger out. Before they say anything,

before they start talkin' I'm like, "Just make one thing straight. Do not

talk about me and I will not talk about you." I don't actually care what

she thinks 'cause that shows me that she has low self-esteem. She must, by talking about other people just to make her feel better. She's only hurting herself, 'cause I'm not getting' mad over it. But if I get mad over it, then she'll be happy.

Tynecia's comments hint that if she did not set the limits on their relating, she would indeed let all her anger out. The scenario demonstrates relational aggression in the form of talking about another girl, and Tynecia suggests that relational aggression may move to physical aggression for her. This situation does not depict the attempts at connection as depicted in other descriptions of girl-to-girl aggression by the participants. The difference in this situation seems to be the nature of the aggression as a deliberate attempt to hurt or betray, which is different from attempts to connect. The life world of the girls in the study included both physical and relational aggression, but there was a distinction in meanings of these forms of girl-to-girl aggression. Physical aggression carried meanings about one's identity and about efforts at connecting and protecting attachment. Relational aggression, however, carried meanings about betrayal and interference with connection.

*Lived Space (Spatiality).*

The experience of lived space encompasses the *feelings* that a certain place or situation brings forth in the person as she occupies that place (Van Manen, 1990). For the girls in this study, the nature of their lived space helped to uncover fundamental meanings of their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Spatiality was central in the structure of the girls' life-world. Space was sometimes a difficulty, as when there was either too much (isolation, being left out, separation from the "normal" crowd) or, conversely, when there was too little, threatening or enclosed, as when boundaries were

violated. Separation from groups of peers was also confining, as Hannah described herself as “like a rat that’s trapped in a cage.” In the context of being at the alternative school, Hannah portrayed being confined in the sense that she did not fit within the identities displayed by girls. She proclaimed herself as “the oddball of everybody,” which also is perhaps a piece of her identity that she has accepted.

The theme of *feeling discomfort and finding ways to interact with girls* was dependent on each girls’ lived space that was available to her. Angie and her friends who felt threatened by another group of girls used space in a protective way, deciding to keep their distance from this group for a period of time. Another participant, Sarita, used her lived space to try to get closer to girls as a way to try to interact. She chased after girls, thinking this was a way to get comfortable with them and have friends.

Within the space where girls related distantly or felt alienated or disconnected, there existed another space of uncertainty or suspension. This space was discontinuous, volatile, and uncomfortable, lacking the fluidity for maneuvering to find a comfortable zone of relating, at least initially. In this space, girls’ fighting was inevitable. But, it was in this fighting space that girls met each other face to face, saw each other clearly, and tested out their connections. In this lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression fighting sometimes opened a space for friendship.

Language was closely tied to spatiality, as its use provided structure to the life-world of the girls, and, therefore, affected their lived space. Language determined space, as rumors either excluded or dislocated or, conversely, included someone in a group. Language was also a sort of gatekeeper in relationships, with its capacity to divulge information or hold it in confidence. The telling of secrets impacted spatiality in girls’

relationships, drawing some into the shared language and space, while distancing others who were not included, and usually alienating the one whose secrets were divulged. Language that was argumentative affected space in girls' relationships. One participant noted that "I argue with someone, then we don't talk for a day." For another participant, less comfortable with language skills, who stated "I don't run arguments well", argumentative language gave way to intrusion into others' space and a fist fight would ensue. Language that was mishandled or untruthful, or delivered in a harsh or negative manner, or accompanied by bodily gestures and looks, also affected space, leading to feelings of distress in the world. Language carried a unique cadence for each girl, innate to her background and life world, such that phraseology and slang required careful listening skills and on-going translation by the researcher and verification with the participants.

*Lived Body (Corporeality).*

The experience of the lived body refers to the presence of one's body in the world, both revealing and concealing something of the self (Van Manen, 1990). In the girls' experience of girl-to-girl aggression the lived body contributed meaning as gestures, eye contact, body size, attractiveness, and positioning were all relevant aspects of the experience.

The language of the body was significant in the girls' relationships, daring to proclaim one girl as one "who acts like she's ready to fight" another as "little" and another as "big...chubby big". The theme of *feeling discomfort and finding ways of interacting with girls* was evident in the way the girls embodied the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. All the participants described being in physical fights as a reaction to



feeling discomfort with other girls. The body was responsive to emotional triggers and to culturally- engrained automatic type behaviors of defending the self or behaving according to learned behavior.

In girls' lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression, the lived body assumed a centrality related to its ability to fight and defend either for oneself, or for another. One participant noted that "some people are bred to fight, it's in your blood; if your family is from fighting, you are going to want to fight." Other participants described the lived body as vulnerable and the need for a group who will render support during a fight and "pull someone off you". Girls' experiences of the lived body as vulnerable included defending by matching your body size to the perpetrator. This was done so as not to appear to be a punk. A punk was someone who took advantage of others. Sometimes it was necessary to pay someone to defend the self.

The body as fighter was important to attain, and one participant explained that she was "complimented" to hear that she fought like a boy. Another participant wished that she knew how to fight. This participant spoke of lifting weights and working out so that she would be ready to fight, if needed. Learning to fight was as important to these girls as learning to play a sport might be to other girls. As applies to many behaviors, fighting could be learned by watching; one participant explained that she liked to watch fights so that she could see the techniques. Thus, fights were usually a place to gather round, be an observer.

*Lived Time (Temporality).*

Lived time includes a person's experience as situated in the dimensions of past, present, and future (Van Manen, 1990). It is one's way of being in the world and is

subjective for each person. For the girls in the study their lived time uncovered meanings of their experience of girl-to-girl aggression both in the moment and over years of relating. Experience was interwoven with temporal dimensions such that what was past had an on-going effect on the present and future of their life-world.

The girls' lived time was characterized by a present orientation, and often a sense of urgency. Their daily lives were full of demands and challenges that eclipsed their focus on future plans. It was difficult for them to describe a world beyond their immediate situation. Their perspective of their future world was narrow and lacked hope or promise. When girls did speak about the future, they were not enthusiastic or poised for success. There was a sense of resignation and trepidation as captured in Angie's comments, "I gotta worry about taking care of myself and getting a job."

In the alternative school girls seemed trapped by time in the sense that they were sentenced to a type of makeover from which they should emerge ready to fit in with a mainstream, culturally normative society. Lived time within the rules and structure of the school often was not enough to change the girls, however. A few months or even years of learning new behaviors and ways of thinking were not going to extinguish culturally based beliefs and values. In the girls' description of their life world, the time at the alternative school was arranged for them and was spent in a daily effort to try to make of them something other than what they were. There were, however, suggestions and prompts around the school that invited students to challenge themselves by stepping into a future time. A whiteboard carried daily nourishing quotes such as, "Thinking is like loving and dying...no one can do it for you." However, just across the hall, present time asserted itself in the form of the in-school suspension room, a dark, small space in which

time literally was spent for regaining control and reflecting on behavior. A lived future time was made attractive for students as shown by celebratory occasions to mark success and achievement. For example, lunches out at a fast food restaurant rewarded those who met attendance standards. Graduations and other milestones were joyfully acknowledged with ceremony, videos, food, and decorations.

In describing their relationships with other girls, the participants spoke of the panorama of their lived time, such as friendships that endured for several years. They also discussed incidences of long-lasting avoidance of girls after fights, but these were not measured in years, but rather in disappearance or losing track, as in statements such as “I don’t know where she is now” or “we don’t see each other any more.” The lapsed time was not as accurate a measurement of absence as was the emptiness of the space where the person used to be.

Lived time was also fluid with indistinct boundaries, allowing for changing perceptions depending on one’s vantage point and stressors. The theme of *feeling discomfort and finding ways to interact with girls* was woven into the existential of lived time for these girls. Hannah described herself “taking it” and enduring months and years of aggressive behaviors from other girls. When time reached a pivotal juncture of frustration and overload, boundaries changed and energy was released in a sudden burst of anger and yelling for this participant. Barbara Ann described a similar experience where her discomfort and attempts to find ways to interact with girls seemed to have a timeless quality, punctuated by her comment that she had been “bullied all her life.”

*Lived Human Relation (Relationality).*

Lived human relation refers to the experience of meeting the other in the

interpersonal space we share with them. One gains an impression of the other through the way the person is physically present (Van Manen, 1990). Further encounters with the other include conversation and sharing, which add another dimension to a relationship. One ultimately learns about oneself through relation with the other and gains a broader perspective about purpose and meaning in life.

The girls in the study described their lived experience of relationship with other girls including ways of relating that were both comfortable and distressing. These descriptions uncover the fundamental meaning structure of the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression. A centrality of the experience was that girls had relationships and girls had friendships, and there was distinctiveness about each of these, but also overlap and fluidity. Relationships were defined as people available in a girl's experience, but not necessarily people with whom she wanted to share intense experiences, secrets, and feelings. Friendships, by contrast, were deeper emotional connections that involved shared understandings and feelings and a willingness to take a risk for that person and stand up for them in a challenging situation.

The meaning structure of *feeling discomfort and finding ways to interact with girls* affected how the participants experienced lived human relation. The girls' lived human relation was layered and multi-dimensional. While discomfort or uncertainty was often the initial feeling about a relationship, girls' lived relationality with others included a gamut of behaviors. Girls described experiencing social niceties, being popular, being a role model or "magnet", to behaviors of bullying or using someone (or being the person bullied), and situations of being disrespectful and physically or relationally aggressive toward other girls. There were also behaviors that supported friendships and buoyed trust.

Participants described situations of dealing with ultimatums set up by girls. Other experiences involved being bullied or forced to provide favors in exchange for friendships. Some participants stated that they paid money so that bully girls would leave them alone. In figuring out these relationships, one girl's perspective was that she could "only have a friend by being used". She believed that "you became popular after being bullied all your life." Another girl described that she was advised to pay people to be her friends so that she would have a friend at school.

Dealing with misperceptions was clearly part of the discomfort that girls felt in relationships. Efforts to interpret and react to misperceptions while trying to establish relationality proved particularly challenging in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Participants described a few situations in which language or gestures led to misunderstanding. On some occasions, however, the exact mechanism or impetus for a misperception was not even known; the only clarity being that another girl was "hating on you." In these situations, girls were not likely to transition out of these misperceptions without help. Fights were likely as a way to work out how the girls were going to connect and who was going to dominate. The mother of one participant was a knowledgeable resource about how to deal with girls who challenged in this way. She advised the girls to stay inside for at least a week and that this would eventually cool the problem.

In the context of the alternative school, the theme of feeling discomfort and finding ways to interact with girls was shown in the girls' lived human relations. The girls' descriptions illustrate the challenges they faced in relating at the school. By virtue of referral to the school, each girl wore a proverbial scarlet letter that identified her as a troublemaker or disruptive girl. Some participants had already been at other alternative

schools and were transferred due to problems at those schools. The underlying assumption in placing students at an alternative school was that behavior can change under circumstances of structure, support, and guidance. From such a perspective, girls had choices to make in terms of relating. One could assert her identity as the fighter or troublemaker, or buy into a new way of relating. The clash between identity, cultural belief system, and societal expectations played out on a daily basis for the girls at the school. In most instances, the girls' need to establish identity and feel valued for who they were and how they expressed it carried more weight for them than rewards for changing their behavior.

Girl-to-girl aggression was just one small aspect of the overall lived human relation through which girls tried to navigate. Girl-to-girl aggression spilled over into girls' jealousy over boys, which spilled over into how boys relate to girls. One of the participants stated that she planned to ask her counselor "if we can have like a little girls' group after school to talk about boys, how they're disrespectful and things." Girl-to-girl aggression may have been the identified problem, but the girls' lived human relation of feeling discomfort and finding ways to interact had larger implications within their life world of growing up female.

#### *Fitting in with the Group Hierarchy*

Belonging to a group is a significant part of adolescent development. In their experience of girl-to-girl aggression the participants described that interacting with other girls also often meant dealing with group behavior. Fitting in with the group hierarchy was a theme in the meaning structure of girl-to-girl aggression. Navigating within and between groups was an aspect of the experience. Group dynamics dictated that girls

shuffled in and out of favor, and one's friends might suddenly change allegiance in order to fit in. One participant, Tynecia, described her experience of a new girl coming to the school and how this impacted her place in the hierarchy of the girls at school. From Tynecia's perspective, the new girl, Julie, was popular and "might be jealous of me" and want Tynecia's boyfriend. The new girl was successful in drawing Tynecia's girl friend away from her into another group. This prompted Tynecia to pull another friend into the situation.

A girl came in which is---might be---being jealous of me. A girl came in, a new girl came in and my friend dissed me to go for her and that really hurt and so I was mad at her and I was talkin' to my friend Jade about her. And I know I shouldn't be talkin' about her, but I told her what I said and I was honest about it. I asked her if she had problems, and she didn't. But friends should never diss friends for other friends.

Tynecia presents as a girl who needs to be the center of attention, and who wants to be admired by a group. She said that her mother actually described her as a magnet, because other young people in her church group were drawn to her and wanted to be around her. Tynecia played an active role in parleying and instigating between groups of girls in the school, to the point that the clinical director did not allow her to be in classes with other girls. The clinical director identified Tynecia as a Queen Bee, very much a bully and a negative leader among the girls.

Angie, another study participant, provides an example of Tynecia's instigating behaviors with other girls. Angie had fallen asleep during a movie at school and learned from her friend that Tynecia was talking about her to other girls during the movie.

So me and my friend, we went to a different class and then Tynecia was like, “Oh, they talkin’ about ya, they talkin’ about ya”, just starting some more. So, I seen the girls after school. We squashed it. Everything was okay. But, Tynecia was the only one that I didn’t say nothin’ to. So, like, so yesterday me and one of the girls that was with Tynecia was talking about Tynecia. Well, I told them I don’t like Tynecia and you can go back and tell her, cuz I know they’re going to.

The description shows the hierarchy and complicated web of communication among a group of girls in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Rather than Angie and Tynecia talking directly to each other, the messaging goes through a third girl, who is then truly “in the middle” between Angie and Tynecia. Angie’s description of additional interaction with the girl in the middle (Aisha) shows that in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression mistrust escalates as girls are caught talking about each other. Ultimately, the experience threatens friendships.

I said it basically so Tynecia could know that Aisha was talking about Tynecia too. She was going along with me, just talkin’ about Tynecia too. And then she go back, after school, she go back and tell Tynecia I was talkin’, I was talkin’ about her and that she ain’t saying nothin’. Between her and Aisha, Tynecia gonna have to figure out herself how Aisha gets down, because she hangs with her. I’m gonna tell Tynecia, “I don’t got nothin’, no problem with you, I just don’t like you and you probably don’t like me, so we gonna leave it at that, but I’m gonna give you advice: watch your friends.”



The alternative school was a microcosm of the girls' life world in terms of establishing a pecking order of power and influence. Both Angie and Tynecia projected an image of being at the top of the food chain and dominating other girls. Their girl-to-girl aggression strategies included both physical fights with other girls and the relational tactics of "talking about" each other. As their relatedness played out over several weeks, it was clear that they had met their equals in the realm of girl-to-girl aggression. Angie was a subtle manipulator, provoking Tynecia to lose control and end up in the in-school suspension. This occurred when Angie made sure that Tynecia saw her braiding the hair of Tynecia's ex-boyfriend. Tynecia, however, gained her own sense of dominance over Angie by never getting physically aggressive with Angie, always walking away before a physical fight ensued. However, Angie seemed to hold the trump card with her warning to Tynecia of "watch your friends". The implication is that Tynecia is not so dominant and influential as she might wish others to believe.

Rumors and their circulation played a key role in how girls fit into a group hierarchy. In the experience of girl-to-girl aggression girls described the flow of talk that always involved at least three girls. In Brianna's situation, the power of the rumors was that they pitted one friend against another, so that one girl was always excluded. One girl tells another girl that a third spoke badly about her.

My friend, Katrina, she hated me, like last week, the whole week,  
'cause Anna was tellin' her that I was never friends with her, that  
I always was friends with Anna, and that I hated Katrina  
completely, and I always talk bad about her. And Katrina never  
told me she said that til, like, we started to be friends again.

‘Cause like Anna and me used to be really good friends til me and Katrina started being friends. Because, like she’d always say stuff about Katrina and I’d get mad about it. So, like we stopped being friends completely, and I guess she thinks if me and Katrina aren’t friends, we’ll be friends again, or something.

Brianna explains that she became mad at both friends over the situation. She was angry at Anna for starting the rumor, but also angry at Katrina for believing it. As stories flowed between girls, more people became involved and soon Brianna found that she was being excluded from a group of girls who hung with Katrina. Brianna stated that she “cussed Anna out” and explained:

If she (Anna) wouldn’t have had softball practice that night, me and my other friend, McKenzie, were gonna probably get into a fight with her ‘cause, like, she kept calling my phone and leaving gay messages like, “Everybody hates you” and stuff like that. Brianna found herself in an untenable space with loss of individual boundaries where groups acted as “one” and “everybody” professed to share similar feelings. She no longer fit in with the group. In her confusion and fear she relies on fighting strategies that have been part of her defensive repertoire as she grew up.

In Sarita’s experience of girl-to-girl aggression, she describes the phenomenon of “showing off” that occurs when her friend gets around a larger group of other girls. In trying to secure their place in the new group, her friends ignore Sarita and leave her behind.

When they get around, like, when we get, first it would be just me and

my friend, and then, like, when we get around a lot of people they just show off and I'd be left in the back and when I try to ask them a question, they try to ignore me. And they tell me to "Shut up, now. I'm talking to her right now." When I leave them I don't want to talk to them no more for that day. But then, like, what my friends do, they'll call my house or my phone, my cell phone, and they'll tell me, why I leave? They was just playing around, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

As the vignette illustrates, some girls may leave a friend behind in order to fit in with a group of people. This passage also depicts one of the recovery behaviors that the girls used to absolve their responsibility over excluding Sarita: they were playing around and they're sorry. Sarita gave a couple of instances of feeling left out in the context of group situations, betrayed by a friend who valued being accepted by the group over the feelings of Sarita. The outcome of the experience for Sarita was "that's why, that's how you and your friend end up fighting."

*Lived Space.*

Girls' perception of their lived space was displayed in the theme of fitting in with the group hierarchy. Space was competitive and hierarchal. Girls had to find their space within girl-to-girl relationships and groups. Girls expressed a desire to "fit in", to "be normal", to not be "left out" among the hierarchy of girls' relationships. While there was a minimum of flexibility in the lived space, girls did find spaces of comfort around friendships, usually with one or two friends who were allowed into a close space. An aspect of relating to girls in a competitive space included the girls' deep need to be perceived as real and authentic and to be treated with respect. Trusting others and feeling

comfortable in their reciprocal trust were paramount to girls' friendship experience.

At the alternative school, space was limited, with room at the top for only one girl. Thus, time and planning were devoted to gaining and preserving the top spot. For two of the girls in this study, space at the top was so valued that they came close to physically fighting in their accusations of one talking about the other. Maintaining spaces for one's followers was also important. One girl trying to win Tynecia's favor bought her gifts. Angie tried to keep other girls in their places by exposing their two-faced behavior of talking behind the back about Tynecia, their supposed friend.

Language was powerful in the context of fitting in with the group hierarchy. Words were able to evoke tears, anger, arguments or to cause other responses. "Cutting" or "picking on" someone, "starting stuff", and "running the mouth" all describe the active nature of language in the girls' life-world and its ability to create spaces primarily of tension and insecurity in relationships. Language could easily isolate a girl, merely by keeping her out of the conversation. One participant described herself as "I'm the oddball out of the conversation out of everyone." One's identity could be encapsulated in language, as names such as "monkey", "ugly", or "fat" seemed to stick to a girl's persona. Words were able to designate a girl within a particular group, such as the "smuts" or the group that was "nasty."

#### *Lived Body.*

In their experience, girls' description of the theme *fitting in with the group hierarchy* was integrated with the lived body. The lived body as carrier of messages about sexuality was a central aspect of girls' relationships. Concerns over attractiveness to the opposite sex were imbedded in girls' descriptions of their girl-to-girl relatedness.

Rumors and secrets typically were based on the body as sexual object. One participant remarked, "...if you break up with your boyfriend right away, or if you lose a friend, the number one rumor that people in [name of school] say is that you slept around with everybody in the school." Girls' relatedness was peppered with innuendoes about the lived body engaged in sexual behavior, but a standard value in their life-world proclaimed a strict morality. Girls wanted to fit it by being attractive and desirable, but they established a hierarchy such that those who were "nasty" (having sex) were invalidated and unworthy. The girls' experiences included a prodding and censoring of each other on the sexual mores of the body in their life-world. Yet, one participant, Tynecia, refused to ignore her friend who hung with a group who were known for "giving head". Friendship trumped nasty for both Tynecia and Angie, who spoke about the need to protect or stand by a friend who was accused of sexual behavior. The experiences of these two girls demonstrate how the theme of *defining self in relation to other girls* was intertwined with the lived body. It is interesting that these two girls are also the girls who were competing with each other for the space at the top in terms of the group hierarchy. An important aspect of identity for both girls included being highly regarded by others. For both of them the lived body contributed to how they perceived themselves and how they were perceived by others. Both girls relied on their physical attractiveness as a mechanism to involve boys in their life world. Boys, in turn, were part of the rumors and talking about each other that swirled through the school.

Hannah described a different type of experience of learning about herself in relation to other girls. Hannah explained that she didn't fit in with the group hierarchy because her lived body was not acceptable within the group-determined norms for attractiveness.

She describes the feeling of being “left out” of things and how that related to her lived body:

Like, if I had three wishes, I’d probably change myself first. Since I get made fun of being fat, my weight, my body because everyone says I’m ugly.

In the context of the alternative school Hannah was keenly aware of how she was too different to fit in with the group. On one level she wanted to change this so that her lived space at school could be more comfortable. On another level, however, in the community, she was in a comfortable space where she felt accepted by her father, a girlfriend and a boyfriend who liked her the way she was.

*Lived Time.*

The meaning structure of *fitting in with the group hierarchy* affected how girls experienced time. Only one participant spoke of the future in terms of some hoped-for wishes about changing herself, hoping to fit in then with other girls. In Hannah’s description of being “left out” by other girls, there is a sense of suspended time, in which she observes herself past, present, and future.

It just makes you mad, because if, like, the days would change, like if everything was turned around, one of the girls would be me, and I would be them. I wonder about it, like sometimes, what would actually happen, if I was another girl, what would happen? Like, would I have fun? Like, I wish I would have fun, do what a normal person is supposed to do. Like do how the normal kids [do], go have fun, party, do whatever you need to do while you’re in eleventh grade and get out. But I have this grudge

holding me back and saying, “You can’t do this, you can’t do that”,  
because all the kids say it.

The passage also reflects how language creates spatial confines in Hannah’s experience. In her life world, the comments and responses of others were powerful barriers that kept her from transforming herself, her relationships, and her future. In Hannah’s lived time she is engaged with the dilemma of wondering about changing herself to fit in. She seems to be questioning whether there is a valid reason to make drastic changes in herself, as she is not sure that she will experience time any differently. She will still feel held back even if everything is turned around.

Other participants also described their perception of time as they tried to fit in with the group hierarchy. Angie noted that the passing of time brought different people into her field of relating, and thus a new hierarchy in which to find her niche. Brianna was a newcomer in the alternative school and was not coping well with the length of time it was taking her to fit in with the other middle school girls. Ultimately, she became truant from school, possibly related to her perceived lack of fit with the group hierarchy. A self-described impulsive person, her urgency about time may have prevented any other response.

*Lived Human Relation.*

In the girls’ description of girl-to-girl aggression, the theme *fitting in with the group hierarchy* affected the girls’ experience of the existential lived human relation. Meaning and purpose in life took on new parameters for one participant as she realized that her life was in her own control, under her own direction, and she had the freedom to ignore peers who picked on her as the bottom rung of their food chain.

They call me ugly. They call me fat. Um, they talk about my clothes, because they all have a lot of money. They, um, they, whenever some other kids say something, they'll have to chime in with them and act like they're all cool and stuff, which some of them ain't. I got used to it after a while, so right now it doesn't really bother me. Like, I can take it for like half the day, and then it would just make me mad, and then sometimes, I won't like, I'll say something back to them.

Another participant, Sarita, was still uncertain about whether she wanted to fit in the group hierarchy. The clinical director commented that she was very surprised that Sarita would talk to the researcher, as Sarita was reluctant to be aligned with adults. Sarita's description of her experiences showed a growing awareness of herself as someone who wanted honest relationships and someone who valued friendship. She was taking some initial steps toward change even by participating in the study.

As soon as you meet somebody you don't go right and hang out with them. First, you like, you wanna usually see, like, if I'm just meeting the person, like say they're just moving next door to me and there's a girl, like when I see them I'll be like, "Hi, da, da, da", just say stuff like that. I don't wanna hang out with them. I just do stuff like that, "Hi." I'd get to know them first and, like every time I see them I say, "Hi." Or, if they're moved next door to me, I'd invite them in. If she sits there and be like I wanna, or like I don't like that person, then I know she's like that. But then if she don't say nothing like that, then it's cool.

In the context of the alternative school, the existential of lived human relation was



an important concept, and presented a contrast to the theme of fitting in with the group hierarchy. School goals included gaining skills in conflict resolution and social responsibility. While girls wanted to preserve their place in the group hierarchy, they were learning that methods such as manipulating others and talking negatively about others were not acceptable. Growth in relationships would mean changing behaviors that were relationally aggressive.

*This is How Girls Are: Girl Drama*

In their experience of girl-to-girl aggression, the thread of this is how girls are inserted itself within girls' relationships and wove girls together in space and time into a shared life world. Every participant referred to the idea that girls behaved in certain ways. Despite the unpredictability of the relationships themselves, girls were known for acting in certain ways. In their experience, girls were able to anchor themselves in some way in the space and time of being an adolescent girl and relating to adolescent girls because they were familiar with certain behaviors in themselves. Girls' varied responses to the behaviors seemed to be associated with the maturity level of the girls and their own personality style.

The behaviors identified were linked to specific situations and were inevitably identified by the statement "this is how girls are....". However, this is not to say that girls are "all alike", but rather that through their experiences with other girls, the participants were able to identify more about themselves and who they were, their similarities and differences with other girls. This concept integrates with "growing up", another theme in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

"Girl drama" was a term that the girls frequently referred to in describing their

experience of girl-to-girl aggression. As with many of the terms used by the girls, “girl drama” did not have an exact definition. However, each participant’s description carried a central idea that a number of girls got into fights or arguments over something that was said about a girl. This “running the mouth” might involve jealousy “because you’re doing better than them.” It could also involve competition over a boyfriend and going out with a girl’s ex-boyfriend, or it could involve sharing a girl’s secrets.

Angie described that she had experienced many “girl drama” situations. She described “girl drama” as girls “running their mouths” and not keeping secrets a girl had shared. Finding out the next day that everybody is asking you questions about your private business causes the drama between girls for her. Angie’s perspective on girl drama is that “it makes time fly”, but as she got older, she gained a different point of view on those behaviors:

Well, when I was, when I was in it, when I was littler or whatever, like I had fun, ya know what I mean, and I liked it. But then as I got older, I mean, I got more mature, and I thought about it, and it’s not, it’s not worth it. It’s not worth my time.

As Angie’s comments illustrate, there was a sensation of fun attached to girl drama behaviors. Angie, a confident girl at the top of the group hierarchy, can afford to engage in girl drama. She knows that few will challenge her status, and she is swept up in the notion of her own power to choose to either pass time by joining the drama, or to decline to get involved in something that she also labels as “childish.” Angie now finds herself “distracted” by boys and came to realize that it’s “funner” with boys because “with the girls it was arguments” and boys are “easier to get along with”. She explained that at age

16 she is more comfortable hanging with boys than with girls. Angie is also cute and flirtatious and the boys at school find her attractive.

With girls they get, they go and get, they get mad so quick. So they, so you, so you can't, you can't, you can't play around like that with girls.

All you can do with girls is gossip and talk about boys. That's, you can't, you can't have fun with girls. That's how I see it. You really can't.

She further explained that she was quite comfortable relating to her two “really good friends”, but found that “hanging with too many girls” was a set-up for girls to have problems in their relating:

Like, girls start too much and, ah, I hung with too many girls, so they, they like too much, too much information is goin' be getting' out and then they just go on and be talkin' about you behind your back and, they gonna be two-faced. A lot of girls are two-faced.

Tynecia also suggests that girl drama comes into play within the context of too much information. In her experience, additions to a statement change the meaning and lead to “bickering over something stupid.”

For example, someone comes to school and they think they're all that, starts stuff with me, like ask me, “Do you like this girl and that girl?”

And I may tell if I do, but then she switches—flips the script—and says more stuff, like adding more to it.

In contrast to Angie's perception that girl drama could be fun, Sarita found the experience unsettling and even contributed to her feeling unsafe. In Sarita's experience, girls being two-faced was depicted as “that's how girls are”. She added that this was

often the source of fights between girls and that for her it meant “You don’t feel that safe around her”. However, Sarita has come to the conclusion that the friendship would continue. “You will be a friend with that person, but you’d like, wouldn’t tell them nothing. You can still hang out with them, but you just not going to tell them any of your secrets or anything”. As depicted in other situations, Sarita is still uncertain about friendships and chooses to take a cautious approach in dealing with girls who are two-faced. In the alternative school, Sarita lacks the security and confidence that Angie enjoys in her role at the top of the group hierarchy. Thus, Sarita is more vulnerable to the effects of girl drama.

“Running the mouth” and “talking about” other girls was another behavior characteristic of girls. Tynecia had the experience of being talked about and attributed it to something that girls do. At age 13, rather than turning to boys for “distraction” as Angie has chosen to do, Tynecia suggests that girls need just to stop these behaviors, “mind your business, worry about you and your life, and don’t worry about other people”. Showing a different perspective than her older peer, Angie, she also advocates that girls need to “stick together no matter what, through thick and thin. Just tell each other that you’re there for each other.” Tynecia elaborates:

Girls may talk about other girls. There’s a lot of nasty people in this world and there’s a lot of people that talk about me and I don’t care. They may not like me, but I’m still sayin’ it and I don’t care what people think. But girls do have times when they just argue, talk about each other. And I think they’re talkin’ about each other ‘cause they have low self-esteem. And they talk about people so they can get their, they can get it [self-

esteem], or they can think it's cool.

Ironically, Tynecia was implicated by other girls for her involvement in talking about girls behind their backs. Other study participants acknowledged participating in behaviors that were part of girl-to-girl aggression. Angie admitted to being fake, Sarita admitted to being a bully, as did Barbara Ann. Brianna admits that "small things get me mad" and she therefore easily gets into fights. Hannah realizes she cannot control her mouth and should stay out of people's business. Only Tynecia was unwilling to admit to any behavior that might reflect negatively on her. Tynecia presents herself as a proselytizer for appropriate girls' behavior, not recognizing her own problematic behaviors. As noted by the clinical director, Tynecia's perception is her reality. In her perception, she is never at fault, she is not the problem, but everyone else is at fault. She may represent another aspect of "this is how girls are" in terms of her denial and unwillingness to recognize destructive behaviors in her own relationship style. She was the youngest participant in the study, which may explain lack of insightful analysis of personal behaviors.

Girls grew weary of too much drama, and were amenable to getting help from adults. In the following situation Angie describes a type of moratorium that a friend's mother suggested.

She tells us that if we stay in the house and just not worry about all of that, nothing will happen. Nobody worries about you no more. So, we tried it and we were like, "Ok, we gonna stay in the house. We gonna be at her house and just do us. Chill. Do us and have fun." And the next thing you know, that's how everything just stopped.

*Lived Space.*

The theme of *this is how girls are* was portrayed in the girls' use of language and its closely associated existential of lived space. Language was the gatekeeper, keeping girls situated in their world, separated from adults, and invisibly linked to other girls and adolescent culture. Words such as "fake", "two-faced", and "girl drama" carried private meanings, used and understood among the participants and others in the adolescent culture. Words such as "nasty" and "smutty" consigned girls in a distinct, negatively stigmatized space. As both Angie and Tynecia explained, in their experience, girls who were sexually active were central characters in the girl drama rumor mill, and were emotionally and physically cordoned off from others. Both Angie and Tynecia exercised their freedom to enter that space and connect with their friend. Their actions illustrate the integration of the two themes *defining self in relation to other girls* and *this is how girls are* into girls' lived space in their experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

In the context of the alternative school, the lived space correlated quite well with the requirements of a girl drama situation. Since girls were in close proximity and saw each other several times daily, either in class or in shared recreation or lunch sessions, there was ample opportunity to initiate the talk and "start something" that would grow quickly into an interesting story. Similar to the theme of *fitting in with the group hierarchy*, the theme of *this is how girls are: girl drama*, was a relational form of aggression that was destructive to attachment between girls. Girls did not link this theme with their personal backgrounds and beliefs as they linked the fighting that was part of the *feeling discomfort* theme. Although girls suggested that the drama could get out of hand and lead to physical fights, the girls' lived experience emphasized this as a relational type of aggression.

*Lived Body.*

*This is how girls are: girl drama* was interwoven with how girls embodied the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Participants spoke frequently about the importance of one's body, appearance, and clothing. There seemed to be *carte blanche* to comment on others' clothing and give advice or start negative gossip about someone's appearance. Hannah's situation depicts her lived experience of girls freely criticizing her body and clothing.

Most of the girls in this school look down on me because I have issues [clothing given to her] that I wore for three years, the same clothes, not exact, but they all look the same. Like the shirt I wore before, a couple times. These pants I wore before, a couple times. And they're all like, "You need to get a whole new wardrobe. You need new shoes. Your shoes look like they've been down, um, heck and back."

Hannah was an easy target for this kind of negative talk about appearance. She had a low opinion of herself and others were able to pick up on this and on the fact that she did not fit in with the other girls.

Tynecia shares a different perspective of "how girls are", noting that jealousy is often part of the experience. Her perspective and reaction to the negative comments reflect her higher self-esteem. She does not buy into what some girls are saying, seeming protected and confident due to her position in the group hierarchy. A girl's body or clothing are the usual targets for the aggressive barbs, but Tynecia notes that "today girls get jealous over anything." The following situation depicts both themes of *fitting in with the group hierarchy* and *this is how girls are* in relationship to the existential of the lived

body in girl-to-girl aggression. In this situation, the lived body seemed to grow to encompass an entire group of girls who banded together as a unified force.

They're like, "Aw, you don't look right in that. That belt is so cute on me, but not on her." Some girls run back, tellin' their friends, talking about them. Like, if there's a group of girls and there's one girl out of their group, and she's like, she's walking down, and those girls, are like, "Ew, look at her. That outfit looks better on me." And so that girl that got picked on, she'll go back to her friends and tell them, and they look at, say, their groups are walking past in the hallway, and they like talk about each other. Aw like, "Her shoes would look better on me. Look at her hair. My hair's better than hers."

*Lived Time.*

In their experience of girl-to-girl aggression, girls described the meaning structure of *this is how girls are* and its relationship to lived time. Participants described certain episodes of time as seeming suspended without purpose, as they remarked "girls have nothing better to do" in referring to behaviors such as starting rumors or acting two-faced. In another instance, Angie described that gossip and girl drama "makes time fly." Participants' perception of time in relation to "this is how girls are" also was oriented to "moving beyond" as in the case of girls needing to "get over" something that was said or get over a lost relationship. One participant commented that girls need to "get over it" when another girl likes an ex-boyfriend, because "it's part of life." Girls experienced time as healing in girl-to-girl aggression. Even in cases of girl drama or girls acting in a negative or hurtful way, most participants noted that after some time passed, girls would work things out and resolve their differences.

*Lived Human Relation.*

The theme *this is how girls are* was woven into the existential of lived human



relation as girls described their experiences of girl-to-girl aggression. The participants described themselves and others as two-faced or fake, bullying, getting into others' business, or running their mouths. In general, the participants accepted that human nature was imperfect and that relating to others was not a scripted task. They could ignore some minor transgressions in ways of relating. They had different expectations of friends, stronger in terms of trust, but looser in terms of interaction behaviors. They all expressed that finding a meaningful relationship or friendship took time. A few of the girls placed friendships in the same category as family, which allowed for more tolerance of disagreement or angry outbursts.

I have the same relationship with my family and friends. It's just the same. They're part of, my friends are part of my family. That's what I consider them.

In the context of the alternative school, the existential of lived human relation suggests two different types of representations of the theme *this is how girls are: girl drama*. Girls who were confident and well-integrated into the group hierarchy found that the way girls are was not particularly threatening or upsetting. These girls perceived it as a type of fun behavior, a way to pass time, or a jealous reaction. Girls who were less comfortable in the group hierarchy and less confident of their fit perceived that girls were being threatening or mean. In both perspectives, the girls experienced that the way girls are in relation to girl drama was a source of negative energy. The school goals for growth of relationship skills represented a healthy alternative for girls to consider in dealing with their experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

#### *Feeling Betrayed by Inauthentic and Untrustworthy Girls*

All of the participants talked about their experience of dealing with fake or two-faced behaviors in other girls. Such behaviors were a major vehicle for "starting stuff" between girls. Hannah commented that a "two-faced person is one of the worst types of

girl aggression.”

The girls’ descriptions of their experience with inauthentic behavior illustrate feelings of being betrayed and their ways of responding. Barbara Ann’s experience with a girl who was two-faced left her feeling “confused ‘cuz I don’t know who to trust.” Barbara Ann had considered Gina her friend, but when she heard Gina talking about her to another girl, Barbara Ann was confused. When Gina came in the next day and was saying “Barbara Ann, you’re a nice girl and all this, I just told her, ‘I don’t wanna be her friend no more.’ ”

Inauthentic behavior included being two-faced, while untrustworthy behaviors usually involved divulging of secrets. Having one’s secrets revealed was a major betrayal of trust. Sarita’s description highlights the significance for her of being betrayed by her friend. Though she appears outwardly tough and strong, Sarita’s vulnerable nature is apparent in her description of an experience in which her long-time friend forces her into a space where she must choose between the friend and a new relationship. The friend plays emotional blackmail by divulging Sarita’s secrets. Sarita expresses hopelessness about any continued relationship with this girl.

My one friend, we was friends since second grade all the way to the end, but now I can’t hang out with her no more because like she got jealous at me because I started hanging out with my new friend. I started hanging out with different people. I stopped hanging out with her cause she said I had to choose, be with her, and I found out she be talking behind my back the whole time, telling me, telling all my secrets back then from when I was in second grade. Telling when we was first gonna fight. So, we just stopped hanging out. We talk. When we see each other we say, “Hi, bye”, but we don’t hang out no more like we used to.

In Sarita’s descriptions of her life-world, it was very apparent that “secrets” shared

between friends were sacred. She stated that she did not feel safe “telling stuff” to this friend any longer. Her recourse was to engage almost exclusively with her large family of cousins, as she explained, “I don’t care really how many friends I got, ....as long as I got my cousins.”

Tynecia’s experience of feeling betrayed reflects that girls’ inauthentic or untrustworthy behaviors are often linked with the need to try to fit into the group hierarchy. Tynecia described that her friend, Paige, whom she has known since fourth grade, told Tynecia’s secrets to others. At Tynecia’s previous school, Tynecia was usurping Paige’s popularity. Tynecia states that Paige was jealous of Tynecia getting more popular than Paige, and that is why Paige “told her business.” Although disappointed by Paige’s behavior, Tynecia’s response indicates that she is in control, dictating to Paige the parameters of their relationship.

Well, we were arguing. We were about to fight, but I didn’t fight her. I chose to walk away and, I was like, “Paige, we can’t be friends any more. I can’t trust you. You tell my secrets. I just can’t trust you any more at all.” So, she took it, she took it the good way. Um, we’re friends now, not best friends any more, but I still talk to her, but I don’t tell her my secrets or anything.

Since Tynecia is a Queen Bee among the girls, others are wary of crossing her in the hierarchy of relating. Paige tries to cover her behavior in order to stay in Tynecia’s good graces. When questioned by Tynecia as to why she told secrets, Paige states that she “was just joking around.” Tynecia remains in control of the relationship with Paige, as evidenced by the comment, “she took it the good way.” Tynecia explained this further: “...she was crying, and I gave her a hug. I was like, ‘Just don’t do that any more.’”

At the current alternative school, Tynecia also wields power over the group hierarchy. In this case, Angie feels betrayed by the inauthentic behaviors of both Tynecia

and Aisha. She plans to confront Aisha on her lack of truthfulness with Tynecia. She believes the behavior is motivated by Aisha's fear of disrupting her place in the hierarchy created by Tynecia.

I'm gonna be like, "Aisha, are you afraid of Tynecia?" I'm gonna say, "Well why you go back and tell Tynecia that I was talkin' about her? You went sayin' that you ain't sayin' nothing." Like, come on now, if you're gonna go back sayin' stuff, at least say it, tell the truth. At least say it all.

In the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression participants tried to deal with their feelings about inauthentic behavior by using tactics to "get back" at the person who started a rumor. Angie describes how she dealt with this situation:

I really can't, I can't do nothing about it because everybody knows, everybody heard about it, so it's not like you could change the rumor. The only thing you could do, I get mad. I get mad. But the only thing you could do is basically is put a rumor on somebody else that said it about you. Start a rumor about that person and that's a way, just getting back.

In a close friendship, however, Angie describes that she could tolerate a friend revealing her secrets. Angie described getting into arguments that often proceeded to fights with a close friend when secrets were revealed. However, the friendship endured after they allowed some space between them.

My friend, Olivia, like she um, she was, she was, like I told her my business and she was tellin' people my business. So me and her was arguin' about that. We was about to fight but we, but we were, but, I mean we just stood away from each other for a couple of days. And then she apologized to me and everything was okay.

Similar to Sarita's situation, Angie then curtailed the amount of information she shared with Olivia. Nonetheless, they remained close friends. Angie comments: "Like, we argue

all the time. But, she don't go tellin' my business, 'cause she don't know all of my business."

Sarita, on the other hand, is at different place on the path of finding and keeping friends. Like Angie, she experienced at least one situation where a girl wanted to fight her. This left her confused and uncomfortable and may contribute to her wariness of trusting girls. In her lived space of relating with girls she is sensitive to their exclusionary behaviors, and deeply hurt by betrayals of private or secret information. All discussions with Sarita suggest that at present she keeps friends "at a distance" and will allow only family within the inner space of her relatedness. As the following section describes, she is in the process of testing out new relationships, part of her journey of figuring out relationships and defining herself.

*Lived Space.*

The theme of *feeling betrayed by inauthentic and untrustworthy girls* was displayed in the ways that girls used space to exclude or limit someone. While being fake was a common behavior, girls were intolerant of this behavior in a friend. Girls would set boundaries around relating with that friend. An example of this was the process of being excluded by several girls when questions arose about whether Brianna was a trustworthy friend.

The friendship zone was a very important part of girls' lived space in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Girls were protective of this space, and more tolerant of aberrations and "little spats" that involved friends. There was a distinction between the space given a friend versus that allowed for a mere acquaintance. Girls spoke of sometimes needing space away from friends, as being together too much led to arguments over "stupid things." In this space of togetherness there was also freedom and security, as one could easily "return" to the comfortable space of a friendship.

*Lived Body.*

Themes of *feeling betrayed by inauthentic and untrustworthy girls* and *defining self in relation to other girls* are reflected in the existential of the lived body. The lived body spoke volumes as it carried messages in girls' experiences of their relationships. Sarita spoke of a friend who would "show off" in front of a new group of people and leave her behind and fail to include her. This "showing off" involved walking ahead of her and being obvious in ignoring Sarita even when she tried to join the conversation. All participants spoke of girls who, quite literally, had two faces. One of the faces was the nice one that smiled at you, and the other was "ignorant", ignored you and joined in negative remarks about you. In figuring out these relationships, girls realized that the lived body never lies. Girls learned that they had to "watch their back". This process usually was needed in cases of dealing with acquaintances. However, one participant described the process of learning the important lesson of "watch your friends". Such a situation exemplified the discomfort of false friendships. In growing up, it was important to recognize that not every relationship was honest and loyal.

*Lived Time.*

The theme of *feeling betrayed by inauthentic and untrustworthy girls* was apparent in the girls' experience of lived time. Relationships were viewed from a perspective of previous experience at an earlier time, sizing them up in terms of sorrows felt and skills learned. For example, Angie discussed the need to "watch your friends", apparently based on her own lived experience with a relationship that grew suspicious. Sarita rehashed experiences of being "left behind" by friends who were showing off. These events made her anxious with her real time relating and contributed to her wariness in making friends. Tynecia identified learning that one of her friends could not be trusted and therefore they needed time apart. Every participant spoke of the need for "time apart" when a friendship was strained from arguments or little spats.

*Lived Human Relation.*

The meaning structure of *feeling betrayed by inauthentic and untrustworthy girls* affected how girls experienced the existential of lived human relation. A couple of the participants, Hannah and Sarita, described greater distress at feeling betrayed as compared to the other participants. Yet, each of them took away a different sense of purpose and meaning in life about relationships. While Hannah seemed to experience a heightened sense of freedom in choosing relationships, Sarita expressed caution and wanted to avoid rejection or hurt. Other participants described their emotional reactions to experiences of betrayal, such as “getting mad”, “disappointed”, or “feeling confused”. Personal growth in relating was less apparent, as their respective choices to deal with future inauthentic relationships were “get even”, take control of the relationship, or dwell in the confused state.

Feeling betrayed by inauthentic and untrustworthy girls was part of the life world girls described at the alternative school. In their shared space and time, they were immersed in relating with each other. Yet, the relationships were never presented as trustworthy friendships. Girls who described intense and valued friendships always spoke about girls who they knew in other situations. The girls’ time at the alternative school seemed to be a disconnected episode in their life where they tended to get pulled into webs of relationally aggressive styles of relating. Part of the therapeutic approach at the school was helping girls recognize the behaviors they were using and suggesting changes. Patterns of girls’ relating were quite entrenched and not easily altered. However, Angie, who had been at the school for over two years, did realize some personal growth in her style of relating with Tynecia.

#### *Defining the Self in Relation to Other Girls*

Throughout the narratives it was apparent that the girls were learning about their own character or identity through their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. The meaning of who they were emerged through their relationships. Three girls described themselves

engaging in protective roles in their experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

Angie was willing to stick up for her friend who was being rumored as “nasty” and having a sexually transmitted disease. The girlfriend was overwhelmed by the rumors and quietly tolerated the gossip. Angie confronted the rumor-starter and told people to leave her friend alone.

One of my friends, they had a rumor about her or whatever, but it was true. So, that was the worst thing about it, the rumor about her was basically true. So, like, she, I don't know what's wrong with her, but she just act like she never heard about that. So, since she's gonna be a friend, I mean you gotta be her friend. She didn't do nothin' about it. You gotta do something about it. So I got involved with it. Because that's my friend, and I see how she's feeling, like people telling her, “da, da, da, you got this, you got that, or you nasty or something.” I just went up to the person and was telling her, “Like don't worry about her. If she got something, she got it, that's on her.” Like that's ignorant. If somebody got something, you don't go spreading their business, That's ignorant.

Tynecia described a relationship with a girl who was in a group of girls known as “smuts”. The smuts were girls who “gave head” to boys. The girls in this group were not welcomed into other groups of girls, being chastised for their behavior. Tynecia, however, had been a friend with this girl and wanted to maintain that friendship, despite the negative stigma associated with the girl. She defines herself in relation to others, firmly asserting herself as a friend and challenging others in their judgment of her.

We're good friends. That's what she does. That's none of my business. That's still my girl and everything, and I still like her. I don't worry about what she's doing and everything. As long as we're tight and our relationship's good and she don't act weird around boys or anything.



She's just like a real person, but she does that thing. She does that to boys, though. They're [group of Tynecia's friends] like, "Why do you hang out with her? She gives head." I was like, "So? That doesn't mean I do it. What about it? That's my friend. I don't care what she does. As long as we're tight." They're like, "Aw, she hangs out with her." I'm like, "Yea, I sure do. Is there a problem?" [They're like], "Aw, no, I'm just saying she gives head. That's disgusting." And I was like, "That's her business, not mine."

Girls experienced aggression toward each other and found new aspects of themselves, and each other, as they worked through their issues. Angie and Tynecia had on-going issues between them regarding "talking about each other" or talking about the friends of each other. Angie demonstrates finding personal confidence in how she could handle her conflict with Tynecia in a "respectful" manner.

It's just been, like, it's been going on, but, like, we try our best to ignore each other, and then, I don't know. I think, I think it would be a lot better if we just told each other how we feel about each other and then leave it at that. Or, if I can't talk to her, I'm just gonna write her a little note and I'm gonna say, "Tynecia, I don't like you and, most likely, you don't like me. So, we just gonna keep it at that." That's being a lot, that's, I mean, being respectful about the whole thing. Not being, I'm not being smart about it. I'm just letting her know we're gonna leave it at that.

The girls were cognizant of responses used by their adversaries. Angie made an observation that she feels that Tynecia showed maturity in her ability to handle argumentative encounters occurring between them. In her analysis, Angie also defines herself in a new way, realizing that she was not "the better person". She made the following comments regarding arguments between her and Tynecia:

I was like, ‘Tynecia, stop before it can get any further’. Like, if we would have kept arguing and nobody would stop, we would’ve fought. We would’ve both fought. Like she always would stop before it would get any further, so that’s the thing, I give her that, about that, because she does, that’s a lot of maturity, but, ‘cause she probably was thinking the same thing, let me stop before it gets any further. She would walk away from it before me. I really didn’t know what to think. I said to myself, “Like that’s childish, I should walk away.” But then after you think about it, she was being a better person.

Brianna’s and Sarita’s experience of girl-to-girl aggression was unique in that both girls described finding meaning in who they were by “testing” to determine her fit with a girl and that relationship. Brianna needed to know that she was able to fight a girl, and indeed, fighting led to friendship for her; this was how she identified whether they could be friends. She commented, “Like, after you fight somebody it’s kind of like impossible to hate ‘em forever afterwards.” Her explanation is synonymous with a wavering line that separates emotions of love and hate. For this participant, the emotional and physical investment involved in the process of fighting may be akin to that involved in an intense loving relationship. Perhaps for some girls, there is confusion about loving and hating. Brianna did admit that she was “confused” about fighting leading to friendship. In her particular family situation, the messages of loving and hating may have been confused or may have overlapped. Her growing up space included “wrestling” with family and others. She referred to a circumstance of being molested by her cousin. She needed to know how much pain a friend could take, in case they did have to fight. She also stated that fighting ensures “a friend will not ignore you”; any kind of attention is apparently better than none. She had bad feelings about certain people and had ways of testing out their relationships and keeping herself safe.

Brianna's life-world was also characterized by self-described "anger issues", to which she attributes her inclination for fights with other girls. She showed a beginning understanding of how it was not healthy for her to continue to get excused for such behavior:

People get me angry easily with my anger management problems. And I don't get blamed for hitting people because of that. Like, I don't know, they think it's not my fault because I have anger issues, or something. They're gonna actually let me get away without, like, telling a teacher or anybody that I hit 'em.

Sarita described a path of defining herself in relation to other girls that was rooted in her childhood circumstances. Growing up with brothers, she was socialized into hitting and playing around as they did with her:

When someone comes up to me, I hit them, because I am just thinking I am playing around since my brothers did that. Every time I go home from school, like, my brother would run in here and grab me and he'll start kicking me. I think he's not good, but he's just playing around because that's how boys play.

When Sarita got into school, other girls did not perceive her pushing and hitting behavior as "playing", and her aggressiveness got her suspended from school a few times.

When I was in second or third grade, I didn't know what fighting meant. Like my momma would sit there and was like, 'Why you always chasing that girl home?' And I was like, 'I was just running after her. I thought we were just playing around.' Cause I was like playing around with her. I didn't know she felt that way. I didn't know she was scared of me until my mom set me down and said she was scared of me.

Sarita describes later forming a positive connection with a girl that she had fought with in

elementary school.

One girl I used to pick on at my old school, she moved over by my house and she went to the school I was going to then. She lived close. I said, 'Hold up! You are the one that got me kicked out of school. You are the girl I used to beat.' Then one day we became best friends ever since.

In the case of Sarita, her experience of girl-to-girl aggression helped her in defining herself and how she related to other girls, and also guided her in negotiating friendship. As she grew up, Sarita describes how she was careful about further misperceptions of girls' behaviors. She described a type of communal interplay that occurred between her and a girl as a way to test the trustworthiness of the other. She listened to the girl talk and took note of whether she spoke badly of others. She reflected on how the girl described friends and others. The unfolding of their relationship depended on shared values about friendship. This participant further protected herself by not sharing secrets until the other girl shared one first.

Defining the self in relation to others did not produce positive meaning for every girl. Barbara Ann was awkward in having friends and tried different strategies to get accepted and fit in. Having experienced being bullied in order to have a friend, she also tried buying a friend. The search for a positive sense of self is on-going for Barbara Ann. This may be related to her developmental level, as she is only fourteen years old. Tynecia describes that she is the friend that Barbara Ann is trying to buy. In the process of dealing with Barbara Ann, and with her counselors' help, Tynecia comes to define herself as someone who will be a friend and will not be bought.

Barbara Ann bought me things. She'd be like, "I really like you, you're my best friend." And I'm like, "You don't have to do this to win my friendship. You don't have to buy me stuff for my friendship. I don't need nothing." She's like, "Well, listen, keep it." I was like, "Okay, I'll

keep it, but you don't have to buy me stuff'. My counselor said Barbara Ann really likes you. Don't let her keep on [buying you things]. I said, "Yea, I respect that. You don't have to buy me stuff to win my trust, like to have my friendship. We can be friends without you buying anything."

Angie, on the other hand, at age 16, displays a mature understanding of her friendships and presents as having confidence about her ability to maintain a friendship with another girl. She describes being selective about her friends, having only two that she hangs with, but is comfortable with them, and accepts that there will be differences and "little arguments."

I'll get into arguments, not no fights or nothin', but like, I argue with my friends 'cause they get smart. They got a smart mouth on them. So, if they gonna say somethin', they end up sayin' somethin' smart. Both of my friends is like that. So, they gonna end up sayin' somethin' smart, so you wanna say somethin' smart back, and then you'll probably be arguin', and then, like, yeah, I'll be fine later.

Hannah's remarks after being dumped by her boyfriend capture the meaning for her of being a friend and having a friend. At age seventeen, she has come to define herself as someone who cares deeply about friendship, to the point that her friend's needs are more important than Hannah's keeping a relationship with her boyfriend.

I wanted to be with him for the rest of my life, but he dumped me. I didn't think he would either. It was a shocker. [It hurt] 'cause my best friend's with him, and I still talk to him, and you know how like when you still, you still want the relationship to go on, but now your best friend's dating him. She don't like him that much, she just dates him, I think, just to make herself, 'cause she's kind of bigger than I am, and she wants someone that loves her, and he would give it to her, 'cause he gave

me the little bit I needed so. That little bit makes me feel good inside.

That's what he gives her.

*Lived Space.*

The theme of *defining self in relation to other girls* was woven into the existential of girls' lived space. The girls used space in productive ways that allowed them to manage their emotions and reactions as they experienced girl-to-girl aggression. Tynecia, for example, walked away from an altercation with Angie, on some level realizing that the "bigger person" neutralizes aggression by creating space. In another type of defining self in relation to girl-to-girl aggression, Angie's perspective is that she needs to close the space between her and others who are aggressing her friend. She decides to "get involved" and confront someone who is spreading rumors about her friend. She intrudes on this space with care, however, limiting her confrontation to verbal responses.

*Lived Body.*

In the context of the alternative school, girls' aggression with other girls eventually involved face-to-face situations. Girls could not hide behind computers, as there were no computers. While note passing did occur, the school day was structured such that girls would eventually have some face time with the other girls during the day. In *defining self in relation to other girls*, it seemed helpful to have lived body, face-to-face discussions between girls. In one situation, Angie states that she was going to write Tynecia a little note explaining that though they did not like each other, they should just stop talking about each other. As events turned out, she was able to say this in person to Tynecia. Angie describes that this was the respectful thing to do.

*Lived Time.*

In their experience of girl-to-girl aggression, the meaning structure of *defining self in relation to other girls* affected how the girls experienced time. Although immersed in frequent arguments or conflicts with female peers, the participants used these experiences

to help identify their own relational strengths and personal goals, albeit narrowly focused. The three older participants spoke about their lived future in which they would take on the mantra of adult culture and work-related concerns. Having a friendship was important for present time and situation for every girl, and they expressed that friends would be there for them when needed. Some participants described further development of friendship in their lived future time. Hannah, also the oldest at age 17, spoke of maintaining a friendship with her long-term friend of 12 years. In her description of a dream about this friend, they were always going to be together. Her description of this lived time suggested the dream-like quality of timelessness. Tynecia described herself being a magnet in future relationships with younger girls at her church. Angie stated that she and her two good friends “all will be friends for a long time.” She described the experience of hanging with a friend even though the girl was “ignorant”. She expressed willingness to give a friend time to change her ways so the relationship could continue. However, she indicated that this could just as easily turn the other way and the relationship would end.

*Lived Human Relation.*

The theme of *defining self in relation to other girls* affected how girls experienced lived human relation and was woven throughout this existential. In defining themselves in relation to other girls, the meaning structure of having friendships surfaced as an essential aspect of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Although girls were aggressive to each other, it served to define themselves and others and to solidify ways to relate and connect with other girls. It was through knowing and experiencing what it is to have and be a friend that one participant came to know the devastation and trauma of losing a friend or relationship. Tynecia described a friendship that broke up after a trust was violated. She was not willing to take this friend back and the depth of the hurt was apparent in her telling of the story.

The girls described meaning in friendship as they put a friend's need before their own or went out of their comfort zone to stand up for a friend and confront rumors about the friend. One participant found purpose in her life in helping her girl friend "feel the little bit of love" similar to what she got from a male friend. Even though the participant's friend was dating her ex-boyfriend, it was more important to see her friend's happiness than to try to get the ex-boyfriend back for herself. Another participant confronted the person who started "nasty" rumors about her friend. She declared that the friend was not saying anything to support herself, so Angie accepted the challenge of protecting her vulnerable friend, and ultimately found meaning and purpose in doing this. Such behaviors demonstrate the fierce solidarity that girls hold in regard to their friendships. It brings to mind the quote, "The language of friendship is not words, but meanings. It is an intelligence above language" (Thoreau, 1906).

### *Growing Up*

One of the themes that was expressed by all the girls in their experience of girl-to-girl aggression was that they were in transit, that they were changing and developing both personally and in their relationships. Even the girls who felt immobilized for a time by the bully behaviors they were enduring spoke about either their past developmental experiences or future expectations. The participants described a time-wise progression of their experience. Two participants spoke of pre-teen behaviors of pushing or ordering girls around, chasing, or hitting them with a book bag. All girls indicated that in early teen years "running the mouth" was prominent. All three older participants described that by age 16-17 years girls were interested in being with boyfriends, and thinking about jobs and making money. Angie summed up her experience this way:

When I hit like twelve years old, twelve, thirteen years old, everything just started happening and like everybody running their mouths. But then, like, as you get older you realize that you got better things to do than to



be running the streets, fighting and everything.

Sarita spoke about her early behaviors of girl-to-girl aggression and the fact that she was not purposely trying to “scare” a girl that she regularly chased home from school. In fact, she thought she was trying to be friends with the girl. However, she found that other kids labeled her behavior as fighting. She found that scaring others could be used to her advantage, as it got her in with the “popular kids”:

I didn't know how to fight, [but] I had so much mouth that people was actually scared of me back when I was in elementary school. Like there was this one girl that I used to always chase home from school. I didn't start a fight. I never fought a day in my life when I was in elementary. Like, she was so scared of me to the point that her mom had to, she had to leave school before I even left. I just chased after her for the popular kids, for people to like me and stuff. They were like, “Aw, Sarita, she knows how to fight.” So I acted like I knew how to fight.

In Sarita's life-world, the ability to fight remained a high priority, as she noted that if she didn't know how to fight, she would be called “a little baby, a little, little girl who's scared to fight. They say you're a little punk, you can't come out 'cause you're a little punk, you can't fight.” She learned to fight when she was in seventh grade, but as she matured, she found that girls used “showing off” as a way to fit in with a popular group. Her experience echoed Angie's, in that being outside and running around was associated with girls' aggressive behaviors in mid-teen girls. Older girls, however, were interested in different things. At close to age 17, a friend whom she fought with as a ninth grader is “different now.” “[She is]...into boys. We don't hang out with a lot of girls no more. We're hardly never outside. She either at home, at school, or at work.”

The older girls deemed certain behaviors of girl-to-girl aggression “childish” and were ready to distance themselves from the experience and move on to other aspects of

their life. Angie shared her perspective on growing past gossiping about her that is often “something dumb, so I’ll just brush that off my shoulders.”

At some point you just say that’s childish. I’m not worried about it. I got better things to do. I gotta worry. I’m older, I gotta worry about getting a job, how I’m gonna take care of myself.

Despite being picked on nearly every day, Hannah had goals for herself and was starting to feel proud of how she was dealing with her challenges in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

The only thing that’s keeping me here, because I want something to look up to, to say, I did this in school. I didn’t do this.” But I don’t have to say, “I got picked on every day, and I got beat up in certain classes, and you hear kids talk about you.” No, when-ever I get out of school, I’m going to be like, I did this, and I did this and this and this, and I don’t have to hear those kids talk.

Tynecia, though the youngest participant at age 13, spoke about wanting girls to get past childish behaviors. She was able to identify and label these behaviors quite easily in other girls. In her experience of girl-to-girl aggression it was important for girls to stand up for themselves, talk about issues face to face, and mind their own business. While she gave lip service to these ideals, in actuality she was frequently caught up with gossip and two-faced behavior. In her maturation process, she was not yet ready to embrace and practice the mature behaviors she advocated. Tynecia shares her experience of another girl being “childish”, while not acknowledging her own similar behavior:

If she hadn’t been like rolling her eyes, like doing all type of stuff, I probably wouldn’t give it back to her. So, of course, I’m gonna respond back. I just won’t, like, take it from her. Actually it’s kind of funny.

‘Cause she’s like fifteen, sixteen, and she’s arguing with a thirteen year

old over some boy. Come on. That's very childish. And she has a boyfriend.

*Lived Space.*

*Growing up* was very much a part of the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression, and the lived space in the girls' life world gave meaning structure to this theme. The predominant feature of lived space as it pertains to girls' growing up concerned how and where girls were situated in the world. Three participants spoke of growing up with brothers and related this to their world view about how one learns the ways of relating and dealing with peers. Two participants described growing up in a particular area and how that affected expectations or rules about relating and behaving in the world. One participant was situated at various alternative schools as she was growing up, leaving her with a certain stigma that affected her way of being in the world. One of the participants grew up without her mother in the family; another participant moved from one foster home to another. Another girl was being raised by her single mother, who was struggling to keep her own life together.

Girls described that the experience of "growing up" in the developmental sense was also affected by their situation in space. This aspect is covered in discussion of "growing up" as one of the themes.

In the context of growing up, language was pivotal. One participant contended that girls needed to tell other girls when their behavior was unacceptable or when someone just didn't like another girl. Sharing this perspective, another participant added, "You do you and I do me", meaning they would each just be themselves and do their own thing in their own space. Girls' description of relating suggested a growing sophistication in language in their lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression as they progressed in age and development. There was a change from middle school to high school in the way that words were communicated in the context of space, such as whispering behind the back in

the younger grades and talking in front of someone in the high school grades. “Cutting” or making derogatory remarks about someone was accepted in a humorous fashion as girls grew older, and was delivered in a group of friends in a casual manner. One sixteen year old participant described a cutting contest: “This is usually what friends do when they are bored. They would be laughing and they just start cutting each other, but they are just kidding around.” She did allow that “sometimes it gets out of hand.” By contrast, comments made in whispered tones in middle school were hurtful and upsetting.

*Lived Body.*

The theme of *growing up* was woven into the lived body as fighter in the girl’s experience of girl-to-girl aggression. The participants described that fighting could be learned in one’s home, as two participants referred to their mothers teaching them how to fight. One of these participants also mentioned learning to fight from her brother’s behaviors toward her. Another participant grew up “wrestling” with her sister. Her attitude toward fighting was part of who she was as a person within the lived relation of her family.

*Lived Time.*

The process of *growing up* is naturally and automatically integrated in the girls’ lived time. The participants’ experience of time in regard to girl-to-girl aggression was associated with moving toward something, such as the end of summer, the end of the school year, or out of middle school or graduating and “moving on”. There was a sense of urgency about getting past this particular challenge of girl-to-girl aggression. The older girls seemed hardened by their experiences and looked back in a wizened way, analyzing what they had been through and proclaiming it “childish”.

Descriptions of “growing up” add to the meaning structure of lived time in the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. The study participants shared perspectives of “acting childish”, which included behaviors such as starting rumors or trying to get

another girl's boyfriend. In this regard, time carried certain expectations. A middle-schooler behaved in a certain way, while an older girl behaved differently. Age or developmental stage was an important criterion in the experience of lived time in girl-to-girl aggression. The girls painted a time line which featured "12 and 13 year olds who are going to run their mouths", to older teen girls who run "outside", to a 17 year old who is pregnant and now "stays inside." One participant spoke of the value girls place on hearing the experience of an older girl: "she likes how I talk to her and give her experience of what she can do when she gets older." In the experience of girl-to-girl aggression, time was described in terms of "growing up" and this was intertwined with each girl's situation in the world and her perceptions of herself and others.

*Lived Human Relation.*

The theme *growing up* was woven into the existential of lived human relation. Participants indicated that "growing up" implied expected transitions in relationships, such that you moved from a mere relating to being friends. One participant described this as getting the "friendship under control" so that there would not be a need to worry about things like bullying, getting smart with each other and disagreements. Tynecia spoke about the need for girls to get past talking about each other and "make things even" in a relationship and "make an understanding and start being friends". Another participant, Sarita, explained that her early attempts at relatedness in the elementary school grades were misperceived by her peers. Girls thought Sarita's chasing maneuvers were to start a fight, while Sarita thought she was making friendly overtures. As she straightened this out with the help of her mother, the relatedness grew closer.

In the context of the alternative school, the theme of *growing up* was part of the girls' life world. Girls expended energy just to get through the normal requirements of a school day. Many were low functioning in terms of academics. In addition, girls had other layers on top of the typical growing up expectations. These girls also needed time

for individual counseling and appointments with other team members such as psychologists or community service agencies. Their particular problems that mandated referral to the alternative school also festered and needed attention. These problems, in many cases, were issues about aggressive relationships with others. As shown in the girls' descriptions, growing up for these girls involved more obstacles, risks, and challenges as compared to mainstream girls.

#### Core Meaning Structure

The themes are the structures of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression that emerged from the experiential accounts. Analysis of the accounts was a process of "mining meaning" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 86) from them. Hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962) demands attention to both description and interpretation. The particulars of the girls' lived experience are already meaningful, but now need to be captured in language, which is the interpretive process. The hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1962) involves seeing the whole, then a part, then a new whole. Using this process, the core meaning structures of girl-to-girl aggression for this population of girls were identified as: attachment amidst risk (including unpredictable others, distrust, lack of power and control, and instability in life circumstances), fighting as approach to friendship, protective response, and having friends and forming identity.

The girls in this study described a life world that was very different from the world of mainstream teenage girls. They had to watch their backs, learn to fight, pay for friends or for protection, worry about being attacked physically or emotionally, and lived in unsettled home situations. Yet, the girls' needs and desires as they grew up and established identities mimicked those of typical girls in that they wanted friends, belonging, and attachment. Their mechanism to achieve this was determined by the risks and challenges in their environment, causing them to instinctually turn to protective behaviors that they had learned, practiced and perfected over the years to survive in their

unpredictable world. Protective behaviors were physical, relational, or a combination. Sarita's comments capture the meaning structures of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. She describes her learned protective response of fighting, a necessity in case one gets "jumped". Her "people", her crowd of girls, are the friends and attachments that she knows will be there to help her out, as she will most certainly need their protective response, just as they will need hers.

When you are going to fight somebody you usually bring some people with you in case, in case they try to jump you. That's why you need a crowd of people with you to sit there, break it up or something. Every time I fought, like I do have somebody with me in case somebody, like in case after I fall to the ground, the girls hit me, the rest of the girls come in and start kicking me and I don't got nobody here, so that's why people bring a crowd of girls.

Aggressive behaviors served other protective functions, such as helping girls find their fit or place within a group, and helping to preserve one's self-esteem. In such cases, the aggression was more likely to be of a relational than a physical type. Tynecia's comments reflect relational aggression that occurs between girls. Her description captures the meaning structure of the need for protection of the self while bonding with "my girls", and also being true to one's own identity.

Sometimes girls do crazy things to make them feel better. Girls may talk about other girls.....And I think they're talkin' about each other 'cause they have low self-esteem...I don't really care what people say. Just keep moving on. All my girls out there, just keep your heads up. Don't worry what people say, 'cause you are who you are and there is nothin' they can do about that.

One of the meaning structures of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression is having

friendships. The girls' experiences reveal the give and take that is part of friendships. One's situatedness in a relationship is an evolving process, one in which wavering boundaries allow for movement, change, and a distinctive way of being in the world. At some indefinable point, a relationship becomes a friendship. One person shares something or invests something, and the other responds to this change in the dynamic. The girls could have fights or arguments, but still maintain friendships. Even friends who chose to hang with a different group of girls were still welcomed back as friends when "you really, really need us." The girls' descriptions show that having friendships was an essential in their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Sarita describes her own transformation from bully to friend:

I think I got rid of that [being a bully]. I, now, when I look back, when I sit there and I see other kids getting bullied, I say, "Stop bullying that kid." And they be like, "Didn't you used to?" Like my friends remember you used to sit there and bully me, but like it changes.

Angie's remarks capture the meaning structure of friendship as part of the experience of girl-to-girl aggression:

In the past I was bullying, but then I grew up and now I just hang out with two of my friends 'cause me and my friends like, every once in awhile we might, we might bully each other, but it's just a friend thing and it's just because we around each other too long, so we are going to be getting smart with each other and disagreeing on things, but that just means that we need to go home and stay apart for a little bit. So, that's what we do. Like, me and my friends we got our friendship under control so we don't, we really don't got to worry about none of that, so we're straight, we're okay.

In further discussions, Angie noted that girls might be aggressive "to keep a



friendship or to lose one.” In her experience of girl-to-girl aggression, she might tolerate “ignorant” behavior in a friend if it was an otherwise good relationship. “Ignorant” behavior was defined as “bullying around, always wanting it your way, telling her she can’t hang with certain people.”

If I had a friend and she was ignorant, like it depends on how a relationship is. If you got a good relationship, then you keep it, but if it ain’t a good relationship, then I wouldn’t be her friend no more ‘cause she be too ignorant to hang around with.

In her experience, the bullying of girl-to-girl aggression could still creep back into even long-lasting friendships and jeopardize the relationship. Her comments suggest that girls are continually defining and re-defining the self as they connect with other girls and as they open themselves to learn more about each other.

They could be friends for a long time, but then the girl could be like, well, I can’t do this no more. I been your friend for too long and you still haven’t changed or whatever, and they stop being friends.

A common experience among the girls was learning how to have friends within the context of growing up. “Fitting in” was a concern for all the girls. Being included was important, but not at the risk of being talked about in rumors. Sometimes girls felt left out as a friend seemed to change direction or behavior or hung with other people. Trust was an essential ingredient in determining the strength and validity of a friendship. Having friendships with girls was clearly a higher value than having a boyfriend. One participant remarked: “Friends stay friends, but boyfriends always leave and go.” The most important aspect seemed to be finding someone with whom a girl could make an enduring connection. Hannah describes such a connection:

Everyone tried to break us up, even her boyfriend, my ex-boyfriend who is now her boyfriend. He tried to break us up, and we’re like, she’s like, I

can't do that, because he said it was either me or him. And she's like, "I have to have both of you." And she's like, "Well, I'll talk to you on the down low, and I'll talk to him all the time like I'm just talking to him." But, after awhile he found out that she was talking to me, so she just, he just let her go, and all the other people realized that me and my girl are always going to be untouchable, so they all just let us go. They don't say you can't hang out with her anymore. They can't. They tried too hard and it didn't work.

#### The Influence of Family in the Life World of the Participants

All the girls spoke of their family backgrounds. They shared a perspective on family relationships and cultural values as they described their lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression. None of the girls was from a traditional family structure. One participant had no connection with her biological family and was in a series of foster home placements. Another participant described a close relationship with her bisexual father, who was raising her. There were money concerns in her family, and she was often home alone while her father worked a second job. She performed housekeeping responsibilities and was expected to stay inside in the evenings due to living in an unsafe neighborhood. She was the only participant who mentioned a parental concern about her school attendance. Her father promised her rewards such as a day at the local pool for good school attendance.

Other participants described situations of lapsed supervision in their homes. Sarita spoke of an older female sibling in the family who was married and out of the home. She stated that she would go to her sister's place when she wanted to skip school, as her sister would be asleep and not realize Sarita was skipping school. Another participant, being raised by her single mom, explained that her mother was often absent from the home. This girl described running around freely on the streets with her sister. While not

admitting to drug activity herself, she described neighborhood drug problems, including drug busts and frequent police visits in the area.

Although supervision was lacking, mothers of three girls taught their daughters to fight. Parenting priorities for these girls involved safety, but meeting the safety need took a different approach than that used in mainstream families. Girls needed to know how to fight, because, more than likely, they were going to spend portions of their day on the streets. Their situatedness in their environment determined the safety priorities of parents. Siblings had shared learning experiences, such as learning to fight. Two girls said that their brothers showed them how to fight.

Running the streets was a frequent and normal event for three of the girls, who described girl-to-girl aggression events that occurred for them in their experience of being on the street. Mothers were influential in the street culture, and gave suggestions to their daughters of how to handle girls who were starting rumors or planning fights. Girls noted that their mothers' suggestions were generally on target for solving street problems.

The extended family was important to one participant, who said that most of the town was composed of her cousins. This participant felt comfortable and protected in street encounters because she always had family nearby. Church attendance was significant for one participant. In describing her church connections, she always included references to her peer group at the church. She described instances of text messaging with other girls during church-related activities. The content of the messages revolved around boys and rumors. It appeared that the problematic behaviors that got this participant into the alternative school were prominent in other aspects of her life. While her mother was attentive to her daughter, supervision was nonetheless lacking, as the participant described a mother who acted as a buddy or friend rather than in a parenting role.

Socioeconomic status was not requested from the girls, but conclusions were drawn from clothing, personal care, and general discussion of family work behaviors. All of the

girls were of low or lower middle socioeconomic class. Two girls spoke about needing to work to get things that they needed or wanted, and two others used money as their only resource to stave off bully behaviors in their peer group.

Several general factors emerged on how the family environment influenced the peer environment for the participants in this study. The girls' lack of supervision in their homes seemed a catalyst in their movement to the streets, perhaps to find peers who shared their need for a place to belong, feel accepted, and have something to do. The messages from the family environment included the need for girls to develop defensive behaviors that would protect them in their relationships. This directly influenced the peer environment as girls projected to other girls an image and attitude that proclaimed them as fighters. Parental responses influenced girls' relatedness with their peer environment. Rules, structure, and responsibilities kept one girl off the streets and accountable for attending school. For Tynecia, another participant, the mother's influence reflected an emphasis on spiritual values, but a disturbance in boundaries in the mother-daughter relationship. The mother repeatedly bailed her daughter out when Tynecia was involved in relational conflicts at school, as shown by the mother's decision to move her daughter from school to school. Thus, the participant did not interpret her relationally aggressive behavior toward peers as problematic. Tynecia modeled the behaviors of her mother, and attempted to blame others rather than accept responsibility for her behaviors. Other girls also tended to model their peer interactive behaviors after those displayed or suggested by mothers. Thus, girls confronted and fought their adversaries, as mothers taught them. Other learned behaviors for dealing with the peer environment included turning to their extended families for support or banding together with close friends and getting off the streets for a period of time.

#### Summary and Assessing Validity

Human nature usually dictates that one will put the best self forward and minimize

any negative aspects of self. Thus, the participants' telling of their experience may be colored to some extent by a desire to appear whatever they thought was the culturally expected norm. Yet, the girls' descriptions were their perspective of their situation, and, therefore true to their experience. Part of their experience of girl-to-girl aggression was sorting out relationships and people and people's responses; thus such behaviors undoubtedly applied to interaction with the researcher. The four months over which data was collected allowed for trust and rapport to develop between the researcher and each participant. Regardless of undisclosed motives, the girls' responses to the researcher are accepted as authentic and representative of their experience. Considering that the lived body is brutally honest, girls' communications were substantiated by nonverbals of voice intonation and facial expression and body posture that imbued their descriptions with the emotional aspect of their experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

A girl's comments sometimes sounded inconsistent among our various discussions, but each interaction captured the perception and reality of their experience at that moment in time. The evolving nature of the girls' experience and ability to express their thoughts is inherent in their life-world as an adolescent. In all cases, the participants were eager to share their thoughts and to inform the researcher and to amplify and clarify the specifics of their experience.

CHAPTER 5:  
DISCUSSION

## Discussion

The phenomenological approach for this study sought to answer the question: What is the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression of adolescent girls in a marginalized group? The responses from the participants provide an orientation to the phenomenon from their lived experience. The research findings raise issues about girl-to-girl aggression, some that have been addressed in the literature, and some that have not received attention.

The participants in this study were a unique population, marginalized in the sense that they attended an alternative school and were stigmatized for their aggressive and disruptive behaviors. Some might consider the girls in this study “misfits”. One staff person affectionately described the school they attended as “the land of the misfit toys”. As their descriptions revealed, they hung with tough crowds, were accustomed to fighting, struggled with control of self and others, and dwelled with instability in terms of family relationships, trust, and life circumstances. Culturally, economically, socially, and educationally these were not mainstream teen girls. Yet, their inside selves were not so different from other girls. They voiced the same issues of feeling threatened or uncomfortable around girls they did not know well, wanting to fit in and be accepted, feeling betrayed at times by girls, and wanting to have and be friends. They were finding their way through typical adolescent developmental issues of defining identity and growing up. Their life world included girl-to-girl aggression with many of the same manifestations as noted in other populations (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003), such as talking behind the back, starting rumors, being two-faced, trying to fit in with the group. In addition, these girls often were involved in physical fights with other girls.

What was distinctive about these girls, as compared to mainstream girls, was their approach to friendship and attachment, and the ever-present need to protect the self amidst the intensity of perceived challenges to attachment. Brianna's comment "fighting makes sure your friend will not ignore you" captures the feeling of how essential it was to have some kind of attachment with someone, even if it involved aggression. Indeed, aggression was the bridge to attachment. Brianna declared needing to know "how much pain a friend can take, in case I have to fight her." While research suggests that all girls are looking for attachment as they solidify their identity (Gilligan, 1982), these girls described a process to attachment that clearly took them on a different journey, directed by their environment, upbringing, and cultural expectations. No other research on girl-to-girl aggression has revealed this finding about aggression as a path to friendship and attachment.

Ruby Payne (2003) describes hidden rules and an unspoken cueing system that exists among members within a socioeconomic class. One's reactions to basic concepts such as love, time, education, and worldview are driven by these cues in one's socioeconomic class. For people of disadvantaged backgrounds, possessions are *people*, whereas for the wealthy, possessions are *objects* or pedigrees. The girls in this study provide support to Payne's theory, as there was a common yearning among the girls to have a good girl friend, to be close to someone. Girls' comments such as "me and my girl are untouchable" and "if you wanna have friends, you totally need to be a friend and be serious", illustrate the possessive nature of girls' relating, and the significant value of having friends.



### Experiential Descriptions in Literature

Van Manen's (1990) data analysis approach includes searching sources in literature that may increase practical insights on the phenomenon. *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood (1988) provides a literary representation of friendship imbedded in girls' aggression. The theme of protection and the need for attachment also are represented clearly. In this novel, the main character, Elaine, reminisces about her childhood world with three girlfriends and the experiences of their relatedness. Like the girls in the study, the novel portrays aggression between the girls, including physical hurt, which existed side-by-side with friendship behaviors. In one scene, the friends throw Elaine's hat down a ravine into an icy creek and abandon her when she falls into the icy water trying to retrieve it. Elaine describes the painful experience of shaking free from her friends temporarily:

They follow along behind me, making comments on the way I walk, on how I look from behind. If I were to turn, I would see them imitating me. "Stuck up! Stuck up!" they cry. I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them. There's something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass. I cross the street and continue along, eating my licorice. (Atwood, 1988, p. 214)

Despite the indifference, Elaine describes "Grace and Cordelia and Carol hang around the edges of my life..." (Atwood, 1988, p.214). As an adult looking back on these events, Elaine realizes the underlying purpose of Cordelia's aggressive behaviors, which was to protect Cordelia by making Elaine feel powerless and unworthy. All the while, however,

the need for attachment is prominent. Elaine revisits the ravine and comes to terms with the double-edged nature of their friendship:

I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were (Atwood, 1988, p. 459).

Like Elaine and Cordelia, the girls in this study described the dichotomy they experienced in girl-to-girl aggression. It was simultaneously a protective response for one girl, and a challenge to attachment for the other, all within the search for friendship.

#### Meaning Structure of Attachment Amidst Risk

Girls spoke of their perceived challenges to attachment, which on the surface appeared like those of many teen girls, but with closer examination were experienced within a milieu that was crowded with instability and therefore caused a more extreme affective response. Angie, for example, describes the unpredictable others, the people that came unwanted into her field of experience because they were "hating on you for some unknown reason." The daily struggle of "having to watch one's back" is not something that one thinks of as part of normal teen development. In this case, aggression was part of protecting the self from ambiguous and unnamed threatening others. The girls in this study exemplified what has been identified previously by Musick (1991). He notes that behavior patterns among disadvantaged female teens that may seem self-destructive and dysfunctional to the mainstream community are, indeed, adaptations that ensure survival.

Angie's apt description: "To keep a friendship they could be aggressive or if they don't want friends they could be aggressive" captures the dichotomy that was part of the girls' experience of girl-to-girl aggression. Aggressing meant getting close to someone, either within the context of meeting challenges related to attaching, protecting the self against detachment, or protecting against the instabilities that were part of their life-world.

Other perceived challenges to attachment that the girls described were mistrust of others and powerlessness. The reaction to mistrust was intense and deep. Secrets between girls had special significance. Girls described that secrets were sometimes about relationships, for example, revealing with whom someone had slept, but at other times were more innocuous, such as skipping school. The common element seemed to be that telling secrets was a shared event, laden with trust and the responsibility of protecting the secret. Sarita's experience of being betrayed by her friend reveals the depth of the hurt and powerlessness. When Sarita's "friend since second grade all the way to the end" started telling all Sarita's secrets "back from when I was in second grade", Sarita responded with a protective response of withdrawal and isolation. The importance of fighting for Sarita was displayed in this situation also, as she noted that one of the secrets that her friend revealed was "when I first fought." Sarita's reference to the experience in this way suggests the fighting was a right of passage for her, almost like a first sexual experience. Sarita cut herself off from this friend, and described wariness and testing in subsequent relationships.

### Meaning Structure of Fighting as Approach to Friendship

Research by Nikki Crick and colleagues spans almost a decade, contributing a great deal of quantitative data supporting the theory, features, and sequelae of girls' relational aggression. None of the studies, however, provides the rich and enlightening descriptions as given by the girls in this study of how they experience girl-to-girl aggression. Girls who grow up with different norms about aggression do perceive it differently. While mainstream girls may perceive physical fighting as dangerous or deviant, for the girls in this study, it held a very different connotation. Importantly, it was an aspect of a girl's identity, honed and developed in her much as girls from other backgrounds might develop identities of being nice, athletic, intelligent, artistic, etc. Because it was part of a girl's identity, this is what she put forward to share with others, to define herself to them and to move closer to knowing them. In short, it was an approach to friendship for these girls. While the culturally biased eye might interpret this as victimizing others, for the girls who lived in this world, it was how they got along, how they approached others, a natural part of their situation. Angie's comment is revealing: "Some people just get in fights, so they be like, "Oh, I haven't fought in a long time. I'm ready to get in a fight.""

### Meaning Structure of Protective Response

Girl-to-girl aggression in this population served to connect them with other girls and was an approach toward friendship. It also served them in protective ways. The girls' lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression was entwined with their cultural system. Literature on girls from disadvantaged backgrounds supports protective responses such as isolation as the sequelae to outspoken or aggressive behaviors that meet with cultural

disapproval. A study by Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995) used a population similar to the girls in this study. They were from culturally diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, though not known as aggressive girls. Interviews of the participants over a three-year time span (grades 8-10) showed girls' desire for connectedness. Girls also experienced conflicts and relational aggression. The researchers found that girls' survival strategies against relational aggression included tactics of being tough, strong, and outspoken (Taylor et al., 1995). However, a repeated theme among their participants was that speaking up in response to hurtful comments, rumors, and unfair statements from peers only got them into trouble. Consequently, girls eventually protected themselves by disconnecting, isolating, or going off on their own, perhaps even dropping out of school. The girls in this study displayed similar behavior patterns. They used certain survival strategies to stay connected. Two of the girls, Brianna and Sarita, best exemplify becoming disconnected when the challenges to attachment were too overwhelming. Brianna became truant from school, and Sarita was wary of forming friendships, lest she be betrayed and hurt. Tynecia, Angie, and Hannah, on the other hand, were bold and outspoken, while Barbara Ann used an "in your face" style of physically aggressing. Additional investigation of the nature of aggression and attachment in girls from disadvantaged groups is needed.

Artz (1998) concludes from her study of aggressive girls that girls were being aggressive to protect their turf, as opposed to what the current study reveals about protecting attachments. Artz's (1998) ethnographic study of violent white school girls describes the participants' sense making of their violent behavior toward other girls. Their explanations were reminiscent of their parents' rationale for being violent toward

their daughters. Artz (1998) concludes that aggressors perceive their victim as a perpetrator who then deserves to be beaten. Furthermore, she suggests that girls' aggression to other girls is motivated by a basic belief about women's inferiority that allows them to rationalize their aggression (Artz, 1998).

The findings from the current study present a sharp contrast to Artz's (1998) findings. Girls in this study were being aggressive to other girls as their culturally learned response for how to find attachment. The protective response for these girls involved dealing with environmental and situational experiences that presented challenges to attachment. In agreement with Artz's (1998) findings, they experienced powerlessness. They described powerlessness as a perceived challenge to attachment within the experience of girl-to-girl aggression. They felt powerlessness when attacked or bullied about their clothing, their appearance, and their differences from others. One way to protect against this aggression was to pay girls or bribe them with gifts so they would be friends, or would stop bullying them. For this population of girls, money represented a powerful and scarce commodity. One participant described herself as "one of the poor kids who most of the kids look down onto." She noted that her clothing was out of style and ordinary. She compared this to other kids in the school who wore more expensive, name brand clothing, and concluded that they steal some of their clothes. The daily reality for the girls in the study, in contrast to mainstream girls, was that they had very little to bargain with in terms of trying to fit in. The risk of being cut off was great and frightening, to the point that money, as a universal symbol of power in the middle class, might be one's only chance to avoid being cut off.

The girls in this study shared many of the risk factors identified by Chesney-Lind and Sheldon (1998) as fostering violent and delinquent acts in young women. These researchers suggest that many girls with such risk factors adopt a “bad girl” image to gain recognition. The girls in the current study, however, presented their experience differently. Their experience of girl-to-girl aggression revolved around themes of forming connections and protecting those connections rather than attempts to gain recognition. The meaning of aggression was deeply entwined with cultural and family values and beliefs about expected and accepted behavior. Sarita, for example, grew up believing that behaviors such as chasing after someone or hitting them were an attempt at play; Brianna described that wrestling with her sisters and mother was an everyday occurrence. Girls described learning to fight from parents and siblings, just as children from other cultural frames of reference might learn to behave in humble or passive ways. While mainstream society labels fighting behaviors as deviant, the girls in this study were following their cultural norms for creating bonds with others and also protecting those bonds.

As noted in research (Crick, 1995; Crick, et al., 2002), children who perceive hostile intent in another person are likely to retaliate with relationally aggressive responses. This current study with girls who are out of the mainstream provides an alternative view of girls’ perception of aggression and their responses to other girls. Findings showed that girls’ perception of aggressive tactics by others and their responses were rooted in cultural norms for behaviors. Thus, when Sarita was approached by a girl at the skating rink who thought Sarita was talking about her, the girl’s solution was not a behind-the-back retaliation, but an up-front confrontation of “do you wanna fight?” Brianna, bothered by a friend’s relationally aggressive exclusion of her, chose to react

with a plan to engage in a physical altercation with the other girl. Barbara Ann, who was being bullied by a girl at school, used physical aggression to protect herself. Angie was joining with her friends and they were watching their backs against girls who “are going to come at us because they don’t like us for some reason.”

The findings from this study support the tenets of evolutionary theory in terms of girls’ aggression to each other serving a protective function. Evolutionary theory suggests aggression is related to competing for scarce resources. For the girls in this study, the scarce resources were attachments, bonds, and being included in the group.

#### Tracing Etymological Sources

In Van Manen’s (1990) approach to researching lived experience, one of the processes for understanding a phenomenon is to trace etymological sources. Tracing the etymology of the word aggression reveals how in earlier times (1611) the experience of aggression was closely tied to the term “to attach”, which is an essential theme that appeared in the girls’ experience of aggression. According to the *Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (1988), the word aggression comes from the Latin *aggredi*, meaning “to attack”; the word attack (1600) comes from the Middle French *attaquer*, which is from the Old Italian *estaccare*, meaning “to attach”, which is from *stacca*, or “stake”. The relationship between attack and attach is evident as one realizes that to attack something, one must get closer to it, and essentially, attach oneself to it. For these girls, aggression was an attack that allowed them to get closer, and permitted them to see other girls better, more clearly, and judge the true nature of the other girl. In getting closer, they could determine whether this was someone who was trustworthy, someone who would stay a friend. Brianna illustrated this in her need to assess how much pain a friend could take.



Her aggression was her way of testing the viability of the attachment. She needed to know whether a bit of aggression would cause the friend to slide away from her, as had so many of the people in her life world. Thus, this etymological reference to “attaching” synchronizes very well with the girls’ meaning structure of their experience of aggression which was rooted in the need to relate, connect, or attach to other girls. The participants clearly revealed their stake in figuring out how to relate and connect with other girls.

Other findings (Brown, 2003; Dellasega & Nixon, 2003) support what this study has found about girl-to-girl aggression as a feature in girls’ efforts to connect with other girls. Girl-to-girl aggression, particularly relational aggression, as a protective dynamic to preserve one’s belonging in a peer group, has been documented in the literature on girls’ aggression (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Jones-Bamman, 2004).

Based on numerous interviews with girls about relational aggression, Dellasega and Nixon (2003) conclude that girls who engage in relational aggression are experiencing an underlying fear or insecurity. Their participants represented a variety of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, their participants were not from a marginalized group, as the girls were in this study. Their findings are consistent with the perspective of the girls from this study, who described discomfort as they sought out ways to interact with other girls. Dellasega and Nixon (2003) also interviewed teachers, mothers, and community leaders. One of the comments from a middle school teacher, Dorothy Strang, captures the meaning structure of girl-to-girl aggression as proffered by the girls in the present study:

It is not innate meanness they are perfecting. It is not the hurtfulness of cliques and unfairness of social status they are honing. They are working

at a much deeper level, at how to connect with others. Their early adolescent struggles to make and maintain friendships prefigure all relationships they will forge as maturing and mature women who must make difficult distinctions between companion, colleague, teammate, playmate, friend, confidante. (p. 65)

In comparing the findings of this study with those of Dellasega and Nixon (2003), the experience of girl-to-girl aggression is very similar. However, the girls in this study described more threat from the challenges that they perceived in their efforts to gain attachment. The girls in this study also responded with physically aggressive behaviors, which to them were a normal and effective learned response to help them make and preserve attachments with other girls.

In her book, *Girlfighting*, Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) also lends support to findings from this study that, even in aggressive behaviors, girls are trying to find ways to connect with each other. She asserts:

If these two contradictory stories of girls' friendship and girlfighting are, indeed, deeply entwined and rooted in the same soil, tracing one will inevitably lead to the other. (p. 6)

Brown believes that deep cultural messages are involved in the complex reality of girl-to-girl aggression, and have ultimately contributed to the fracturing and fighting within girls' relationships. She cites media messages which proclaim unattainable feminine ideals and a sexist society, both of which serve to divide girls rather than encourage sisterhood and solidarity (Brown, 2003). The voices of the girls in this study clearly echoed some of these ideas, as they noted that "girls hate you because you have a

boyfriend and he's good to you and they're mad 'cause they don't got no dude like that" and derogatory remarks such as "I don't like her. She ugly!" Representing the contrasting idea, girls' deep connections and friendships were expressed as "we're untouchable" and "friends forever". One participant proclaimed the strength of trust between friends, stating that she "would stand up to girls if I had my best friend near, 'cause my best friend won't let nothing happen."

What perhaps is unique about the girls' responses in this study is that they did describe some of their own transformation in terms of recognizing that their aggressive behavior was not productive. Muscio (1998) discusses that American females lack a frame of reference for relying on each other and for building mutual trust and love. She notes that it is too painful for females to figure out "what other women represent inside of us that we either dislike, fear or wish we 'possessed'..."(p. 139). Consequently, women are likely to give themselves over to cruel, competitive and aggressive behaviors. However, as one participant in this study suggests, in "living through" the experience of girl-to-girl aggression, one may come out on the other side with a mutual respect for oneself and one's adversary. This participant shared her realization that another girl was the "better person" in their on-going disagreements and arguments. At 16 years of age, she had come to value something in her peer's way of dealing with their differences. Though she acknowledged about her peer that "I don't like you, and most likely you don't like me", she had figured out something about their relating process, and had decided to proceed in a "respectful" manner with this peer. So, in this respect, the study findings capture a variation in what other research has displayed about girls' aggression.

### Art as a Source of Lived Experience

In the girls' description of the lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression, there were other examples of girls' reacting to cultural influences in their relatedness. Van Manen (1990) suggests that phenomenology seeks experiences from sources such as poetry, art, literature or music that are relevant to the participants' description of their experience. Girl-to-girl aggression is currently a vastly popular topic in the media. Movies such as *Mean Girls* (Michaels & Waters, 2004) parody the complex nature of girls' behaviors and clearly illustrate the impact of cultural values such as attractiveness, wealth, power, and getting boy friends on girls' esteem and relationship issues. One participant in the study referred to the group "The Plastics" who were depicted in the movie *Mean Girls* (2004). She stated that such groups "got girl-to-girl aggression going because others would follow them and be mean to other girls." As described by girls in this and Dellasega and Nixon's (2003) book, girls who feel that their own connection is being threatened may aggress other girls.

Magazines targeted toward teen girls, such as *Seventeen*, depict beautiful girls with flawless bodies, skin, and hair. One participant, after glancing through an issue of *Seventeen* magazine, commented on the competitive nature of girls' relationships as everyone tries to be the most desired or best-looking. She admitted that, as a younger girl, she wanted to be "the cute little girl", but found that when she started growing up, she was "no longer skinny" and felt, "there goes all my chances of everything." In spite of strong media images that exclude the imperfect, and that portray girls as objects vying for male attention, this participant managed to sort through all the relational competition among girls and see relationships through a different lens.

Some guys like you for what you are, and I agree. Some guys like big girls, some guys like little girls. It all depends. But it doesn't like depend on what they like about your body. It's how they feel about you. See, love is all about like feelings, not about how you look. If you, someone's going to love you no matter if you're fat or skinny, so it doesn't really matter. As long as you know that they love you, that's all that really matters.

As this participant makes clear, there are girls who are ignoring cultural and sexist barriers and figuring out relationships, not only with girls, but with males. This participant was the oldest girl in the study (age 17), and, as her description reveals, had reached her analysis only after living through the experience of wanting to be the mainstream culturally correct little girl.

#### Meaning Structure of Having Friends and Forming Identity

Findings in this study are consistent with those from a study by Sharon Thompson (1994) about teenage girls' accounts of sex, romance and pregnancy. In the course of her interviews of four hundred girls from varied cultural backgrounds, she found that girls sort girls into various categories of "others". This "othering" of girls is based on girls' perception of good and bad hierarchies based upon cultural and societal mores, such as sexual identity, drug use, promiscuity, trustworthiness. As echoed by the girls in this study, other girls might be your worst enemies, and make it necessary to "watch your back" and "watch your friends". Girls were placed into categories such as "smuts" or "nasty". However, as the girls in this study also suggest, there is hope for the triumph of

girls' relationships and friendships over feuding. Two of the older girls in particular provided instances of sorting things out and cherishing lasting friendships with girls.

By contrast, the girls in Thompson's (1994) study, many of whom were teenage mothers, spoke of betrayal and the impossibility of female friendship. Thompson (1994) postulates that girls' friendships "take a share of the weight off love---make it more feasible to postpone the intimacy that sex is supposed to buy" (p. 228). Such a hypothesis opens up interesting ideas about a link between unconnected and friendless girls who engage in sexual relations at young ages in their search for connection. Thompson's (1994) findings and hypothesis underscore the importance of encouraging friendships among teen girls.

Another similarity between Thompson's (1994) findings and those of this study is the trend for girls' account of girlfighting to begin in childhood and then to proceed through adolescence. Much like the girls in the present study, Thompson's participants spoke of fighting "naturally" because something made them angry, or it was brought on by a bad look or bad feeling or some unknown cause. In this study, fighting was part of one's family life, as girls learned how to fight from mothers or brothers. Thompson found that as her participants grew into adolescents, fighting over boys gave the girls a story line that could actually make sense of their anger. In this study, a similar theme was noted, as many of the girls described fighting over boys as they reached adolescence.

The experience of girl-to-girl aggression revealed through the study participants illustrated the meaning structure of having friends and the girl-like nature of friendship in girls' lives. Media and books attest to the importance of friendships and bonding for girls' development and ability to thrive. In the New York Times best selling novel, *The*

*Secret Life of Bees*, author Sue Monk Kidd (2002) writes about a Caucasian, motherless young girl, Lily, who is taken in by three African American beekeeping sisters. One of the strong messages in the novel is the powerful nature of women's bonding to one another. The author comments in "The Penguin reader's guide" at the end of the novel:

When women bond together in a community in such a way that "sisterhood" is created, it gives them an accepting and intimate forum to tell their stories and have them heard and validated by others. The community not only helps to heal their circumstance, but encourages them to grow into their larger destiny. This is what happened to Lily. She found a sanctuary of women where she could tell her story, and have it heard and validated---an act that allowed her not only to bear her sorrow but transform it. (p. 8-9)

In a similar way, the girls in this study spoke of the need for a friend with whom they could share "secrets", their innermost concerns and questions that they wished to validate with other females. They were searching for the bonding and connection that would confirm their ideas and assist their self-definition.

There is nothing surprising about girls' strong friendships. As more information about girls' relationships becomes known, it seems that girls' aggression toward each other also is not so novel. Emotions of caring deeply and being deeply angry do coexist in the same person, whatever the gender identity. Perhaps it is not so essential to find and label the cause for girl-to-girl aggression. What needs attention, as revealed by the girls in this study, at least, and by the girls from similar backgrounds in the researcher's pilot study (Adamshick, 2005), is the initiation of protective factors to address the risks and

challenges perceived by girls in marginalized groups in their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. It is time to “flip the script”, a term used by one of the girls in the study, and view girl-to-girl aggression from the girls’ perspective. Girls described a life world that included a culturally imbedded belief about physical aggression, in particular, as a link to attachment for them. The findings from this study suggest that girls in this population experience challenges not only in their relationships, but also from a hostile environment. Relationships seem tenuous, at best, and if attachments are formed, there is always the risk that something unpredictable or out of one’s control will interfere. Much of their focus and energy is on trying to protect the self amidst daily hostilities and challenges. However, girls still wanted close friendships and tried to obtain them using behaviors that had protected them in risk situations. When girls discussed future plans, they sounded resigned and confined, rather than excited or hopeful.

Instead of buying into the cultural belief system of “this is how girls are”, girls need help to see freedom and possibility in their lives and relationships, and a glimpse of a promising future. They need protection from their risks so that they will feel free to connect and relate with girls in ways that are healthy, nurturing, and empowering. Freedom is a basic entity of relationships that in some sense has been taken away through the labeling of girls’ relationships as mean or acrimonious. In freedom, there is opportunity to overcome challenges, find friendship, and imagine a hopeful future. Merleau-Ponty (1958) states, “it is still I who makes another to be for me and makes each of us as human beings” (p. 506).



### Implications for Nursing

Distinct features about girl-to-girl aggression in this population became clear through the participants' description of their lived experience. The meanings of aggression for girls in this marginalized group are different from those of mainstream girls. The girls' identity is strongly tied to their fighting behaviors, and fighting is a normal behavior within their life world. The girls in this group are experiencing risk and challenge in their daily encounters with their environment, of a more extreme nature than mainstream teens. The girls want attachment, connection, and friendship with other girls. Aggression is their approach to friendship and their way of protecting and holding on to relationships in the same way that it protects them against a hostile environment.

Nurses, particularly in their roles in schools and communities, are in position to interface with girls in a marginalized group such as this and develop initiatives to address issues of risk and protection. It is paramount that nurses respect the cultural tenets and life world of girls who are out of the mainstream. Since girls from this type of marginalized group are a unique population, the interventions for this group also need to be unique. Rather than impose mainstream approaches for girl-to-girl aggression, nurses must negotiate with girls in a marginalized group to find strategies that are acceptable within their worldview (Munoz, 2006). The implications for nursing care are in the areas of practice and research.

Ideally, primary prevention should be offered, particularly for girls who are in high-risk groups. Girls who need the most preventative focus are those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and in unstable family or home environments. Primary types of care include recognizing instances in which girls use aggressive approaches,

identifying the purposes of these aggressive behaviors, and teaching about healthy relationship skills. In particular, girls from high-risk backgrounds may need help to see that they do not need to fight with friends to gain the attachment that they seek; they can approach girls in other ways.

Currently, children who are severely disruptive and aggressive in traditional school settings are referred to alternative schools. Findings from the current study suggest that this approach needs further evaluation for aggressive girls. Approach to friendship in aggressive girls is different. Segregating physically aggressive girls in specialized schools serves to stigmatize them and does little to address issues that are behind the behaviors, such as a culturally imbedded approach to friendship and attachment. Goals for interpersonal learning and understanding as these relate to friendship and attachment behaviors may be achieved by exposing aggressive girls to mentors from backgrounds similar to theirs. Mentoring has been used successfully by Dr. Cheryl Dellasega in her Club Ophelia™ and Camp Ophelia™ programs ([www.clubophelia.com](http://www.clubophelia.com)). Culturally congruent mentors provide identification and a reality-based example of building attachments and friendships within the parameters of the girls' worldview.

Girls who express their aggression toward other girls in overt, physical ways, even though they may not see themselves as marginalized, are a vulnerable population who need advocacy. Nurses are in position to serve as advocates. They need to evaluate risk factors and challenges that occur in the girls' life situations and environments. Nurses must provide protective factors for each risk or challenge. They also need to facilitate girls' connections and friendships with one another. Girls need help to affirm

their identity and to recognize that there are more aspects to their individual self beyond being a fighter.

Nurses can support girls in learning new interpretations, skills, and values to cope with a lifeworld that is hostile or unstable. The girls in this study described challenges such as unpredictable others, mistrust, lack of power and control, and instability in their life circumstances. Before girls can change girl-to-girl aggression, they must feel protected and comfortable in their own world. Efforts to deal with unstable life circumstances will need the collaboration of community agencies, which nurses may help to engage. For the girls themselves, nurses must turn attention to building trust and gathering data about each girl's vulnerabilities and risks. Protective elements may include behaviors such as helping girls reframe situations and identity alternate points of view. Girls may benefit from discussion of trust and how to recognize trust-worthy people.

Nurses should begin by focusing on girls' family relationships as a reference point for trust. Girls in this study commented on their bonds with family members and that one of the things that hurt them the most was when someone criticized their family members. Girls valued their families and all spoke about "family", even when family was a foster family. In many cases, girls spoke of feelings toward friends and family as being the same. Girls stated, "My friends are like family." Even in cases of nontraditional or fractured families, family is nonetheless the common denominator of one's first attachment experience. Family may represent the euphemism for whoever is a close or significant other in a girl's life situation. Nurses must proceed from the perspective that every child needs someone who is absolutely crazy about her, and proceed to find that

person. Girls' relationships with each other need the model of a primary caring relationship.

Results from Werner and Smith's (1992) classic study of resilience in children growing up with numerous risk factors illustrated the importance of a supportive person in a child's life. A significant other in each girl's attachment experience needs to be brought forward to provide greater understanding of that girl's trust and attachment issues amidst behaviors of girl-to-girl aggression. Using concrete examples from close relationships with significant others will provide a strong anchor in girls' own reality structure for building trust in relationships with other girls. In this situation, the mentor role again appears highly influential. Exposure to exercises in trust building also may be helpful.

Helping girls recognize and value personal power is an important concept that nurses can introduce. Power is aligned with freedom and nurses can discuss with girls the freedom that they have to choose within the fields available to them. Freedom provides the structure for the girls' life-world. Although their world may seem full of barriers and ways that they are marginalized, these are arranged by freedom and can be overcome. Nurses can help girls to recognize the freedom that is available to them in family, friendships, and in their interaction styles. In accord with Merleau-Ponty's (1958) reflections on freedom, there are no restrictions on the meanings of freedom as connection to their world because they are not restricted in the world. Girls are open to the world and have all that they need to transcend themselves. Their choices and actions do not restrict them, but instead allow them to transcend.

The study findings show that girls dealing with girl-to-girl aggression, regardless of being out of the mainstream population of girls, experienced having the same needs inside as other girls, such as desire for attachment and friendship. Therefore, nurses should incorporate this factor into their strategies of care, and avoid stereotyping girls who are out of the mainstream. Nurses should appeal to the normal developmental needs of girls in this age group, while attending to the provision of protective factors.

The role of friendship in girls' experience is powerful and should be included in nursing interventions aimed at neutralizing aggressive or uncomfortable reactions between girls. Nurses can use friendship as an anchoring point in helping girls to reach out to each other and form relationships. Activities suggested by Dr. Cheryl Dellasega for Camp and Club Ophelia programs ([www.clubophelia.com](http://www.clubophelia.com)) are good resources. Group work with girls in a mainstream school setting that allows a mixture of girls with and without behavior problems provides a balanced perspective. One of the healing factors of group participation is the realization of the universality of one's experience (Yalom, 1995). As shown by the girls in the study, the common denominator, regardless of being out of the mainstream, is desire for attachment and friendship. This is a relevant starting point that facilitates trust and cohesion for group work. In time, the focus can shift to discussion and problem solving in regard to unique threats and challenges among girls experiencing girl-to-girl aggression.

These interventions all serve to reduce the challenges and risk situations that the girls in this study identified as part of their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. The strategies also promote protective factors in the form of trust, family, power, and friendship. Within the context of these changes to their life-world, the girls may see

themselves from a different perspective. They may be able to perceive a lived time that includes a future that is open to hope, promise, and excitement. Once these goals are achieved, girls may experience freedom to change their aggressive relating with other girls.

Additional nursing research on girl-to-girl aggression in marginalized groups of girls is necessary. In particular, the idea of attachment as an underlying dynamic in girl-to-girl aggression should be explored. Comparisons of experiences related to both aggression and attachment in girls in different types of marginalized groups would add to understanding the challenges and risks as perceived by girls. Other marginalized groups might include pregnant, unwed girls, girls who have a lesbian sexual identity and girls who are physically or mentally challenged. Continued research on girl-to-girl aggression by nurses will provide additional evidence to guide nursing practice in care of adolescent girls. Nurses are close to the pulse of adolescent health, as they work with adolescents in primary care situations. Nurses also care for adolescents in crisis, such as self-mutilation, substance abuse, or suicidal behaviors. The core denominator in many teen crises is a relational issue or problem. In such cases, nurses need the supportive evidence from research on girl-to-girl aggression to assist in understanding dynamics of girls' behavior and choosing useful strategies of care. Additional research should include girls from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

The findings from this study demonstrate that for girls from a marginalized group attending an alternative school, the experience of girl-to-girl aggression is deeply entwined with the risks and challenges inherent in their life circumstances. Yet, their

experience also reveals that they have similar needs and desires for attachment and friendship as those of other girls. Further research should explore the derivation of discrete strategies and subsequent application of the suggested strategies in order to evaluate the effect in altering girls' experience of girl-to-girl aggression, and ultimately, the outcomes for the girls and women.

Girl-to-girl aggression has become a significant area of interest in the media and in popular literature. While it is important to recognize harmful relational behaviors, care must be taken to avoid labeling adolescent girls as "mean" or hateful. Adolescence is a time of tremendous growth, change, and learning. One of the key learning areas is relationship skills and socially acceptable behavior. In the phenomenon of group identity and belonging that is so essential to adolescent growth, there is a strong possibility for adolescents to assimilate the behaviors of their peer group. As shown with adolescent girls, the adoption of mean behaviors by a group may turn ugly and unwieldy. Further research is needed on strategies for coalition building among girls that accentuates positive relationships. Investigation of mechanisms to facilitate appraising, interpreting and responding to social interactions may also be appropriate. Research that investigates the use of group process for learning and practicing these topics is indicated.

Research related to girls' friendships would add to the understanding of connection and attachment that seem to be embedded in girl-to-girl aggression. Friendship as a factor in preventing early sexual relations also presents as a related topic for research. Exploration of the role of culturally congruent mentors working with girls in marginalized situations also needs further research.

### Limitations of the Study

The participants in this study represented a small sample of girls who were from a marginalized group in the sense that they were enrolled in an alternative school. From this perspective, the experience of girl-to-girl aggression as described may be specific only to girls in their circumstances; however, the girls did not think of themselves as marginalized. The participants were from diverse cultural backgrounds, which adds to the relevance of the findings among a wider population of girls. The wide age range of the participants in the study is a limitation, as the girls represented variations in their developmental issues. Another limitation of the study is the amount of time the researcher was able to spend at the school. While the researcher gained immersion in the school by visiting weekly for several hours over four months, consistent daily observation would have supplemented the data. The study results are an effective portrayal of the world as experienced by the participants. The researcher encouraged participants to amplify and clarify throughout data collection. Emerging themes were verified with participants in the summary interview to check for validity. Girls' responses were integrated into the final analysis and interpretation of the data.

### Summary

The girls who participated in this study represent a vulnerable population with some unique problems and needs relative to their daily life challenges and their experience of girl-to-girl aggression. There is need for a balanced approach in working with them. Strategies need to integrate protective factors and trust, while urging healthy relational skills, and encouraging freedom, identity development, and future orientation. Consideration of the girls' cultural context and the meaning of aggression based on



background must be respected and integrated into approaches for girls' attachment and friendship needs. The interventions suggested provide beginning frameworks around which nurses and community health providers may approach issues of girl-to-girl aggression for girls in this type of marginalized situation.

A popular song by Martina McBride (2003), *This One's for the Girls*, captures something of the meaning structure of girl-to-girl aggression described by the girls in this study. The lyrics proclaim that girls are the same inside, which may be interpreted as the search for connection. The song lyrics also reflect girls' situatedness in their life-world as freedom to love, to dream, to wish, to stand their ground, to be beautiful the way they are, just to "be", all options that may be integrated into girls' lives to help promote connection and perhaps neutralize girl-to-girl aggression.

This is for all you girls about thirteen.

High school can be so rough, can be so mean.

Hold onto, onto your innocence

Stand your ground when everybody's giving in

This one's for the girls

Who've ever had a broken heart

Who've wished upon a shooting star

You're beautiful the way you are

This one's for the girls

Who love without holding back

Who dream with everything they have

All around the world

This one's for the girls

Yeah we're all the same inside

From one to ninety-nine

This one's for the girls.

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APPENDIX A:  
LETTER TO SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

December 26, 2004

Clinical Coordinator  
Alternative School  
Central Pennsylvania

Dear Clinical Coordinator,

A few weeks ago I spoke with you about the dissertation research that I plan to conduct for completion of my PhD degree in nursing at Penn State University. Dr. Cheryl Dellasega is on my dissertation committee and had suggested that I contact you about interviewing girls at your alternative school.

The research that I will be conducting is a qualitative study titled, "The experience of girl to girl aggression in adolescent girls in marginalized groups". The study involves one or two individual interviews of female students. The period for data collection will probably extend over several months, depending on the response to recruitment.

The process that I would like to follow in recruitment of participants is as follows:

- Send explanatory letters to parents/guardians of female students who have been referred due to aggressive behavior. The proposed letter is included for your information as a separate attachment with this document. It may not be circulated to parents until the dissertation proposal has been approved by the PSU Institutional Review Board. The parents will be asked for consent for their daughter to participate in the study. Consent forms will be provided with each letter.
- Arrange a time to meet briefly with students who have consent for participation from a parent. At that time I will explain the study and request assent from girls who are willing to participate in the study. An assent for participation in research must be received from each participant.

I will include girls in the study as their consents and assents are received. Most likely I will need about ten participants. The final number of participants will be determined based on saturation of the data, which refers to the point at which no new data are revealed in interviews. The process of data collection will not infringe on class time. However, I would like to be able to interview the participants during any unscheduled period in their school day.

Please advise me in writing whether I may proceed with this plan to enter the alternative school for data collection. The dissertation proposal will be submitted for approval

through the PSU Institutional Review Board. I will include your permission letter with my proposal to the PSU Institutional Review Board.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at my office at Moravian College (610) 625-7766 or by e-mail at [adamshp@moravian.edu](mailto:adamshp@moravian.edu). I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Best regards,

Pamela Adamshick, PhD(c) MSN, APRN, BC  
Pennsylvania State University  
Nursing Doctoral Student

APPENDIX B:  
LETTER TO PARENTS

**Dissertation Proposal: “The experience of girl to girl aggression in adolescent girls in  
marginalized groups”**  
*IRB #20332*

January, 2006

Dear Parent or Guardian,

This letter is an invitation for your daughter to participate in a research study at the alternative school. I am doing the study to finish my PhD degree in Nursing from Pennsylvania State University. I am allowed entrance into the school to do the study. The PSU Institutional Review Board has approved the study.

The purpose of the study is to gain better understanding of teenage girls’ aggression toward each other. The study will ask about physical fights between girls. The study will also ask about types of aggression that create “girl drama”. These quietly aggressive behaviors include starting rumors or gossip, refusing to talk to a girl, excluding someone, or giving mean looks, stares, and other negative body language. The study participants are girls, age 12-17 years. The study requires two individual interviews. Each interview lasts about 1 hour. Participants will also do self-tapings (recordings) each week. Self-tapings will take about 15 minutes each week for 2 months. The study will start later this spring.

I will conduct the interviews at school, in a private area. Participants will make their self-tapings in a private conference room at the school. The Clinical Coordinator will assist with the self-taping process. I will not use the participants’ names in the study findings. I will keep the participants’ names confidential. I will assign a code number to each participant as I collect and transcribe the data. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions. They may quit the study at any time.

If you are willing to permit your daughter’s participation in this research, please read, sign, and return one copy of the attached “**Informed Consent**”. The second copy is for your records. Your daughter also will sign an “**Informed Assent**” at the time of the interview, if she is willing to participate in the study.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this letter. Your daughter’s participation in the study will help nurses gain knowledge about girls’ aggression. The findings will show themes in teenage girls’ aggression to each other. The study may shed light on ways to stop “girl drama” and other types of girls’ aggression.

Feel free to contact me if you want more information about the study. My phone and e-mail are on the consent form.

Best regards,

Pamela Adamshick, PhD (c ), MSN, APRN, BC  
Pennsylvania State University  
Nursing Doctoral Student

APPENDIX C:  
CHILD ASSENT AND PARENTAL CONSENT

**ORP USE ONLY: IRB# 20332 Doc. #1**  
 The Pennsylvania State University  
 Office for Research Protections  
 Approval Date: 02/16/06 T. Kahler  
 Expiration Date: 02/15/07 T. Kahler  
 Social Science Institutional Review  
 Board

## INFORMED ASSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University - *Child Assent Form*

**Title of Project:** The Lived Experience of Girl-to-Girl Aggression

**Principal Investigator:** Pamela Adamshick, MSN, APRN, BC  
 Graduate Program The Penn State University School of Nursing  
 600 Centerview Drive 1300ASB/A110, Hershey, PA 17033  
 610-625-7766; [Pia1@psu.edu](mailto:Pia1@psu.edu)

**Advisor:** Dr. Judith Hupcey, RN, Ed.D.  
 Graduate Program The Penn State University School of Nursing  
 600 Centerview Drive 1300ASB/A110, Hershey, PA 17033  
 717-531-4211; [jxh37@psu.edu](mailto:jxh37@psu.edu)

**1. Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to understand teen-age girls' aggression to each other. Aggression includes physical fights. Other types of aggression are making mean comments or starting a rumor about someone. It can be talking about someone behind her back, keeping someone out of a group, and giving someone disapproving body language or stares. Sometimes these interactions between girls are called "girl drama". The study will give ideas about how nurses can stop the "girl drama" between girls. I hope to help girls understand different ways to get along with each other.

**2. Procedures to be followed:** I will interview you. I will ask questions about your experiences and feelings in your friendships with other girls. I will interview you at school in a private room. The interview will last about 1 hour. I will tape-record the interview. You will also make private tape recordings. You will do this each week for the two months after the study begins. These recordings will take 10 or 15 minutes each week. You will go to a private room at school. In these recordings, you will describe any "girl drama" that you are having with your girl friends. You will get the recorder and your own private tape from the clinical coordinator. You will meet with me again after two months for a second interview. We will talk about the findings from the interviews. We will talk about your tape recordings.

**3. Discomforts and Risks:** There is little danger to you in this study. Some of the questions ask you to remember experiences and feelings about getting along with friends. Sometimes people get uncomfortable when they remember some events. In that case, some feelings may bother you. There is a small chance that this may happen to you. However, you do not have to tell me anything that you do not feel comfortable telling me. If you become very upset, counseling is available.

**4. Benefits:** You might learn more about yourself. Sometimes talking about experiences with someone helps a person to sort out things. You might find that other teenage girls have the same experiences. You might feel better about yourself by being in the study. People will have a better



understanding of the whole experience of “girl drama”. Nurses will gain new ideas about how to intervene in “girl drama”. We may learn about ways to decrease girls’ aggression to each other.

**5. Duration/Time:** You will spend about 2 hours for the interviews. You will spend about 15 minutes each week making a self-recording about your experiences of “girl drama”. You will do this for about 2 months.

**6. Statement of Confidentiality:** Only the person in charge and Ms. Stalnecker will know who is in the study. I will use code numbers to label the tape recordings. I will lock the tape recordings in a cabinet in my office. Besides me, my advisor and the typist may listen to the tape recordings. The clinical coordinator will collect your self-tapings. The tapes will be in a locked box. She will not be able to listen to the tapes.

The information you tell me is confidential. There are some limits on what can be kept confidential. I must report the following to the proper people:

- Suicidal thoughts, aims, or plan
- Homicidal thoughts, aims, or plan, or past admission of involvement with homicide
- Child abuse or reason to believe that child abuse/neglect is happening
- Use of drugs or alcohol

I will destroy the tapes after I go over the findings. This will be no later than 2010. The following may review and copy records related to this research: The Office of Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; The Penn State University Social Science Institutional Review Board (IRB); The Penn State University Office for Research Protections (ORP).

**7. Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about this research. Contact Pamela Adamshick at 610-625-7766 with questions. You can reach me by pager anytime at 610-606-4194. If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

**8. Compensation:** You will get a \$10.00 gift card that can be used at a bookstore.

**9. Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is your choice. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

If you are under 18 years of age and agree to be in this study with your parent’s consent, please sign your name below that you agree to be in the study.

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated assent form.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

**ORP USE ONLY: IRB# 20332 Doc.  
#2**  
 The Pennsylvania State University  
 Office for Research Protections  
 Approval Date: 02/16/06 T. Kahler  
 Expiration Date: 02/15/07 T. Kahler  
 Social Science Institutional Review

## **INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**

The Pennsylvania State University - *Parental Consent Form*

**Title of Project:** The Lived Experience of Girl-to-Girl Aggression

**Principal Investigator:** Pamela Adamshick, MSN, APRN, BC  
 Graduate Program  
 The Penn State University School of Nursing  
 600 Centerview Drive 1300ASB/A110, Hershey, PA 17033  
 610-625-7766; [Pia1@psu.edu](mailto:Pia1@psu.edu)

**Advisor:** Dr. Judith Hupcey, RN, Ed.D.  
 Graduate Program  
 The Penn State University School of Nursing  
 600 Centerview Drive 1300ASB/A110, Hershey, PA 17033  
 717-531-4211; [jxh37@psu.edu](mailto:jxh37@psu.edu)

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to gain better understanding of teen-age girls' aggression to each other. Aggression includes things such as physical fighting. Other types of aggression are making mean comments (written or spoken), starting a rumor or gossip about someone, talking about someone behind her back, excluding someone from a group, and giving someone negative body language or stares. Sometimes these interactions between girls are called "girl drama". The study will suggest ideas on how nurses can stop the "girl drama" between girls. I hope to help girls understand different ways to get along with each other.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** I will interview your daughter. I will ask questions about her experiences and feelings in her friendships with other girls. I will conduct the interview at school in a private room. The interview will last about 1 hour. I will tape-record the interview. Your daughter will also make private tape recordings. She will do this each week for the two months after the study begins. These recordings will take 10 or 15 minutes each week. She will go to a private conference room at school. In these recordings, your daughter will describe any "girl drama" that she is having with her girl friends. Your daughter will get the recorder and her own private tape from the clinical coordinator, Ms. Deirdre Stalnecker. Your daughter will meet with me again after two months for a second interview. We will discuss the findings from the interviews. We will discuss her tape recordings.

3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There is little risk to your daughter in this study. Some of the questions ask her to recall experiences and feelings about getting along with friends. Sometimes people get embarrassed or uncomfortable when they remember some events. In that case, some emotions may develop. There is a small risk that this may happen to your daughter. However, she does not have to tell me anything that she does not feel comfortable telling me. If your daughter has an intense emotional reaction that causes great distress, counseling is available.
4. **Benefits:** Your daughter might learn more about herself and how you she interacts with others. Sometimes talking about experiences and feelings with someone helps a person to sort things out. It may help the person look at them in a different way. She might find that other teenage girls have the same experiences. She might feel a higher self-esteem from contributing to the study.

Society will have a better understanding of the whole experience of “girl drama”. Health care providers will gain new ideas about how to intervene in “girl drama”. We may learn about ways to decrease girls’ aggression to each other.

5. **Duration/Time:** Your daughter will spend about 2 hours for the interviews. The first and second interviews will last about one hour each. Your daughter will spend about 15 minutes each week making a self-recording about her experiences of “girl drama”. This will occur for a period of about 2 months as stated above.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Only the person in charge and the clinical coordinator will know who is participating in the study. I will use code numbers, never a person’s own name, to label the tape recordings. I will lock the tape recordings in a file cabinet in my office. Only the typist, my advisor, and I will listen to the tape recordings. The clinical coordinator will collect the girls’ self-tapings. The tapes will be in a locked box. She will not be able to listen to the tapes. Publication or presentations of the study findings will not include any personally identifiable information. The following may review and copy records related to this research: The Office of Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; The Penn State University Social Science Institutional Review Board (IRB); The Penn State University Office for Research Protections (ORP).

The information in the interviews and in your daughter’s personal tape recordings is confidential. Some circumstances may place limitations on confidentiality. Specifically, I am required to report the following to the appropriate authorities:

- Suicidal thoughts, intent, or plan
- Homicidal thoughts, intent, or plan, or past admission of involvement with homicide
- Any admission of child abuse or reason to believe that child abuse/neglect is occurring
- Use of drugs or alcohol

I will destroy the tapes after I summarize the findings. This will be no later than 2010.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about this research. Contact Pamela Adamshick at 610-625-7766 with questions. She is also available by pager on a 24-hour basis at 610-606-4194. If you have questions about your daughter's rights as a research participant, contact The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.
8. **Compensation:** Your daughter will receive a \$10.00 gift card that can be used at a bookstore.
9. **Voluntary Participation:** Your daughter's decision to be in this research is voluntary. She can stop at any time. She does not have to answer any questions she does not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent for your child to take part in this research study. If you agree that your child may take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form for your records.

I give permission for my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in this research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX D:  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

**The Pennsylvania State University  
College of Health and Human Development**

**Dissertation Proposal: “The experience of girl to girl aggression in adolescent girls  
in marginalized groups”**

*IRB #20332*

**Interview Guide**

An introduction will be offered as follows:

We are here to talk about how girls interact with each other. Often girls of your age get caught up in “girl drama”. Sometimes there is physical fighting or sometimes it is other types of quieter aggression like name-calling and talking behind the back, starting rumors, excluding a girl from a group, things like that. Maybe girls write nasty notes or give stares or negative body language to another girl. What happens when girls don’t get along? What is that experience of “girl drama” all about? I am interested in your particular experiences with what happens when girls don’t get along.

Think about your friendships and interactions with other girls. It may be helpful to think about a particular friendship as a way to get started. What happens when you don’t get along with your girl friends?

The interviewer will then proceed with these general guide questions, with probes added as needed:

- Describe how you interact with a girl friend when you are getting along well. What is that like for you?
- To what degree do you feel accepted in your friendships with other girls?
- When you are not getting along with other girls, what is that like? How does it get started? How does it get resolved?
- Did you ever feel you were picked on by other girls? What was that like for you?
- Has there ever been a time when you experienced “girl drama” in your friendships with other girls? What was that like?
- What actions come into play when you and other girls are having a conflict or are not getting along? Is there physical fighting? What other types of things happen? What is that like for you? How do you feel about the things that happen?
- How safe do you feel in your friendships with other girls?
- How do you feel about being popular or unpopular?
- How satisfied are you about your relationships with other girls?

APPENDIX E:  
INSTRUCTIONS ON SELF-TAPING

**The Pennsylvania State University  
College of Health and Human Development**

**Dissertation Proposal: “The experience of girl to girl aggression in adolescent girls  
in marginalized groups”**

**Instructions to Participants for Self-Tape Recording**

For the next couple of months, until we meet for our second interview, I would like you to use an audio tape recorder that will be kept at the school in the following manner:

- 1) At the end of each week, you will go to the office of the clinical coordinator and request to use the tape recorder and a new tape.
- 2) You will be given a private place to record onto the audio tape. You should record your reflections (thoughts and feelings) on any aggressive experiences or “girl drama” that you have had that week with your female peers.
- 3) If you have an aggressive incident with a female peer during the week and you wish to record your immediate thoughts and feelings about the experience, you may go to the clinical coordinator and request to use the recorder in private at that time. You will receive a new tape for each recording.
- 4) Write your name in pencil on the tape and return the tape and the recorder to the clinical coordinator when you have finished taping. You will put the tape into a lock box in the clinical coordinator’s office.
- 5) I will listen to the tapes each week in private. Your name will be removed from the outside of the tape prior to the tape being transcribed by the transcriptionist. When you and I meet for a follow-up interview, we will include your self-tapings as part of the data that contributed to themes about girl-to-girl aggression.



APPENDIX F:  
INSTRUCTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS FOR FINDING  
ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF  
GIRL-TO-GIRL AGGRESSION

**The Pennsylvania State University  
College of Health and Human Development**

**Dissertation Proposal: “The lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression”**

***Instructions to participants for finding artistic representations of girl-to-girl aggression***

For the next couple of months, I would like you to continue to think about what it is like for you to experience girl-to-girl aggression.

Make the weekly self-recordings by going to the clinical coordinator for the supplies.

Also, please look for something artistic, such as a poem, a story, a picture, a piece of art work, or a movie or TV program that shows or gets in touch with what you feel about the experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

Write a few sentences, or more, explaining why you chose the artistic piece that you chose. Explain how the art relates to your experience of girl-to-girl aggression.

You may submit your written comments in one of two ways:

- into the locked box with your self-taping (put your name on your paper) OR
- bring your written comments to our second interview

If possible, submit the art work (if it is a poem, story, or picture) with your written comments.

Thank you! ☺

APPENDIX G:  
READINGS TO WHICH PARTICIPANTS RESPONDED

**The Pennsylvania State University  
College of Health and Human Development**

**Dissertation Proposal: “The lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression”**

**Dellasega, C. & Nixon, C. (2003). *Girl Wars: Twelve strategies that will end female bullying***

I AM.....

“I got elected to be the freshman representative to our dance team even though I wasn’t the most girl in my class. One day totally out of the blue, a girl who was jealous of this yelled at me from across the hall at school, ‘Hey, Sarah, come here!’ So I go over there and she says she heard that I wanted her boyfriend. My friend, who was with me, just kind of snapped at her, ‘You have a boyfriend?’

It was funny, but it didn’t exactly help the situation. I said, ‘I don’t even know who your boyfriend is. Besides, I gotta go to class.’ I walked away and just let her stand there. She sent someone after me into my classroom with a note saying to meet her at the door after class. I wasn’t too worried, but just to be safe I told the teacher. I wanted to make sure someone knew, so I wouldn’t get in any trouble if things heated up. The teacher advised me to stick close to my friends for a while, when I was in the hallway or in the bathroom.

This went on for several days. After every lunch there she was, threatening to beat me up. And every day I told the teacher.

One day she said, ‘I heard you are trashing me, that’s what Linda said.’

‘Well, let’s go get Linda and talk to her about it,’ I responded.

‘No!’ she yelled. ‘I want to settle this right here and right now!’ I wouldn’t give in, so she yelled, ‘Who the f---- do you think you are?’

I calmly responded, ‘I am Sarah Wyse and who are you?’ and then I walked away.

She wanted to beat me up physically, but my words and passive reaction stopped her. The teacher I had kept informed had sent an anonymous referral to the guidance counselor and obviously it worked!” (p. 69-70)

---Sarah Annamarie Wyse, age 15, Michigan

**ON AGAIN/OFF AGAIN**

“Ann was my best friend at the beginning of the year. We had the same classes and walked together all the time. One day I noticed she was ignoring me, so I asked her if something was wrong. She just shook her head but kept ignoring me. Finally I asked her why she was mad. I couldn’t remember doing anything mean to her, so I was totally confused.

She told me someone had told her I was saying mean things behind her back. She wouldn’t tell me who it was, but obviously it was someone convincing. Although I hadn’t done anything wrong, I apologized because she meant a lot to me. I didn’t have many friends, and I couldn’t afford to lose her.

We were best friends again until a month later, when it happened again. Now I knew she was mad at me, but again, I had done nothing wrong. I tried to stay strong and not apologize, but I just couldn't. So again I apologized, and we went back to being best friends.

On the last day of school, she totally ignored me again! Some of my other friends got the inside scoop and told me what was going on with her: she was badmouthing me. During the summer I was kind of doing my own thing and not talking to her until she started talking to me on the Internet. She was being nice, but I could feel something wasn't right. I went along with it because I'm not the kind of person who stays mad. We were still talking a little bit until she sent a message to her whole buddy list saying not to talk to me because I am a disgrace to this earth. That got me really fired up, so I confronted her.

She is a bad liar. First she tried telling me that she got it off an e-mail and just had to send it on. Then she denied even telling me that and changed the story completely. By that point I hated her.

Luckily, I had friends who told me to forget about her and that what she was saying wasn't true. In a situation like this, it is best to find out who your real friends are and stick with them." (p. 27-28)

---Hilary, a teen

## WORD WARS

"Why are girls mean to girls? My mother told me they were jealous, my father told me they were simply mean, my oldest sister told me that's the way girls act, and my other sister just shrugged and said it happened to her too. None of this took away the pain of irreversible wounds. When boys are angry, they get physical, sometimes causing bruises or broken bones, but words are the most dangerous weapons. They sting, they last, and girls seem to have a way with words that are more vicious and attack the inner self.

She was my best friend of five years. I considered her my sister, loved her more than life itself. We promised to be friends forever and mixed our blood to seal the promise, but I drifted into honors classes as she drifted into mainstream. We made new friends and saw less and less of each other. There was not a fateful day, not final fight that I can recall.

'The most beautiful discovery that true friends can make is that they can grow separately without growing apart', or so I thought. One day I e-mailed her: 'I love you.' In bold letters I got back a letter declaring our friendship in the past.

Tears have never felt so hot nor pain so raw. Life changed. Her words didn't just hit a nerve; they traveled into my bloodstream and flowed throughout. My heart is what hurt the most, but the worst pain was still to come. The rumors were yet to be spread.

Another girl, who was a friend to us both, sent me the cruelest message I have ever received. Littered with four-letter words, her message told me I didn't have a right to live and said she would see to it I didn't. The threats hurt, but the most painful part said I had never been a good friend to either her or my best friend.

My parents saw the threatening mail and burst at the seams. My Dad wanted to go to the police; my mom wanted to call her house. I just wanted a hug. In the end my mom called

her mom, and eventually I got an apology, but it didn't mean anything. Words are not erasable. You can't say them and then forget. To this day, I don't know what happened. I pass them in the hall, I see their smiles, and I fade away, into that oblivion that they have destined for me.

I don't know why girls hurt girls. I do know that I have been punched in the face, kicked in the leg, I have even withstood heart surgery, but nothing has been so painful as losing a best friend, a sister, my better half....all over words." (p. 11-13)

---Danielle Siegel, age 18, New York

## BEST FRIENDS

"Through my eyes, Lauren was my best friend. I loved her as much as a friend could ever love her best friend. We did everything together, and I told her everything.

The summer before ninth grade, Lauren invited me to go to the mall with her and a few other friends from school. I was so excited, I called off work and woke up early. She told me that she would call before she came to get me. Around noon I started to worry that she had never called. I thought she may have been running a little late, so I called her. To my surprise her father answered and notified me that she had already left for the mall.

I was so mad. When I confronted her, her response was, "You were never invited anyway."

Episodes like that happened all the time; to me that was just how Lauren was. After every little incident, I just shoved it in the back of my mind, thinking nothing of it. A few weeks into the school year, a very personal secret was being passed around my school, a secret that only my best friend would have known. I was so hurt to find out she was talking about me and also to know that this wasn't the first time. When I confronted her, her response was that she had never told anyone, but I knew she was lying. After that, I lost all respect for her.

I figured out that friends don't hurt each other. I never thought our friendship would end, especially like that." (p. 121-122)

---Sarah, age 15, Pennsylvania

## HARD FRIENDS

"Last year I was really good friends with this one girl. She would write nasty notes and swear at me when we were mad, but then we would always patch up. This year things got kind of weird. First, her and her practically assistant made this singing/dancing group and kicked me out. Then they made up code names that ended with the word 'gum' for people they hated, and mine was 'Orange Gum!' At first I thought my friend was being mean because I was one of the fastest, strongest girls in my class and the other girl (who was new this year) was one of the fastest girls at her old school and thought she would be here too. Clue: They each promised to hate the person the other one did. Fact: That's not a good promise. Advice: When girls call you a bad name you never heard before, such as 'tutor freak,' say something like, 'That is so creative! That's not on the list of bad names! How do you spell that? Is it two words or one?'" (p. 119-120)

----M. L., age 10, Pennsylvania

## CONTESTANTS

“Upon turning eleven, I entreated my mother to purchase a subscription to *Fashion Magazine X*, believing that it would be a superb initiation into the sophisticated teenage world of which I was soon to become a member. I anxiously awaited its arrival in my mailbox each month, at which time I would assiduously labor at attempting to collect the pearls of wisdom encrypted in its pages. Eventually I had a proverbial necklace of knowledge, all acquired from the magazine. Among the pearls on the strand were articles like, “How to get noticed at a party” and “How to get his attention: 10 great beauty tips that really work!” with the occasional “All about the rivalry between generic female pop star Y and generic female pop star Z” thrown in for variety. Whether their content comprised beauty tips relating to standing out or instructions on how to “walk sexy and get seen first,” there was one key teenage girl concept I acquired an understanding of from reading the articles. This key concept was that, regardless of what else I would ever be preoccupied with, I would always inexorably be a contestant in a perpetual beauty contest, vying for the approval attention of a male judge. As I understood it, this facet of female existence was inescapable, as it was the greatest determinant of one’s worth. It therefore became necessary to do all I could, utilizing makeup, diet tips, and anything else which would aid my place as number one in the lifelong contest. I soon stumbled upon another invaluable piece of knowledge: if the postulate that life was a perpetual beauty contest was true, then it logically held true that every girl, everywhere, was my competitor. Every female I met was a prospective thief of my sash bearing the number one. This idea carried great significance, because it meant that I could never have a truly profound relationship with any girl, no matter how lovely she, her slip dress, or her makeup were. For regardless of how brightly they smile at one another or how frequently they embrace, everyone knows that the contestants are all secretly plotting to procure the coveted tiara.” (p. 35-37)

---Miriam Firunts, age 15, California

## DIFFERENT

“When black girls hurt black girls with words, they are striking out at the dark face that haunts their mirror, the specter that terrorizes them day in and day out.

*Ugly.* You ain’t got no alibi. You ugly. I said. You ugly.

To be black and female in America is to be painfully invisible and undeniably exploited. And so the black girl suffers her blackness; she suffers her femininity. She sees other black girls as viable victims when she seeks to cast out her pain, because she has been conditioned to believe that black girls are worthless and negligible. When black girls hurt black girls with words, they are demonstrating what years of internalized racism have done to the most vulnerable members of a minority group.

She ain’t cute. She ain’t nothing. She black as tar. Her nose big. Her hair nappy.

In Cleveland, just a few years back, a girl stabbed another girl to death on her front lawn for taunting her about her ‘nappy’ hair. Both girls were thirteen or fourteen years old, obviously inculcated with the mythology of ‘good hair’ that is sadly pervasive in black

culture. The finer texture of hair, too many blacks believe, the more attractive its owner. The outraged ‘killer’ was probably pushed over some psychological edge by her classmate’s teasing. Perhaps she thought that killing the girl would destroy the idea that she was not beautiful and never would be. Who knows what she was thinking when she strode down the street with a knife in her hand?

I can’t stand her. She thinks she cute. Forget her. She ain’t nobody.

When black girls hurt black girls with words, we must do more than shake our heads and label it a shame. In Toni Morrison’s *The bluest eye*, the author shows us, through stunning prose, how the destruction of one little black girl is really a reflection of a larger, insidious decaying of society.

Black women and men need to examine the ways in which they are complicit in helping to make their daughters victims by perpetuating the self-hatred bred by slavery, economic and class divisions within the black community, and the mindless internalization of white conceptions of black history and culture.

We all need to know that when black girls hurt black girls, they inflict wounds that leave scars, and understand that the hurts of the individual resonate powerfully in her world, spreading her pain.” (p. 37-39)

---Michelle R. Smith, Ohio

## FRESH START

“The first year in high school was a year of lessons in life and friendship. When we started our classes, I was pretty uncomfortable, since I was the only one among my group of friends in that class. Then Sandy approached me and we became good friends.

One day she told me that she liked Matt, this guy in our class. Since the guy was my classmate, I tried hooking them up. All three of us became good friends and would always hang out together. Everything was great. When a row started between Matt and me, everything changed for the worst.

I started shouting at him, even though I knew it was wrong. When we patched things up, we found out that lies were told by Sandy to prevent us from being good friends again. He ignored her and started hanging with me and our other friends in the higher grades. Everyone blamed me for isolating Sandy and branded me a flirt.

I would go to school late and come home early every day to prevent them from harassing me. Days, weeks, maybe even months passed by without anyone talking to me. I was even afraid of going out of our room in fear that everyone would stare and laugh at me. I felt so depressed and alone. I often cried myself to sleep and wondered why it was happening to me. Most of the people I thought were my friends abandoned me. There were times when I would walk near her group of friends and they would start whispering, rolling their eyes, or saying rude things to me. There was even a point where I started thinking of killing myself.

My real friends gave me the courage to stand up for myself and stop caring what others thought of me. When they noticed that I never went out of our classroom, they asked me what was wrong. I thanked God for giving me friends that did not believe in rumors.

I learned that we must not judge people by how they look or act but by how they interact with you. We must not do the things we think are wrong for the sake of popularity. Also



that we must not do things we do not want done to us. And if, right now or in the future, this situation happens to you too, just remember to keep your head up high and go with the people that you can really count on. Their friendship will help you get through whatever you are going through.” (p. 52-53)

---L. M., age 13, Manila, Philippines

## WHISPERS

“My mother warned me! She said, ‘Mary, be careful of the he-said-she-said-whisper-in-your-ear people in life. You know the ones, they say things like, ‘Hey, Mary, did you hear about that...blah blah blah.....And oh, I thought you ought to know because....We are best friends after all, aren’t we?’

I didn’t really pay attention to her, but before long I found myself right in the middle of the he-said-she-said crowd, and I have to admit, I liked it. Being popular was fun!

I was surprised too. You would think something as important as becoming popular would take decades. But it didn’t!

Mom always said, ‘Things that are cheap and easy won’t take long. French fries take about a minute.’ I guess I forgot about that when I was trying to be cool.

Anyway, in about a week I sounded just like them, dressed like them, and fixed my hair like them. I was amazing! I was even starting to say the whisper-in-your-ear things.

Mom knew I was turning into one of them, but she let me try it for a while, to see how it felt. I knew deep inside that it never felt quite right to be talking about others in a whisper-in-your-ear sort of way. Besides, my real best friend, Melinda, said I was one of them now, not one of her. She said I sounded like them, looked like them, and even smelled like them!

She looked so sad too, when stupid Sally said I said nasty things about her, which I didn’t! But she says it’s too late, I must have, because all the kids knew her secret, and besides, I knew deep down inside I was guilty of something. I mean I did sound like, look like, and yes, even smell like them!

I didn’t know if being popular was worth it. Not if it hurt friends like Melinda.

When I finally told Mom what had happened, she just shook her head and said, ‘See, those are the he-said-she-said-whisper-in-your-ear ones I’m warning you about. People who throughout life you need to beware of, because they may act like, seem like---but I guarantee they aren’t---friends who care!’” (p. 58-59)

---Mary Louise Lynch Santacaterina, United Kingdom

## GIRLS HURT GIRLS

I started high school with a set of new people who were all strangers, except for Natalie and Claire, who were my closest friends at the time and not good ones at that. Natalie was the controller: she would decide who she wanted to be best friends with for a few days and then change her mind, constantly swapping between Claire and myself.

When I was chosen to sit next to Natalie, I did feel a twinge of guilt knowing Claire was being left out, but I didn’t dare speak out in case it would be me who was left out next. When that happened, it was awful. It hurt so much to have to sit behind them and listen to

their whispers and giggles. Soon I started to realize that I was obviously less desirable than Claire.

So the search began. I had to start by becoming friends with a different group of girls so I could hopefully forge a relationship with one of them as a best friend. I don't know where my need or desire to have one best friend came from, yet it was something that I just had to achieve.

Looking back, I do not understand why Claire or I put up with Natalie, yet we did. We each tried our hardest to win over the affections of Natalie so we would be the favorite of the week and not have to sit alone in classes. So before I had even finished my first year at high school, I experienced how other girls could hurt me." (p. 145-146)

---Shelly Baker, age 20, United Kingdom

**Karres, E.V.S. (2004). *Mean chicks, cliques, and dirty tricks*.**

FIRST PERSON: WHAT I REALIZED---A REAL LIFE STORY

"I remember when it started, me picking on this girl. It was the beginning of middle school, and this girl was one I couldn't stand. She was short but not too short, nor too tall. She had long black hair and she was skinny.

One time I poured some ice water on her T-shirt, and she had to stay at school with a wet T-shirt all day because she couldn't call home. Another time I put a toad frog down her pants. Once when we were in class I had to sit behind her, and I stuck some gum in her hair.

One day we went on a class trip to the skating rink, and I took a pair of skates and told her she could wear them. She didn't have much money, so I acted like I was helping her out.

But, see, the night before, I loosened the screws in the wheels on the skates. So when she started to skate, the wheels came off and she fell and busted her butt. She wasn't badly hurt, but she was hurting pretty badly. I felt sorry for doing that, and I apologized to her and told her to keep it quiet. But she didn't, and I got suspended from school for a week. Man, did my mom tear my backside up for days.

When I went back to school that next week, some of my friends told me that the girl's mother had just died and everybody was showing her sympathy.

But guess who wasn't showing her sympathy? Me.

Still I left her alone for two weeks. After that, she came up to me and said she wanted me to stop picking on her. Please! I said okay and she walked off, at which point I tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned around, I struck her in her face.

To my surprise, she hit me back. Both of us got into trouble for that, but I got in more because I threw the first lick. Plus, I hadn't realized how strong she had gotten over the years. Otherwise, I would have left her alone.

If I had, I'd still have my real front teeth in my mouth!" (p. 125-126)

---Rikki Lee, 15

THE POWER OF ONE

“When I first started middle school, other girls picked on me because of my size, just because I was a little bigger than they were. At that age, I didn’t know anything about wearing only the name-brand clothes or anything about the word ‘skinny.’ That was the last thing on my mind. I was just ready for recess so I could go outside and play with my friends. I don’t remember what I did to stand up for myself or how getting called names affected me mentally, but I will always remember the harsh words and I felt the emotional pain from it.

Today I know how to stand up for myself very well. I do not let things get to me as easily as I used to, and I do not give the smaller worries a bigger shadow. I try to be myself, and doing that has gotten me further than anything.

And I’m proud to say that my waist size has no effect on my self-esteem at all! Most important, I try to surround myself with girls who are positive and who set goals for themselves and their future. I think that’s the best way---keeping away from girls that say negative comments about others.

In the end, you learn to be an all-around nice person.” (p. 122)

---Shea, 16

## THE GOSSIP

“Being two-faced---that’s what I hate more than anything. But there’s this girl on my bus who acts so goody-goody. She starts talking to me and saying nice things. Then I hear from another friend what she says about me behind my back and the way she, like, runs me in the ground and calls me names and stuff. And before I know it, the fact that I stumbled gets twisted into me being ‘drunk.’ By lunch everybody is talking about it. That afternoon, girls I don’t even know whisper mean things about me. But whenever I confront the girl who started the rumor, she denies everything and acts so innocent, it kills me.” (p. 19)

---Dee Dee, 15

## Atwood, M. (1988). *Cat’s eye*

“I go out with boys. This is not part of a conscious plan, it just happens. My relationships with boys are effortless, which means that I put very little effort into them. It’s girls I feel awkward with, it’s girls I feel I have to defend myself against; not boys. I sit in my bedroom picking the pilly fuzballs off my lambswool sweaters and the phone will ring. It will be a boy. I take the sweater into the hall, where the phone is, and sit on the hall chair with the receiver cradled between my ear and shoulder and continue to pick off the fuzballs, while a long conversation goes on that is mostly silence.

Boys by nature require these silences; they must not be startled by too many words, spoken too quickly. What they actually say is not that important. The important parts exist in the silences between the words. I know what we’re both looking for, which is escape. They want to escape from adults and other boys, I want to escape from adults and other girls. We’re looking for desert islands, momentary, unreal, but there.” (p. 260)

**Kim, age 15, Warren, PA:**

**Nothing Girl**

Maybe I wear baggies  
and white socks with flip-flops,  
maybe I don't like listening to rave  
and I'm not on the social mountaintops  
maybe I don't care about the things that make your worlds twirl,  
maybe you look at me and think: Gee, what a nothing girl.

Maybe I like giving smiles  
which seems to be a sin today,  
and maybe I allow my imagination to sometimes run away,  
maybe you don't understand this and that's why you cannot see,  
if this makes me a nothing girl, then that's okay with me.

The world makes you believe  
your personality musn't be detected, and your face must be picture  
perfect.

Maybe I look at you and feel sorry that you are blind,  
robots you have become, yourself you'll never find.

God made you as well as me, this means I am something, the world  
is a liar  
and if I must be a nothing for you to see it, then so be it.

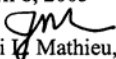
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Date: April 8, 2005  
From: Jodi  Mathieu, IRB Administrator  
To: Pamela Z. Adamshick  
Subject: Results of Review of Proposal – Full Review (IRB #20332)  
**Approval Expiration Date: February 16, 2006**  
“The Experience of Girl to Girl Aggression in Adolescent Girls in Marginalized Groups”

The Social Science Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved your proposal for use of human participants in your research. By accepting this decision, you agree to obtain prior approval from the IRB for any changes to your study. Unanticipated participant events that are encountered during the conduct of this research must be reported in a timely fashion.

**Enclosed is/are the dated, IRB-approved informed consent(s) to be used when recruiting participants for this research.** Participants must receive a copy of the approved informed consent form to keep for their records.

**If signed consent is obtained, the principal investigator is expected to maintain the original signed consent forms along with the IRB research records for this research at least three (3) years after termination of IRB approval. For projects that involve protected health information (PHI) and are regulated by HIPAA, records are to be maintained for six (6) years. The principal investigator must determine and adhere to additional requirements established by the FDA and any outside sponsors.**

**If this study will extend beyond the above noted approval expiration date, the principal investigator must submit a completed Continuing Progress Report to the Office for Research Protections (ORP) to request renewed approval for this research.**

On behalf of the IRB and the University, thank you for your efforts to conduct your research in compliance with the federal regulations that have been established for the protection of human participants.

JLM/slk  
Enclosure  
cc: Judith E. Hupcey

**Please Note:** The ORP encourages you to subscribe to the ORP listserv for protocol and research-related information. Send a blank email to: [L-ORP-Research-L-subscribe-request@lists.psu.edu](mailto:L-ORP-Research-L-subscribe-request@lists.psu.edu)

An Equal Opportunity University

January 13, 2005

Penn State Institutional Review Board  
c/o Pamela Adamshick  
Graduate Program  
The Penn State University School of Nursing  
600 Centerview Drive  
1300 ASB/A110  
Hershey, PA 17033

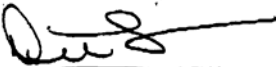
RE: Pamela Adamshick, MSN, APRN, BC

Dear Sirs and Madams,

Pamela Adamshick has requested the assistance of [REDACTED] in her proposed study on Relational Aggression. [REDACTED] is willing to cooperate with her efforts and her entry to select students from our population to act as consenting participants.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,



[REDACTED], LSW  
Clinical Coordinator

*"Centers for Innovative Learning"*

**Vita: PAMELA ZENZ ADAMSHICK, MSN, APRN, BC**  
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### **FORMAL EDUCATION**

Pennsylvania State University: 2000-2006

PhD Nursing Doctoral Candidate; Dissertation Title: *The lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression*

University of Illinois Medical Center Campus, Chicago, IL: 1974-1977

Master of Science in Nursing: December, 1977; Major: Psychiatric/Community Mental Health Nursing

University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, MI: 1970-1974

Bachelor of Science in Nursing (cum laude): May, 1974

### **ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS**

St. Luke's School of Nursing at Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA

Assistant Professor of Nursing

August 2001-present

St. Luke's School of Nursing (diploma program), Bethlehem, PA

Instructor of Nursing

August 1991-August 2001

Northampton Community College, Bethlehem, PA

Assistant Professor of Nursing

August 1990-May 1991

Instructor of Nursing (adjunct faculty)

August 1988-May 1990

Lewis University, College of Nursing, Romeoville, IL

Instructor of Nursing

February 1978-January, 1979

### **RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

September 2004: \$1550 award from the Sharon Davies Memorial Awards program of the Freedom From Fear Foundation to fund dissertation research: *The lived experience of girl-to-girl aggression*.

September 2003: Research Assistant for Sigma Theta Tau funded study: "Patient's trust in health care providers". Principal Investigator: Judy Hupcey, RN, EdD.

### **PUBLICATIONS**

Dellasega, C. and Adamshick, P. Z. (2005). Evaluation of a program designed to reduce relational aggression in middle school girls. *Journal of School Violence*, 4(3), 63-76.

Adamshick, P. (2003). "RICHES": Implementing a school-based support group. In A. A. Miles (Ed.), *A journey of scholarship: St. Luke's hospital school of nursing at Moravian College 1998-2003* (p. 22). Bethlehem, PA: St. Luke's Hospital School of Nursing at Moravian College.

### **CHAPTERS/TEXTS/MANUSCRIPTS REVIEWED**

Review of Chapter on Coping and Stress in Potter, A. and Potter, P. (Eds). (2006) *Fundamentals of Nursing, Nursing*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition. St. Louis: Elsevier Science.

Review of manuscript: "The experience of stigma as described by family members of the severely mentally" for *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* (February, 2006).