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# Qualitative comparison of the perceptions of victims and school authorities on early adolescent female bullying

Chaitra Elizabeth Wirta-Leiker

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

A QUALITATIVE COMPARISON OF THE  
PERCEPTIONS OF VICTIMS AND  
SCHOOL AUTHORITIES ON  
EARLY ADOLESCENT  
FEMALE BULLYING

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Psychology

Chaitra Elizabeth Wirta-Leiker

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Counseling Psychology  
Counseling Psychology Program

August, 2011



## ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study compared the perceptions of self-identified victims and school authority figures in regards to adolescent relational aggression among female middle school students. Six significant aspects of this issue were explored, including causal conditions; contextual factors; definitions and descriptions of relationally aggressive interactions; intervening conditions, such as recognition of the victims and their decision to report; intervention and prevention strategies within the school setting; and the negative consequences of relational aggression upon the victims. The data were developed into a grounded theory with the purpose of discovering effective aspects of anti-bullying intervention and prevention programs in U.S. schools. Findings included obstacles in reporting, ways victims preferred to be approached by educators, and foundational aspects of intervention based on student and educator experiences with bullying, including victim empowerment. The implications for schools in applying these findings were described, including a significant shift from a punishment-based approach to a learning-based approach in resolving peer bullying situations.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescent female-on-female bullying is a disturbing and prevalent phenomenon. Hazler, Hoover, and Oliver (1992) found that 72% of school-aged females reported being bullied at some point during their academic career, and Fekkes, Pijpers, and Verloove-Vanhorick (2005) and Hunter and Borg (2006) reported that approximately 23-27% of school-aged females are being bullied in schools at any given time. In the past, bullying was assumed to be a problem specifically related to males and physical dominance (Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001), but in recent years, it has become clear that female bullying is a significant issue. Numerous definitions of bullying exist, but most agree upon three primary factors: Intentional harm doing, repeated occurrences over time, and an imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator (Hazler et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Varjas et al., 2008).

In females, bullying often takes the form of relational aggression, which involves indirect verbal, social, and emotional means of perpetration (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Dixon Rayle, Hartwig Moorhead, Green, Griffin, & Ozimek, 2007; Kenny, McEarchern, & Aluede, 2005). Such forms of aggression include verbal threats, spreading rumors and telling lies, name-calling, gossiping, mocking, sending threatening notes/emails/instant messages, excluding or ostracizing from the group, social isolation, ignoring, manipulating friendships, alliance seeking, stealing friends or significant others,



terminating friendships, and withholding emotional support (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005).

Research has shown that relational aggression is at its peak during the adolescent years, especially in middle school-aged females (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Kenny et al., 2005; Laser Haddow, 2006). This may be due to several factors. Gilligan (1982) noted that the transition into middle school marks the developmental stage in which a child is beginning to individuate from her parents and assert independence, while the influence of peer relationships strengthens. During this time, peer conformity is highly valued (Laser Haddow, 2006), and adolescent females depend heavily upon peer feedback and approval in developing an identity, especially in relation to attractiveness, self-worth, and self-esteem. Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) and Gilligan (1982) proposed that, because adolescent females place greater emphasis upon friendships and social intimacy than adolescent males, they are most vulnerable in this area; therefore, it makes sense that they would utilize bullying strategies that are intended to harm social relationships.

Olweus (1993) cited bullying as the most common type of school aggression contributing to mental health problems, and countless studies have noted the emotional consequences of bullying upon victims. Increased feelings of sadness, depression, rejection, anxiety, anger, low self-esteem, low self-worth, stress, helplessness, and self-pity are likely to occur (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Hazler et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2005; Varjas et al., 2008). Mental health problems that have been correlated with female bullying victimization include eating disorders, self-destructive



behaviors (drinking, substance abuse, cutting), and suicidal ideation (Dixon Rayle et al., 2007). In addition, social consequences such as lost relationships and avoidance of social situations are likely (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2005). Bullying also leads to academic performance problems such as low grades, difficulty concentrating, and absenteeism in victims (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2005), and Dixon Rayle et al. (2007) noted that victims may feel disconnected with their school due to a perceived lack of safety.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the prevalence of female-perpetrated bullying among adolescent females, Kenny et al. (2005) cited bullying as one of the most underreported safety problems in schools. In fact, numerous studies cite discrepancies between students' and school authorities' perceptions in identifying and intervening in bullying situations. Hazler et al. (2001) found that teachers are likely to correctly identify physical forms of bullying, but struggle to recognize more covert forms of bullying, such as the verbal, social, and emotional aggression that often occurs in female bullying, making it difficult to effectively intervene. Bradshaw et al. (2007) and Crothers and Kolbert (2004) cited similar results, reporting that school faculty underestimated the number of students involved in bullying situations, and were often unaware of the seriousness of peer victimization and the related impact upon the victim's life.

While students' responses to several studies suggested that school authorities either ignore bullying situations or intervene in a way that leads the situation to be worse (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Varjas et al.,



2008), teachers believed that they intervened effectively the majority of the time (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Hazler et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). A study by Pepler, Craig, Zeigler, and Charach (1994) found that while 84% of teachers believed they intervened in bullying situations “always” or “often,” only 35% of the students agreed with this. In addition, a study conducted by Williams and Cornell (2006) reported that only half of the students who are being bullied in school will seek help from school authorities, with approximately 50% of the students reporting that they did not believe teachers were genuinely concerned about them, and 30% stating that they did not believe they could turn to any of the adults at school for help. Other studies cited numerous reasons for students’ failure to report victimization problems to school authorities, including feeling that school authorities would not be supportive or receptive, a belief that teachers were not interested in intervening, that a report would not be taken seriously, or that the intervention utilized would not resolve the situation (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Varjas et al., 2008). A fear of retaliation from the bully or her friends and embarrassment over being unable to deal with the situation independently were also noted as reasons for choosing not to report the bullying (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Varjas et al., 2008). Such reasons may correlate with Unnever and Cornell’s (2004) assertion that bullying may often be viewed as a tolerated and accepted aspect of the school environment and culture.

In noting the severe psychological, emotional, and social consequences of female-perpetrated bullying on victims, the discrepancy in the perceptions of students and school authorities is a major cause for concern. The research indicated that female students view



relational bullying as a common occurrence in their lives, yet school authorities have difficulty identifying female-on-female bullying situations, often do not understand the deeply negative impact upon the victims, and are typically unable to effectively intervene (Hazler et al., 2001). While it makes sense that the victims' failure to report bullying plays a role in school authority figures' lacking awareness of the nature and extent of the problem, thus making them less able to take appropriate action (Unnever & Cornell, 2004), it is important for school authorities to recognize their role in creating an accepted culture of bullying within the school environment, which makes it difficult for student victims to report such problems.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the experiences of and effects upon female victims of female-perpetrated bullying from the perspectives of the self-identified victims and school authorities. In addition, the victims' decision to report bullying and related interventions employed by school authorities was explored. A theory surrounding the experiences, effects, reporting decisions, and perceived effectiveness of interventions was developed by combining the perspectives of student victims and school authorities.

### **Research Questions**

Various aspects of female-perpetrated relational aggression were investigated in this study. The overarching research question was:

- Q1     What are the similarities and differences between the perceptions of self-identified adolescent female victims and school authority figures in regards to female-on-female bullying?



Underlying this question, the following topics of exploration included:

- Q2     What are female-perpetrated bullying behaviors?
- Q3     What are the experiences of the victims?
- Q4     What are the effects of relational aggression upon victims?
- Q5     What are the circumstances under which victims chose to report bullying to school authorities?
- Q6     How do school authority figures recognized victims of female-perpetrated bullying?
- Q7     What are the perceptions surrounding the effectiveness of current anti-bullying interventions in the school setting?

Additional topics were discussed based upon the responses given by the participants.

Such inquiries covered the following topics: the schools' current anti-bullying policies and programs; victims' and school authority figures' perceptions about the reasons bullying occurred; school authority figures' experiences with bullying, including their own victimization or bullying behaviors as a child, adolescent, or adult; school authority figures' experiences intervening in bullying situations in the school setting; individuals' ideas about prevention strategies in regards to relational aggression; and individuals' thoughts about recent national media coverage of bullying-related suicides among youth.

### **Significance of the Study**

Previous research has focused on assessing the number of school-aged students who are bullied, as well as their perceptions regarding the characteristics of bullies and victims, reasons bullying occurs, reasons for choosing not to report bullying, and the perceived effectiveness of related interventions. Few of these studies focused specifically



on female victims of female-perpetrated bullying during the middle school or junior high years from a qualitative perspective and none have attempted to combine these various aspects into a cohesive theory surrounding the process of bullying and related intervention strategies.

This study was unique in that it explored four distinct areas of adolescent female-on-female bullying and combined them within a grounded theory by merging the perceptions of both victims and school authority figures. First, the experiences of the victims was explored, focusing on the identification and description of female-perpetrated bullying behaviors. Next, the perceived impact of female-perpetrated bullying on the victims was studied. Following this, the factors present in a victims' decision to report or not report bullying was examined, including factors present within the school environment that made reporting difficult, in an effort to create a more effective reporting process. Finally, the perceived effectiveness of interventions was explored in an attempt to design more realistic and efficient intervention strategies.

### **Assumptions**

A significant assumption in this study was that the student victim participants recognized that they were being bullied by female peers, and therefore had a sufficient level of understanding regarding the concept of bullying and the impact bullying has had upon their lives. It was also assumed that all participants, both student victims and school authority figures, were open, honest, and genuine in sharing their thoughts, feelings, ideas, beliefs, and experiences regarding adolescent female-on-female bullying.



### **Delimitations**

The following delimitations existed in this study in relation to the victims:

1. Females
2. Adolescents
3. Attending middle school or junior high school in a Rocky Mountain or Midwest region
4. Self-identified as a victim of female-perpetrated bullying

The following delimitations existed in this study in relation to school authority figures:

1. Middle school teachers and administrators (school counselors were not included because their training is in mental health, not education)
2. Employed at a middle school or junior high school in the Rocky Mountain or Midwest region
3. Employed at the middle school for at least one year prior to research interviews

### **Definition of Terms**

*Bullying* is the repeated, unwanted, unprovoked, and intentional behavior of an individual or group toward another individual or group of lesser physical strength, psychological strength, or social status, through physical, verbal, social, or emotional means of perpetration (Olweus, 1993, 1994).

*Bullying interventions* consist of any attempt by an individual or group to stop the act of bullying either during or after its occurrence.

*Grounded Theory* is a qualitative research method used to systematically collect and analyze data in order to construct a theoretical model (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).



*Relational aggression* is a covert form of bullying in which an individual or group attempt to harm another individual or group through verbal, social, or emotional means (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005).

*School authority figures* are adult middle school employees who have the authority to intervene in bullying situations, typically teachers or school administrators.

*Victims* are the recipients of bullying behavior.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study was designed to explore and compare student victims' and school authority figures' perceptions of adolescent female-on-female bullying. This chapter contains a review of related literature. It begins with a discussion of common characteristics and definitions of bullying. The section goes on to describe victims' experiences and the related effects of bullying. The remainder of the chapter reviews circumstances surrounding reporting and current intervention strategies for schools.

#### **Description of Female Bullying Behaviors**

##### **Characteristics of Bullying**

Bullying has been cited as the most “enduring and underrated problem in U.S. schools” (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005, p. 101). It is considered the most ubiquitous form of youth violence (Varjas et al., 2008). Much of the research has been based on physical and direct forms of bullying; the three primary characteristics are that harm is done, the act is repeated, and there is an unfair match between the participants in relation to physical size, verbal abilities, or social status (Hazler et al., 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993). While numerous definitions of bullying exist, almost all of these share two common characteristics: the behavior is intended to be harmful and is perceived as hurtful by the victim (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). Other commonly accepted elements of bullying are an imbalance of power; an organized,



systematic, and hidden nature; often opportunistic, though once it starts it is likely to continue; it occurs over a period of time; and it contains emotional and psychological dimensions (Sullivan, Cleary, & Sullivan, 2004). Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) indicated that bullying involves an unprovoked attack that causes psychological, social, or physical pain to the victim.

Underwood et al. (2001) suggested that it is dangerous to borrow frameworks from research on physical aggression to understand the phenomenon of relational aggression. Understanding relational aggression may require completely different methods and constructs, with a greater focus on relationships within groups. In addition, relational aggression is often perpetrated outside the initial awareness of the victim, and she is not likely to experience the harmful consequences until sometime in the future; for this reason, it is likely that this type of aggression unfolds over a longer duration of time than physical aggression (Underwood et al.).

Bullying can take various forms, including physical, direct, indirect, social, and relational aggression. Physical bullying involves bodily harm to the victim (Olweus, 1991), and it is the only form of bullying that is not included under the definition of relational aggression. Direct relationally aggressive behaviors are those that use confrontational methods to create interpersonal damage (Crothers et al., 2005), such as name-calling. Indirect relational aggression is usually committed by a third party, so the perpetrator can remain anonymous, in order to inflict pain in such a way that it seems as though there was never an intention to hurt anyone (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Reid, Monsen, & Rivers, 2004; Trim, 2009; Underwood et al., 2001),



such as spreading rumors. Indirect aggression makes it more likely that the perpetrator will avoid counter-aggression or sanctions, and remain unidentified (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Social aggression consists of more subtle, nonverbal behaviors that seek to damage a victim's self-esteem and social status (Goldstein & Tisak, 2003; Smith, 2004), including excluding an individual from a group.

Relational aggression involves purposefully harming another through social relationships using a combination of direct, indirect, or social means (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Bowie, 2007; Beran & Violato, 2004). Remillard and Lamb (2005) cited relational aggression as the intent to harm a peer through the exploitation of a relationship by damaging the peer's social status or self-esteem. Relationally aggressive behaviors occur when a perpetrator tries to harm a victim through manipulation of relationships or threats of damage to relationships, according to Crick et al. (2002). Mullin-Rindler (2003) stated that relational aggression is "characterized by a power imbalance involving a combination of direct and indirect methods to damage someone's reputation, relationships, or sense of inclusion in a peer group" (p. 10).

When combining all of these aspects, relationally aggressive behaviors can be demonstrated in numerous forms. Bullies often spread rumors or gossip about the targeted individual (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Kerry, & Patton, 2001; Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick et al., 2001; Crothers et al., 2005; Mullin-Rindler, 2003; Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Gossiping about sexual orientation and frequency of sexual partners is especially common among females (Crick et al., 2001). Threatened exposure of shared secrets to potential opposite-sex romantic partners or same-sex peers is a common strategy (Crick



et al., 2001), as well as flirting with one's boyfriend (Crick et al., 2002), or attempting to steal friends or romantic partners (Crothers et al., 2005). Victims may be deliberately ignored, isolated, or excluded (Bond et al., 2001; Bosworth et al., 1999; Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick et al., 2001; Crothers et al., 2005; Mullin-Rindler, 2003; Olweus, 1991; Remillard & Lamb, 2005), or have peers threaten to withdraw friendships or emotional support (Crick et al., 2001; Crothers et al., 2005). Victims may experience verbal bullying through teasing, ridicule, sarcastic comments, cold or hostile tones, or name-calling (Bosworth et al., 1999; Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Mean facial expressions (Remillard & Lamb, 2005), glares or intimidating staring (Crothers et al., 2005; Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2001), and having money or belongings taken or damaged are other forms of perpetration (Bosworth et al., 1999). Victims may receive mean messages, notes, text messages, or prank phone calls (Crothers et al., 2005; Owens et al., 2001). More inventive strategies include the use of code names, in which the identity of the victim is concealed in everyday conversations so the victim cannot prove she is being targeted or speaking just loud enough about a victim so that she can hear her name and only some of the material being shared (Owens et al., 2001).

Varjas et al. (2008) noted that students' perceptions of the definition of bullying are a critical missing component in understanding school bullying. The researchers conducted a qualitative study to explore this issue (N=502). Students' definitions of bullying were fairly consistent, including verbal and physical aggression, in addition to threats, manipulation, spreading rumors, destroying others' property, taking others' property, seeking revenge, and seeking power (Varjas et al.; Espelage & Asidao, 2001).



The majority of youth in a study by Espelage and Asidao (2001) defined bullying as intentional acts of picking on or teasing others to hurt the other's feelings.

In contrast, Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) surveyed teachers' regarding their perceptions about bullying behaviors using the Bullying Attitudes Questionnaire (N=116). They found that a quarter of the teachers did not define name-calling, spreading rumors, intimidation by staring, or taking others' belongings as bullying, and a large percentage did not perceive social exclusion as a form of bullying. The educators labeled interactions involving physical aggression as more serious and identified these as forms of bullying that required intervention, as opposed to verbal aggression. Empathy, as measured by the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE), was found to be a significant predictor in an educator's attitude toward all forms of bullying and willingness to intervene. Teachers were less likely to observe acts of social exclusion, but the overt nature of the visual and auditory signals of physical and verbal aggression were more noticeable (Craig et al.). This is consistent with Boulton and Underwood's (1992) findings that teachers often do not recognize varying forms of social and relational aggression.

Some researchers suggested that bullies who use relational means of aggression may not even recognize the harm they are causing (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Underwood et al., 2001). Several of the students (both genders) interviewed in a qualitative study who admitted to bullying reported that they did not realize the severity of harm their actions caused until after they engaged in them (Varjas et al., 2008). This is contradictory to the assumption that bullying is always an intentional act. Other research suggested that



adolescents do believe relational aggression is hurtful, but do not see it as being as harmful as physical aggression (Goldstein & Tisak, 2006). This appears to be less true of females, who view relational aggression as more harmful, hurtful, damaging, and consequential than males (Goldstein & Tisak, 2003, 2006).

### **Prevalence of Bullying**

Bosworth et al. (1999) found that 82% of U.S. students are bullied at some point during their academic career, and it was most prevalent during the ages of 11-13 years (N=558). One study found that approximately half of victimized female students reported being bullied by males, while only 23% were bullied by females (Fekkes et al., 2005). This conflicts with findings by Boulton and Underwood (1992), which suggested that girls are typically bullied by other girls.

Bullying was once thought to be dyadic in nature, but more recent findings suggest that it often occurs in groups and is typically observed by a number of bystanders (Smith, 2004). Yoon, Barton, and Taiariol (2004) found that victimization encounters tend to occur within a group context as well. Many students have also noted that perpetrators tend to act in groups, as opposed to one-on-one bullying (Espelage & Asidao, 2001).

Fekkes et al. (2005) found that more than 60% of victims were bullied by peers in their own grade, and only about 15% were bullied by youth who were in higher or lower grades than the victim. However, findings by Espelage and Asidao (2001) suggested that, in middle schools, eighth graders were more likely to be the perpetrators, while sixth graders were more likely to be victims.



Seals and Young (2003) conducted a study on bullying with seventh and eighth grade female and male students in five school districts to assess the prevalence of bullying and victimization in relation to gender and grade level (N=1,126; Female=59%; Male=41%). They found that 45% of the seventh graders and 42% of the eighth graders reported that bullying occurred often in their schools. It was also found that seventh graders were more involved in bullying than eighth graders. In addition, findings suggested that bullies of both genders tended to target victims of the same gender in dyadic bullying situations, but females were more likely to engage in mixed-gender group bullying (Seals & Young).

Nearly two times as many bullying incidents involve verbal aggression as compared to physical aggression (Reid et al., 2004). Participants in a study by Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) reported a greater frequency of verbal and relational aggression as compared to overt physical aggression; in fact, physical aggression was only reported in conjunction with other forms of relational aggression in this study. Other studies have cited a correlation between physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying, suggesting that individuals who experience one type are likely to be victims of other types of bullying as well (Graham & Bellmore, 2007).

In similar studies, students of both genders clearly viewed incidents of verbal, social, and emotional bullying as more common in their lives than physical bullying (Hazler et al., 2001). Bradshaw et al. (2007) found that the four most frequently reported forms of bullying in students of all ages and genders were name-calling, teasing, spreading rumors or lies, and intentionally leaving someone out. Varjas et al. (2008)



noted that students described incidents of verbal and relational bullying most often, such as insults, teasing, spreading rumors, or manipulating friendships. Other findings are consistent, noting direct verbal aggression, such as name-calling, as the most common type of bullying among both genders (Nansel et al., 2001; Seals & Young, 2003; Volk, 2004). Nansel et al. (2001) found that the most typical forms of bullying among girls included name-calling, teasing, rumors, rejection, and taking of personal belongings. When adolescents were asked to describe an incident in which they were victimized through relational aggression, 67% reported being gossiped about (Underwood et al., 2001).

While the results are varied as to whether girls or boys engage in more relationally aggressive behaviors, there are numerous findings that indicate the genders interpret and experience relational aggression in different ways (Goldstein & Tisak, 2006). Some researchers posit that girls and boys are equally aggressive, but these behaviors simply take on different forms. Varjas et al. (2008) reported that girls engaged in more relational bullying, while boys demonstrated more physical bullying. Studies by Espelage and Asidao (2001) and Smith (2004) also found that girls engaged in more frequent relational aggression. Studies suggest that girls are more likely to be the perpetrators and victims of relational aggression, and relational victimization most commonly occurs in female-on-female interactions (Crick et al., 2002; Graham & Bellmore, 2007). In fact, over 70% of adolescent females reported that their friendships with other girls involve relational victimization (Crick & Nelson, 2002).



In an international study of females ages eight, 11, and 15 years in Finland, Israel, and Poland, all were found to use indirect aggression more often than their male counterparts (Bowie, 2007). A study comparing gender differences in relational aggression in children from individualistic U.S. societies and collectivist Indonesian societies by French, Jansen, and Pidada (2002) found evidence that relational aggression was extensive within social interactions in both cultures, particularly among girls. However, it is important to note that relationally aggressive acts may differ between these cultures (French et al.).

Nansel et al. (2001) found that Hispanic youth reported more frequent perpetration of bullying, while African-American youth reported being bullied less frequently overall. Brown (2003) noted that these covert practices do appear to be more prominent in white, middle- and upper-class adolescent females than for those of color from similar backgrounds, which may be related to upbringing and socialization. For example, African American females may learn to use assertiveness due to struggling against dominant cultural practices throughout their lives, and they may have greater awareness and knowledge of how to function within a racist society without internalizing the negative messages related to problems in peer relationships (Brown, 2003; Crothers et al., 2005).

Bullying has been found to occur most often in hallways, the cafeteria, locker rooms, bathrooms, the gymnasium, and outside the school, typically during recess and passing periods (Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Fekkes et al., 2005; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Numerous studies reported students believe that this type of behavior



usually happens out of sight and hearing distance from teachers (Espelage & Asidaao, 2001), and an inverse relationship has been found to exist between adult supervision and bullying in most cases (Reid et al., 2004; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). More than one in five middle school students reported avoiding restrooms at school due to fear of being bullied (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005).

### **Purposes of Relational Aggression**

Relational aggression serves multiple goals. Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) reported that the purpose of relational aggression often appears to be social isolation. Relationally aggressive acts deprive adolescents of the chance to meet their social needs for acceptance, closeness, and friendship, all of which are critical in adolescent development and well-being (Crick et al., 2002). In fact, fear of social abandonment was a significant concern among respondents in a study of adolescent female relational aggression by Crothers et al. (2005).

A significant motive for engaging in relational bullying is simply that it is fun or exciting to gossip about peers, and can alleviate boredom by creating drama (Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006; Owens et al., 2001). Some aggressors appear to engage in relational aggression for entertainment value, by manipulating others' relationships or feelings of self-esteem for their own enjoyment (Underwood et al., 2001). An aggressor may surrender to peer pressure to engage in such behaviors, or simply want to demonstrate their dislike of the victim (Espelage & Asidaao, 2001). Relational aggression can also be used to gain the recognition and attention of peers in order to fit in with a peer group or improve one's social status (Espelage & Asidaao, 2001; Owens et al., 2001;



Underwood et al., 2001). Reactive forms of relational aggression may be a method seeking revenge for a perceived wrong (Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Underwood et al., 2001). Victims of one study indicated their belief that the purpose of bullying was to hurt the victim or cause them to feel sad, in addition to making the bully feel better about herself (Bosacki et al., 2006). The majority of studies suggested that bullies deliberately choose strategies that help them maintain dominance and power in social relationships (Bosworth, Espelage, and Simon, 1999; Gilligan, 1982).

Crothers et al. (2005) stated that the girl who initiates relationally aggressive behaviors often gains social status, while the target loses status; this is especially true when spreading rumors about girls' sexual reputations. At times, girls are motivated to start rumors or relationally aggress against others in order to deflect any potentially damaging social criticism from themselves (Crothers et al.). When adolescents attempt to harm a peer, they choose methods that they perceive will cause the most harm to the goals that are valued by a particular peer; because female values tend to center around interpersonal relationships and social interactions, it makes sense that this is how girls would choose to harm one another (Bowie, 2007).

### **Developmental Issues**

Relational aggression has been observed in children as young as three-years-old, and it appears to become increasingly complex and covert throughout middle childhood and adolescence (Yoon et al., 2004). Fleshbach was the first researcher to describe the concept of relational aggression in an observational study of first grade girls in 1969; she discovered that girls were significantly more likely than boys to react to an unfamiliar



peer by excluding the individual from the peer group (Bowie, 2007). Relational aggression is partially dependent upon maturational stages of development, since both verbal and social skills are necessary. Because girls tend to develop more quickly than boys verbally, it is possible that they develop indirect strategies of aggression earlier than boys as well (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992).

Data suggests that there is a peak in bullying during early adolescence, when students are entering middle school (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Nansel et al., 2001; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2004; Trim, 2009). In studies of students in grades six through 12, it was noted that rates of bullying increased from elementary to middle school, then declined in high school; however, in schools where a students did not transition to a new school during 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, there was not a sharp spike in the rate of aggressive behavior (Pellegrini, 2002).

Aggressive behavior is reportedly at its peak around age 11 in females, which may be due to an increased focus on peers relationships and dating, leading to a hierarchical structure (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Gilligan, 1982). In early adolescence, females experience a heightened desire to be accepted and liked by peers, with a need to be recognized and popular (Willer & Cupach, 2008). Because adolescence is the peak time to value and be influenced by peer relationships, peer victimization may be exceptionally harmful at this age (Crick et al., 2001; Eisenberg et al., 2003).

Between the ages of 11 to 15 years, girls tend to form tight friendship groups (often called cliques), and are more likely than boys to have one close best friend (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Often, the female sense of self is dependent upon this



connectedness and interdependence with peers that results in acceptance (Crothers et al., 2005). Self-disclosure, intimacy, and loyalty become central aspects of friendship during this stage of development (Goldstein & Tisak, 2003, 2006). Although females rated their interpersonal relationships as more rewarding than males at this age, they also reported greater strain and tension within their same-sex friendships than males (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). Bowie (2007) found that girls who were friends or associated with relationally aggressive girls in early adolescence were more likely to exhibit relationally aggressive behaviors one year later.

Increased aggression during this developmental period may be due to many factors. Yoon et al. (2004) noted that adolescents' cognitive and social growth is developing in ways that affects the quality and structure of interpersonal relationships during the middle school years. As adolescents seek independence from parents and show an increased interest in peers of both sexes, social acceptance becomes critical. The ability to solve complex social problems become more sophisticated and adolescents become more skilled at comprehending subtle, nonverbal behaviors that may influence their relationships with peers. They become more adept at utilizing negotiation and bargaining in resolving interpersonal conflicts. In fact, relational aggression is most often committed by individuals who have highly developed social and cognitive skills (Yoon et al.).

Specific characteristics of middle school that may be partially to blame for increases in bullying include large and impersonal classes, emphasis on competition and social comparisons between peers, teachers' nonchalant attitudes toward indirect forms of



bullying, the lack of a consistent cohort throughout the school day, the increased number of teachers and classroom transitions, and students attending from a larger geographic region (Pellegrini, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2004). A decrease in supervision occurs as students transition from self-contained elementary school classrooms, in which the same teacher spends the majority of the day with students, to middle school schedules, which usually allow teachers to see each student for only an hour or two at a time (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Power, 1999).

Pellegrini (2002) stated that “aggression elicits aggression and cooperation elicits cooperation” (p. 155). In the constantly transitioning and impersonal environment of middle school as compared to elementary school, the cost of aggression is low, while the benefit is high. If students were to meet repeatedly throughout the day, cooperative acts would be seen as having greater benefit and aggressive acts would be more costly because there would be greater opportunity for reciprocation; when repeated meetings are likely, it is the best interest of both parties to try to resolve conflict in a cooperative manner (Pellegrini).

It is also during the middle school years when adolescents are in the developmental phase of individuating from their parents toward greater autonomy, and the influence of peer relationships become stronger and more central to how individuals view themselves (Gilligan, 1982; Kenny et al., 2005). Peers rely on feedback from one another that influences feelings of attractiveness, self-esteem, and self-worth (Gilligan, 1982; Kenny et al., 2005). Adolescent females tend to place a significant emphasis on close friendships, and therefore they may be inherently aware of the related



vulnerabilities within such relationships, making them more adept at using strategies that target social relationships (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick & Nelson, 2002; Crick et al., 2002; Crothers et al., 2005; Gilligan, 1982; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001).

Relationally aggressive behaviors are likely to be perceived as more upsetting for females than males, since such episodes may threaten the closeness and possible continuation of the friendship (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

Pellegrini (2002) noted that as individuals shift from middle childhood into early adolescence, their negative views on aggression decrease, and they more readily accept and associate with aggressive peers. Findings suggest that aggressive strategies with peers are common and accepted during early adolescence. Bullying is often viewed as a form of proactive aggression, in which the goal is to increase social status with peers during school transitions. Individuals attempt to establish leadership and dominance in newly developing peer groups as they move into middle school by targeting weaker classmates, in order to ensure success in achieving social dominance (Pellegrini).

This can lead to competition among females resulting in aggressive behaviors. Not only is this approval and popularity difficult to gain, but also difficult to preserve, and therefore relationally aggressive behaviors persist in this struggle (Willer & Cupach, 2008). This is consistent with the findings of a qualitative study in which several female students admitted to bullying peers in order to gain and maintain a leadership role within their peer groups (Varjas et al., 2008). In this way, relational aggression is employed as a mode for fitting in (Yoon et al., 2004). This is not consistent with generally accepted



definitions of bullying, which assume that a power differential is in existence between the bully and victim before the bullying occurs.

Peer groups tend to be organized vertically, and individuals must compete against other members of their group for resources, such as social status and romantic relationships (Pellegrini, 2002). Girls who are higher in the social hierarchy of the school have more resources to maintain their popularity than girls who are lower in the hierarchy, but they must consistently aggress against lower status victims in order to maintain their own status (Willer & Cupach, 2008). In addition, because physical aggression is viewed as less acceptable as children grow older, it makes sense that relational aggression becomes a more developmentally normative way of expressing aggression (Underwood et al., 2001).

### **Cultural Implications**

Gilligan (1982) stated that the feminine socialization process encourages females to adhere to socially approved gender roles and assume stereotypical feminine traits, which includes emphasizing interpersonal relationships, dependence, nurturance, and passivity. These norms predispose females to utilize relationally aggressive behaviors, because girls are expected to sustain amicable relationships with one another, and expressing overt anger is deemed unacceptable; therefore, females resort to more covert manipulation tactics in order to express anger or assert control (Crothers et al., 2005; Gilligan). By employing more manipulative and covert ways of expressing anger, females can resolve conflicts and establish their dominance. Crothers et al. (2005) found that many girls felt that avoidance of conflict was supported by adults, due to the



expectation that they act ladylike, mature, and calm. Females are also more likely to mask their anger because they anticipate negative reactions for such feelings, and girls often receive reinforcement for covering up their anger and building relationships (Bowie, 2007). In addition, peers tend to be more accepting of overtly assertive behavior demonstrated by males than females (Bowie, 2007).

In a qualitative study based on interviews with 421 adolescent girls from varying economic, racial, and geographic backgrounds, Brown (2003) found that U.S. culture and media images play an influential role in relational aggression among girls. Media messages emphasize a beauty ideal, and therefore it is logical for girls to gossip about one another's appearance as a way of undermining each other and vying for power. Middle school girls spend a lot of emotional energy and time trying to look right and fit in. Finding another girl to tease or reject can be a way for girls to measure their own sense of worth in comparison to others, in order to lessen anxiety about not fitting in (Brown). The media also portrays negative characteristics such as "catty, backstabbing, judgmental, jealous, devious, manipulative, dramatic, and defensive" (p. 352) as expected female behaviors (Crothers et al., 2005).

### **Positive Aspects of Relational Aggression**

Some researchers believe that relational aggression can have positive uses and outcomes. It has been suggested that acts of relational aggression may serve positive developmental functions by helping adolescents to "sort out issues of identity and social norms, helping them to feel a sense of belonging, and protecting the integrity of their social group in school" (Remillard & Lamb, 2005, p. 222). For example, gossiping may



enhance group unity, define group norms, express social information, and assist in solving interpersonal conflicts. Cliques can provide protection, elevate one's status, and teach outsiders a lesson; however, it is important to note that the competition for social status occurs both outside and inside of these groups (Brown, 2003).

### **Assessment and Diagnostic Implications**

The *DSM-IV-TR* (APA, 2000) provides criteria for various disruptive behavior disorders, including Conduct Disorder (CD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). It lists bullying as one of the 15 criteria required for a diagnosis of CD, placed under the category of aggression toward people/animals, and grouped with threatening and intimidation (Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004). However, the criteria for these types of disorders are correlated with physical and overt forms of aggression, not indirect and relational aggression (Keenan et al., 2008). In fact, little is currently known about the psychometric properties of relational aggression required for assessment, and the most common method for collecting data is through peer and teacher reports (Keenan et al., 2008).

One study attempted to establish the reliability and validity of youth and caregiver reports of relationally aggressive behavior, test the extent of overlap between relational aggression and ODD and CD, and evaluate the relative contribution of relational aggression to impaired functioning (Keenan et al., 2008). The Child and Adolescent Psychopathology Scale (CAPS) was administered to youth (both genders, ages nine to 17 years) and caregivers, in order to determine symptoms of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), ODD, and CD. In addition, items from the Peer Assessment of



Relational Aggression were used to assess symptoms of relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Findings demonstrated the validity of youth and caregiver reports of relational aggression. Relational aggression was found to be somewhat more impairing for males than females by caregiver report, but was noted as having significantly higher levels of impairment in females by youth report. The study also found that relationally aggressive behaviors are equivalently common among both genders in that age group. Although most of the youth who met criteria for ODD and CD engaged in relatively high levels of relational aggression, youth who engaged in relational aggression did not typically meet the criteria for ODD and CD. The study did not support a *DSM-V* diagnosis of relational aggression, as it appeared that there was a strong association with ODD and CD; for example, relationally aggressive items such as “spreading rumors” was consistent with the ODD symptom of “spiteful and vindictive,” and “telling friends that he or she would stop liking them unless they did what he or she wanted” was similar to the CD symptom of “bullying” (Keenan et al., 2008).

### **Experience of the Victims**

#### **Targeted Characteristics of Victims**

Bosacki et al. (2006) suggested that “bullying and victimization experiences are multidimensional and dynamic” (p. 232). Because it is difficult to describe the lived experiences of such interactions through traditional self-report and peer-report measures, Bosacki et al. advocated for qualitative inquiry as a more useful avenue for researching victims’ experiences. Sullivan et al. (2004) stated the “chaos theory of bullying,” which



posits that bullying is random and can happen to anyone at any time; however, most studies cited differing from the norm as the main reason for being targeted.

In a qualitative study of middle school students of both genders (N=502; females=271; males=285), researchers found that victimized students differed from the norm in one or more of the following five categories: gender, race, personality, physical appearance, and wardrobe (Varjas et al., 2008). Wardrobe was noted by these students as being the number one reason for being targeted. Other differences were also mentioned, such as “bringing different food to school, listening to different music, and engaging in odd behavior” (Varjas et al., 2008, p. 109).

Other studies have cited visible differences as a reason for being victimized as well. Students in various studies reported that certain peers are victimized more frequently due to differences in physical appearance (Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Frisén, Jonsson, & Persson, 2007). Victims were teased because they wore glasses, were over- or underweight, did not wear trendy clothes or hairstyles, or were perceived as unattractive (Bosacki et al., 2006; Bradshaw et al., 2007; Edmondson & Hoover, 2008; Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Frisén et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005). Facial appearance and obesity were among the most common reasons for females to report being bullied (Kenny et al., 2005). Cranham and Carroll (2003) noted that nonconformity in the area of fashion was often used as a reason to socially exclude females. Students who were obese or did not conform to general social expectations of appearance seemed to be victimized more frequently (Jankauskiene, Kardelis, Sukys, & Kardeliene, 2008).



Even desirable characteristics, such as intelligence, were reported as a source of negative commentary in female-on-female interactions (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Cranham & Carroll, 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2003). Being quiet was often expressed as an unacceptable social behavior as well (Cranham & Carroll, 2003). In addition, students with low self-esteem related to athletics were victimized more often (Jankauskiene et al., 2008). Youth who disliked school suffer from more frequent peer victimization, though it is unclear whether they disliked school before being victimized or as a result of it (Eisenberg et al., 2003). Pellegrini (2002) stated that peer harassment or maltreatment in school “can be so severe that it denies victims equal access to education” (p. 153).

Jankauskiene et al. (2008) surveyed Lithuanian middle school students, and found that students from richer families tended to be bullies, while students from poorer families tended to be victims. Students of a lower socioeconomic status in U.S. schools were targeted more often as well (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Symbolic forms of financial status include clothing, shoes, electronic equipment, and cars (Roberts, 2006).

Students also appear to be vulnerable to victimization based on their social status, special needs, or sexual identity (Roberts, 2006). Youth who have physical difficulties, are from ethnic minorities, or do not fit gender stereotypes seem to be victimized by bullies more often (Reid et al., 2004). Smith (2004) found that sexual minorities and individuals with disabilities are more likely to be victimized. Children with special education needs seem to be targets due to their disability (Kenny et al., 2005). Close Conoley (2008) reported that victims are often targeted for engaging in non-typical gender behaviors. Open homosexuality in a predominantly heterosexual school



environment led to frequent victimization (Juvonen et al., 2001). Kenny et al. (2005) found that 25% of victims reported being bullied because of their race or religion. Victims were also targeted for being a different ethnic background from the majority of students in the school (Reid et al., 2004; Espelage & Asidao, 2001). A study by Eisenberg et al. (2003) did not find that a single ethnic, racial, or age group was the target of bullying, but rather that it is a problem on a school-wide level, as opposed to a specific group.

In early adolescence, when great variation exists among pubertal development of students, sexuality may be a considerable source of embarrassment for some females (Juvonen et al., 2001). Young adolescents who are going through changes in puberty are likely to be victimized, especially girls whose bodies mature earlier than their peers (Kenny et al., 2005). Females reported being bullied through sexual rumors or comments more frequently than males (Nansel et al., 2001).

Pellegrini (2002) merged the results of several of his studies on bullying in middle school students, and found that victimization was negatively correlated with popularity, and affiliating with more popular peers inhibited victimization. In addition, not having friends and being rejected by peers was a contributing factor in being targeted for victimization. Victims tended to view themselves as less popular, and youth who lacked social skills are more likely to be socially isolated, making them easier targets for bullies (Seals & Young, 2003). A frequently cited reason for being bullied was “not fitting in” (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2098), and youth who are victimized may be avoided by peers for fear of being victimized themselves or damaging their social status (Nansel et al., 2001).



For this reason, victims may view themselves as failures or outcasts (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005).

Bullies seem to be skilled at blaming the victim for acting in a certain way or representing something negative, in order to validate the bullying; this may result in the victim believing that something truly is wrong with her (Roland, 2002). Victims often tend to take the blame or responsibility for being bullied, citing their own perceived deficiencies as a reason to be harassed (Bosacki et al., 2006; Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Graham & Bellmore, 2007; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). In fact, bullies and bystanders agreed with the notion that victims often contributed to their own victimization (Espelage & Asidao, 2001).

Victims tended to internalize the negative actions directed at them, even if they knew the insults were not true or realized it was intended to be harmful; this seemed to be especially true of girls struggling with obesity (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). It also possible that victimization served to reinforce negative feelings a girl already has of herself. When girls were insulted about aspects of themselves they could not alter (such as ethnicity), or when features of themselves they disliked were confirmed through insults, it tended to impact how they viewed themselves; they often diminished appraisals of themselves based on these insults (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001).

The tendency to internalize negative peer feedback may also be due to the greater emotional investment females place on their peer relationships (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Female victims often considered themselves to be less attractive and confident than peers (Frisén et al., 2007), and reported feeling worse about themselves than males



after being relationally victimized, whether the perpetrator was male or female (Goldstein & Tisak, 2003). Oftentimes, though victims may desire self-change, they may feel hopeless that their situation in the world would change, even if self-change occurred (Cranham & Carroll, 2003). Adolescents reported that gossip was more damaging to their relationships than exclusion, which may be related to the differing level of intimacy involved in each of these acts; gossip is a greater breach of trust, while exclusion is a more superficial behavior. However, the youth did not believe that exclusion felt less harmful than gossip (Goldstein & Tisak, 2003).

Some victims acknowledged that they had personal attributes that hindered their ability to conform to expected norms within the culture of the school (Cranham & Carroll, 2003). Other times, the victims seemed to have an inability to notice, comprehend, and/or follow the rules of their academic environment. The subtle and complex rules developed within a particular school's social framework are developed by students, and it seems that most students find it normal and acceptable for their friends to have specific expectations of their physical appearance, choices, and behaviors. Victims tended to have very black and white perceptions of right and wrong actions, regardless of the context or consequences of such actions; if an authority figure implemented certain rules, victims believed there was no reason to have trouble adhering to these rules (Cranham & Carroll, 2003).

### **Characteristics of Bystanders**

Bystanders in bullying situations can take numerous roles. They can be passive and choose not to intervene, gossip about the incident, provide verbal encouragement to



the bully, or act in the role of a lookout (Reid et al., 2004). Although 90% of bystanders reported that it is “unpleasant to watch bullying” (Reid et al., 2004, p. 247), there are consistent reports of an audience being present during aggressive incidents between peers. As the number of bystanders increases, the diffusion of responsibility effect becomes apparent, and the likelihood of someone intervening in the situation decreases (Reid et al., 2004). Bystanders reported that their reactions to a bullying situation depended upon their relationships with the victim and bullies; if they were friends with the victim, they would attempt to help, but if they did not like the victim or were friends with the bully, they would encourage the incident (Varjas et al., 2008; Wilson-Simmons, Dash, Tehranifar, O’Donnell, & Stueve, 2006). Bystanders who reported no connection with the victim were more likely to do nothing for fear of becoming another target if they intervened (Reid et al., 2004; Varjas et al., 2008). Victims have reported that the inaction of student bystanders in bullying situations intensifies the victims’ feeling of being violated (Cranham & Carroll, 2003).

Bystanders may feel powerless and their inaction can lead to a loss of self-respect and feelings of guilt (Reid et al., 2004). Reid et al. (2004) found that approximately 50% of youth bystanders reported feeling sympathetic toward victims, while 25% were neutral and 25% were unsympathetic. Females appear to be more supportive of victims than males, though it has been found that sympathy for the victim decreases with age (Reid et al., 2004). Because of adolescent females’ intense desire for acceptance by peers, it appears to be more harmful for them when the aggressor involves other people in the



incident, because it cripples their social acceptance and makes them particularly vulnerable to peer rejection (Willer & Cupach, 2008).

Oftentimes adolescents who experience victimization within the larger group context, such as a classroom, are likely to experience maltreatment within dyadic contexts as well, such as friendships (Crick & Nelson, 2002). Friend victimization is a “betrayal by a trusted, self-selected companion” (Crick & Nelson, 2002, p. 600). However, it appears that adolescents who experience frequent relational aggression in their friendships do not believe that these behaviors impact the relationship significantly, suggesting that some girls may be used to such actions in their close relationships (Goldstein & Tisak, 2003). Frequently victimized individuals tended to have fewer friends, though a greater number of friends can act as a protective buffer against peer maltreatment (Crick & Nelson, 2002). However, victims also tended to choose friends who were victimized as well, which lessened the security that friendship typically provides against bullying (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

### **Characteristics of Bullies**

Engaging in peer harassment has been reported as a way to be popular and gain peer acceptance (Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Elinoff et al., 2004). In fact, the majority of middle school students described bullies as popular, well-liked, and feared (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Mullin-Rindler, 2003; Pellegrini, 2002; Trim, 2009). Victimized individuals may even attempt to establish friendships with their tormentors in order to gain social status, often resulting in troubled relationships that prevent the victim from learning the



positive social skills and support that exist within a healthy friendship; this can put them at risk for future abusive relationships (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

Female aggressors are typically characterized by a balance of prosocial and aggressive skills (Trim, 2009), though a distinction between victims and aggressors can be difficult to identify since the majority of students have been in both roles at some point during their academic careers (Elinoff et al., 2004; Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Because relational aggression is unlikely to result in consequences from adults, adolescents who are typically nonaggressive may be drawn into such actions as a form of retaliation, taking on the roles of aggressor and victim (Crick et al., 2001). Even adolescents who are deemed “good kids” may tolerate or utilize aggression in order to increase their social status (Pellegrini, 2002). Other victims reported that they consciously chose not to bully others because they knew how terrible it felt, and they attempted to stop bullying and comfort the victim when they saw it occurring (Espelage & Asidao, 2001).

### **School Violence as a Result of Bullying**

In instances where school violence resulted in serious physical injuries or death, perpetrators frequently cited relational aggression, such as being excluded from a group, as a motivating factor in their choice to act out through physical aggression (Crick et al., 2002). Elinoff et al. (2004) reported that victims of bullying are more likely than non-victims to bring weapons to school. Many recent school killings and suicides have been linked to emotional and social forms of peer maltreatment, and not to physical bullying (Hazler et al., 2001). Laser Haddow (2006) suggested that “being bullied is an early link in a causal chain that ends in violent behavior” (p. 47), and while it is not the sole



determinant of violent actions, it is a significant factor in the eventual move towards violence.

The feelings of shame that result from bullying, especially public humiliation, may lead to violence as a way for the victim to maintain self-esteem or earn respect by showing others that they are not to be hassled (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). A significant number of school shootings, including Columbine High School, were likely precipitated by rejection of peers. While almost all of these shootings were perpetrated by males, there are rare instances of female shooters. One of the most publicized shootings committed by a female was that of Elizabeth Bush, 14-years-old, who shot the head cheerleader at her school in Williamsport, Pennsylvania in 2001 after being tormented by her and other peers (Brown, 2003; Leary et al., 2003).

### **Effects of Bullying**

Bullying has been documented as contributing to numerous negative mental health outcomes for victims. In fact, Bond et al. (2001) found that the effects of victimization on mental health status were exceptionally clear for girls, exhibiting a significant impact on future emotional well-being. Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) noted that social, academic, cognitive, physical, biological, and psychological consequences are likely to affect the victim.

### **Depression and Anxiety**

Bond et al. (2001) found that “a history of victimization predicts the onset of anxiety or depression, especially in adolescent girls” (p. 483). Numerous studies indicated that victims are likely to experience anxiety and depression (Beran & Violato,



2004; Bond et al., 2001; Crick et al., 2001; Crick et al., 2002; Fekkes et al., 2005; Leary et al., 2003; Graham & Bellmore, 2007; Nansel et al., 2001; Reid et al., 2004; Rigby, 2001; Roberts, 2006; Roland, 2002; Seals & Young, 2003; Smith, 2004). This included both victims and bystanders (Elinoff et al., 2004); in fact, the majority of students in any bullying incident are bystanders, and they are just as likely as victims to experience feelings of anxiety and powerlessness (Mullin-Rindler, 2003). Victims often experience stress, unhappiness, and loneliness, due a loss of significant relationships (Crick et al., 2001; Reid et al., 2004; Rigby, 2001; Seals & Young, 2003).

### **Self-Harm and Suicidal Ideation**

Internalizing such depression and loneliness can lead to suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts (Fekkes et al., 2005; Hazler et al., 2001; Roland, 2002; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Numerous incidents of adolescent suicide have been attributed to repeated victimization by peers (Rigby, 2001; Roberts, 2006). A study by Rigby (1998) found that students categorized as victims scored significantly higher than non-victimized peers on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), which measures psychiatric symptoms and mental health; most notably, victims were more likely to engage in suicidal thinking. Bullying through relational means appears to have a greater effect on feelings of depression and suicidality in females than males (Kenny et al., 2005; Roland, 2002). A study by Rigby (2001) found that peer victimization leads to more frequent thoughts of self-harm and suicide in females, especially those who perceive low levels of social support. Self-destructive behaviors can also develop due to peer victimization (Crick et al., 2002; Roberts, 2006; Seals & Young, 2003); eating disorders



and self-injurious cutting are especially common consequences among adolescent females (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005).

### **Self-Esteem and Self-Worth**

Victims often have low self-esteem (Leary et al., 2003; Nansel et al., 2001; Reid et al., 2004; Rigby, 2001; Seals & Young, 2003; Smith, 2004; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005; Sullivan, 2000) and low self-confidence, as well as feelings of shame or incompetence (Beran & Violato, 2004; Sullivan, 2000). They may view themselves as unattractive, unintelligent, or insignificant (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005; Sullivan, 2000). Withdrawal and isolation are common consequences among victimized girls (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Laflamme, Engstrom, Moller, Alldahl, & Hallqvist, 2002; Roland, 2002). Victimization also resulted in feelings of anger, fear, alienation, disempowerment, hurt, sadness, stupidity, self-pity, vengeance, and public humiliation (Hazler et al., 2001; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005; Sullivan, 2000). Victims may feel helpless, resulting in an external locus of control (Hazler et al., 2001; Laflamme et al., 2002).

### **Academic Performance**

A necessary condition of an effective learning environment is freedom from fear of bullying (Bosworth et al., 1999), and the fear that accompanies bullying affects learning (Edmondson & Hoover, 2008). A large majority of students who have experienced bullying reported that they did not feel safe at school (Edmondson & Hoover, 2008; Laser Haddow, 2006). Students who are victimized are likely to have a difficult time focusing on schoolwork because they are preoccupied with how terrible



they feel as a result of their victimization, or are thinking about when and where the next aggressive interaction is going to occur and how to avoid it (Roberts, 2006; Sullivan, 2000). In fact, Roberts (2006) found that the higher the level of fear a victim has within the school setting, the lower the victim's overall GPA. Findings from numerous studies indicated that victims had poorer academic achievement than non-victimized peers (Elinoff et al., 2004; Kenny et al., 2005; Seals & Young, 2003; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Absenteeism, poor grades, and truancy are common consequences of bullying (Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Graham & Bellmore, 2007; Hazler et al., 2001; Reid et al., 2004; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Reid et al. (2004) and Smokowski & Holland Kopasz (2005) stated that school personnel need to be aware that chronic relational bullying has been linked with absenteeism and poor school performance. Approximately 160,000 U.S. youth reported occasionally staying home from school to evade peer maltreatment (Leary et al., 2003).

### **Health Concerns**

Youth who are bullied develop more psychosomatic symptoms and suffer from more frequent health complaints than non-bullied peers. Female adolescents who reported frequent peer maltreatment in 1994 scored comparatively higher on a measure of poor physical health when it was administered three years later, in 1997 (Rigby, 1998). Such health consequences included sleep problems, headaches, stomachaches, bedwetting, and depression (Fekkes et al., 2005; Rigby, 2001; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005; Sullivan, 2001). Girls were more likely to report physical complaints than boys (Roberts, 2006). Victimized students tended to have elevated levels of physical



symptoms, resulting in frequent visits to the school nurse (Graham & Bellmore, 2007).

In fact, “the American Medical Association has designated school bullying a public health concern” (Graham & Bellmore, 2007, p. 139). Smokowski and Holland Kopasz (2005) found that approximately 7% of U.S. eighth graders stayed home at least one day per month due to fear of being bullied at school, under the context of somatic complaints.

A study of children ages 10-15 in the Stockholm County Children’s Hospital found that bullying can be a trigger in more immediate injuries as well (Laflamme et al., 2002). Accidental injury may occur because of a loss of concentration, when trying to escape the bullying, or through self-inflicted means of injury, such as a suicidal action.

### **Chronic Victimization and Trauma**

Individuals suffering from chronic peer maltreatment may exhibit symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These include recurrent and distressing dreams, images, or intrusive thoughts; reenactments of the maltreatment during play; avoidance of activities or situations associated with the victimization; loss of interest in activities and hobbies; a sense of doom about the future; hypervigilance; an exaggerated startle response; and difficulty concentrating (Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Though the literature did not mention Acute Stress Disorder (ASD), it is reasonable to assume that many victims may meet the criteria for this as well, since it is characterized by symptoms similar to PTSD that occur immediately following a traumatic event. Results of a study by Carney (2008) indicated that the frequency of exposure to bullying was the most significant factor in predicting levels of trauma. More repetitive exposure to bullying seemed to influence the victim’s sense of trust in herself, others, and the world in general,



which resulted in feelings of helplessness and fear (Carney, 2008). Chronic peer maltreatment may also negatively influence how an adolescent interprets future peer interactions (Crick et al., 2002).

### **Long-Term Effects**

Adults who reported frequent peer victimization in childhood reported long-term effects, such as depression, low self-esteem, and difficulty forming peer or intimate relationships (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Nansel et al., 2001; Rigby, 1998). This could be the result of continual victimization in childhood, which may have instigated internalization of the message from bullies that these individuals were inadequate and worthless (Nansel et al., 2001). Former victims tended to be more depressed and exhibited lower self-esteem in young adulthood as compared to their non-victimized peers (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). When former victims had their own children, they were more likely to overreact to perceived bullying behaviors toward their offspring, which contributed to the “intergenerational cycle of overprotection” (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005, p.105). This can lead to inhibition of assertiveness and effective conflict resolution skills.

### **Effects on Friendship**

Victims often experience peer rejection, poor friendship quality, and a lower number of friends than non-victimized peers (Smith, 2004). Sullivan (2000) found that victims had difficulty forming healthy relationships. For youth who internalize negative feedback from peers into self-views, their sense of self-worth can be damaged (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Youth who reported experiencing more frequent and intense



victimization indicated that they felt worse about themselves than those who were not victimized (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Because adolescent girls invest a significant amount of energy into social comparisons and peer acceptance, they also rely more heavily on peer feedback to inform their self-worth, making them more vulnerable to the impressions of others regarding bodily appearance or attractiveness (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). Therefore, the consequences of relational aggression may be more salient for adolescent females (Crick et al., 2002; Goldstein & Tisak, 2003).

In a study by Remillard and Lamb (2005), 40% of the girls who relationally aggressed against one another remained friends and became even closer following the incident; this may be indicative of such aggression being less harmful than expected. This may also indicate that girls have developed coping strategies to work through conflict while still retaining the relationship. However, the closer an individual felt to the friend before the aggression, the more hurt she felt by the incident. The closer the relationship was before the event, the closer the relationship was after the event as well. In many cases, the victim was the only party that felt less close in the relationship. This may be due to the victim seeking outside support, and the aggressor being unaware of a problem in the relationship (Remillard & Lamb).

The intensity of the anger a girl felt toward her aggressor also played a role in whether or not she was willing to continue to friendship; those who were angrier did not consider the person to be a friend any longer (Remillard & Lamb, 2005). There was a strong correlation between anger and hurt following the aggressive act; it may be that these emotions are difficult for adolescents to distinguish from one another, or that they



are experienced in combination. The more hurt a girl felt, the more wishful thinking, self-blaming, withdrawing, and tension-reducing activities she engaged in. Seeking social support may help to preserve the friendship between the aggressor and victim, by allowing for negative expression of feelings while still avoiding confrontation. Girls may believe that a direct confrontation is more likely to end the friendship, and many girls appear to make the decision to preserve the friendship at the cost of their own self-esteem and self-respect. Numerous researchers suggested that seeking social support results in negative long-term outcomes, because it is largely passive and avoidant; other researchers suggested that seeking social support provides a way of gaining greater insight into an incident (Remillard & Lamb, 2005).

### **Cause or Effect**

The issue of causality versus effect is pertinent in correlating a victim's symptoms with the bullying she's experienced. For example, does bullying impact self-esteem and ultimately lower it, or are individuals with lower self-esteem targeted by bullies? When asked how they felt immediately following a bullying incident, 30% of students said that they felt irritable, panicky, or nervous, and had experienced recurring memories of the incident in which they were victimized (Rigby, 1998). A significant number also reported feeling sad and miserable following the bullying. The more frequently a student reported being victimized, the more often she felt that bullying played a role in lowering self-esteem and increasing emotional distress, as well as increasing the desire to avoid school (Rigby, 1998).



### **Circumstances Surrounding Reporting**

Kenny et al. (2005) cited bullying as one of the most underreported safety problems in American schools. More than one-third of middle school students reported feeling unsafe at school due to bullying, yet did not report the bullying to school personnel for various reasons (Bosworth et al., 1999). About half of the students who admitted to being bullied in an anonymous survey reported that they had not told anyone at home or school about being victimized (Reid et al., 2004).

Many studies indicated that students are dissatisfied with the manner in which bullying is handled by adults in their school. Some students viewed teachers as ineffective in recognizing and responding to bullying, and others believed they did not respond quickly enough and did not provide consequences that deterred future bullying (Varjas et al., 2008). The way in which school officials responded to reports of bullying was typically spread throughout the school by peers; this is likely to have a direct influence on future reporting (Roberts & Coursol, 1996).

Mishna & Alaggia (2005) noted seven factors that may prevent a victim from reporting peer maltreatment: "Secrecy, powerlessness, victim blaming self, retaliation, child vulnerabilities, fear of losing the relationship if the bully is a friend, and expectations regarding the effectiveness of adult interventions" (p. 217). Secrecy refers to the code of silence youth often have in keeping specific information from adults. Feelings of powerlessness produce a fear of consequences or a belief that nothing can change the bullying situation. Victims' tendency to blame themselves based upon socially undesirable personal characteristics can also prevent reporting, as well as a fear



that no one will believe they are being victimized. Many victims also fear retaliation by the bully if they report (Newman & Murray, 2005), as well as retaliation at the hands of the bully's friends (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). Perceived vulnerabilities in the victim, such as feelings of anxiety or insecurity, having fewer friends, or having a disability may also make reporting difficult for the victim (Mishna & Alaggia).

Many adolescents may secretly crave the attention or friendship of their tormentors, and therefore avoid telling an adult at the cost of hurting a potential friendship (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). If they are friends with the perpetrator, they may feel guilty turning their friend in to an authority figure, or fear the relationship will end (Newman & Murray, 2005). The less that children were interested in staying friends with the perpetrator, the more likely there were to seek help (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). Victims who responded to bullying with passivity and politeness tended to be more interested in maintaining a friendship with the aggressor, while those who did not care about maintain a friendship were more likely to respond aggressively (Newman et al., 2001).

One's assessment of whether adults have the ability to effectively intervene also influences their decision to report (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). As youth grow older, they become progressively more doubtful of adult intervention strategies. If a report is not validated or supported, the victim may feel shamed or hopeless. Adults tend to assume that disclosure about victimization is beneficial and necessary in receiving support, protection, and intervention; however, this may not always be how victims predict the outcome of disclosure. It does appear that the greater effort a victim puts forth in



withholding information, the more likely she is to suffer from stress-related troubles.

Reporting can alleviate feelings of guilt and hypervigilance, yet there are risks inherent in reporting bullying as well, and youth must weigh these risks with the benefits in making their decision about whether or not to seek help from an adult (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005).

Most victims reported having people they could talk to about their problems, such as parents, friends, siblings, teachers, principals, and counselors (Espelage & Asida, 2001). However, adolescents in other studies reported feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed to share problems about their relationships with adults and felt it was more acceptable to share these types of problems with friends (Goldstein & Tisak, 2006). Many adolescents who admitted to being relationally aggressive felt that socially excluding an individual was their right, and not something that others should intervene in; this message may be passed along to victims as well (Goldstein & Tisak, 2006).

According to Goldstein and Tisak (2006), as adolescents begin to gain independence from their parents, they consider numerous aspects of their lives to be under their own control, and not applicable to adult rules or regulations. However, despite these perceptions of autonomy, adolescents still believe that adult authority figures should have the capability to regulate various moral behaviors, and therefore are willing to allow parental regulation of behaviors that they deem harmful or unfair when directed at others. Adolescents were more accepting of peers providing input with regard to interpersonal issues, but did not believe their parents or friends should have jurisdiction over their relationally aggressive behavior, though parental jurisdiction over physical aggression was considered acceptable. Parental regulation over gossip or social



exclusion was deemed objectionable as well (Goldstein & Tisak). However, in general, it appears that middle school students are more likely to tell an adult at home than school about being victimized (Reid et al., 2004).

Newman et al. (2001) found that adolescents engaged in a series of cognitive and affective processes prior to reacting to conflicts. Individuals tended to encode and interpret the social cues and context of the conflict, make attributional inferences about the other party's intent (whether or not it is hostile), and act upon goals to reach the desired outcome. Goals may include affiliation, control, avoidance, or revenge, and these factors play a role in mediating between initial encoding of cues and the decision to act upon certain strategies. Emotions were also influential in responding, and feelings such as fear and anger can motivate individuals in different ways of coping. Most notably, it appeared that help-seeking in youth was motivated by fear and the goal of avoidance. Females were more likely than males to "pursue goals and use strategies that [were] considered prosocial, constructive, and sometimes avoidant" (p. 399). Females often attempted to resolve the conflict while maintaining the relationship with the perpetrator; this was achieved through means such as sharing, discussing, taking turns or submitting to the other person's views. Females were also more likely to seek help in order to get back personal belongings, reestablish control, right a wrong, or end the conflict (Newman et al.).

A study by Boldero and Fallon (1995) looked at the types of problems that cause adolescents distress, and whom adolescents go to for help with these problems. They found that adolescents chose who they sought help from based upon the specific type of



problem. The majority of adolescents described day-to-day problems about family, interpersonal relationships, education, and health (including drugs/alcohol, depression, and suicide). Females were more likely to ask for help than males at all ages (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Newman et al., 2001; Rigby & Barnes, 2002); however, only slightly more than half of the females in this study asked for help from an adult. In another study, female victims were more likely than males to report being bullied to an adult or friend, but the decision to report depended upon the victim's perception of school authority figures (Dixon Rayle et al., 2007). A study by Unnever and Cornell (2004) also found that girls were more willing to seek help than boys, but the decision to report was influenced by student perceptions and emotions, as well as the perceptions of how teachers and peers would respond. In all cases, the victim was more likely to tell their friends about the bullying than an adult (Boldero & Fallon, 1995).

Students in lower middle school grades were consistently more likely to seek help from school authority figures than students in higher middle school grades (Williams & Cornell, 2006). This may be due to their desire to be autonomous and appear capable of resolving conflict without the assistance of an adult (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Several studies found that younger individuals were more likely to report in general (Rigby & Barnes, 2002).

Many adolescents perceived telling an adult to have negative consequences with peers (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Victims may not report bullying because they believe it is unacceptable to "rat out" peers or hope that if they do not report, the bully will like them (Sullivan, 2000). Victims suggested that telling a



teacher about the problem led to peers viewing the victim as a teacher's pet or a wimp (Cranham & Carroll, 2003). Regardless of the severity of the bullying, some youth felt that it was shameful to report on others actions, which may be a cultural implication in the U.S. of being a "tattletale" (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). This fits with another common reason for not reporting: The victim wanted to resolve the conflict on her own (Newman et al., 2001).

Approximately 10% of victims reported that the situation with the bullies became worse after telling a teacher (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). In this case, it may be important for teachers to think carefully about how they plan to provide protection for an informant against retaliation (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). Many students indicated that they would be more willing to report bullying if it would remain confidential (Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Newman & Murray, 2005; [www.safe2tell.org](http://www.safe2tell.org); Varjas et al., 2008). Without anonymity, many students feared future retaliation and believed that telling an adult will make the situation worse (Reid et al., 2004; [www.safe2tell.org](http://www.safe2tell.org); Sullivan, 2000).

A study by Hunter and Borg (2006) found that anger was a predictor in a student's decision to seek help from peers and adults. They suggested that children who were angry at their aggressor sought help as a way of dealing with the loss of self-esteem caused by the bullying, placing sole blame on the aggressor as a way to improve their self-esteem. The study also found that victims were likely to seek help when they were feeling vengeful, which is indicative of aggressive rather than assertive behavior. Feelings of helplessness and self-pity were also predictive of student's desire to seek social support (Hunter & Borg).



However, feelings of helplessness were also correlated with victims choosing not to report; this may be due to a belief that they cannot change the situation and no one else has the power to change the situation either (Hunter & Borg, 2006; Sullivan, 2000). Many students believed teachers could not or would not do anything to stop the maltreatment (Sullivan et al., 2004). In fact, Olweus (1991) found that many students reported that bullying occurred in the classroom while the teacher was present. Students who had been victimized for many years seemed helpless when discussing getting assistance from teachers, and they reported that they did not want to burden their parents with school problems (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). In addition, these youth seemed accepting of their situation and their goal to just survive each school day (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Chronic bullying might serve to undermine students' trust in school personnel, and cause them to feel too isolated from the school community to seek help (Unnever & Cornell, 2004).

Findings by Hunter and Borg (2006) and Unnever and Cornell (2004) also indicated that students who were bullied more frequently were more likely to report the incidents to an adult, suggesting that bullying needs to be a fairly frequent occurrence in the victim's life before they decide to report it to an authority figure. For this reason, reports should be taken very seriously (Hunter & Borg). Reid et al. (2004) also found that youth who were bullied more frequently were more inclined to report the maltreatment. Fekkes et al. (2005) found that 75% of chronically victimized youth told at least one adult about it.



Unnever and Cornell (2004) conducted a study of six public middle schools in the areas of physical, verbal, and social bullying. They used the Culture of Bullying Scale to assess student perceptions of the degree to which bullying was an accepted and persistent feature of the school climate. They found that chronically victimized students were more likely to report the bullying to school authorities, regardless of the type of bullying they experienced. One of the most common reasons to report involved practical benefits, such as getting personal belongings back, ending a fight, or righting a wrong. Victims were less likely to seek help if they believed their school tolerated bullying, or if they perceived teachers as ignoring bullying incidents or doing little to intervene. The majority of the students surveyed for this study indicated that bullying was a pervasive feature of their school culture (Unnever & Cornell).

The school climate also appeared to be a factor in bystanders' decision to report bullying that they had witnessed ([www.safe2tell.org](http://www.safe2tell.org)). Those who reported the incident to school authorities felt they had a positive relationship with one or more of the school staff and believed that the information would be taken seriously and addressed effectively. However, those who were reluctant to report stated that they were anticipating a negative response from school authorities. Numerous studies reported that youth felt that school authority figures did very little to stop bullying when they witnessed it, often perceiving that the authority figure chose to ignore the situation (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). In fact, upon reporting bullying to an adult at school, 33% of middle school students perceived that the school authority figure did nothing to follow up on the matter (Bradshaw et al., 2007). In a study of middle school students, only 53% reported that they would seek help



from a school authority figure if they were being bullied by a peer (Williams & Cornell, 2006). Approximately 30% said that there were no adults in their school whom they could turn to if they had a personal problem, and almost 50% felt that the teachers in their school were not genuinely concerned about them (Williams & Cornell, 2006). African-American and other minority students were less likely to view their school as a place where they could seek help from adults (Unnever & Cornell, 2004).

Sullivan et al. (2004) suggested that certain teaching styles may make it more difficult for victims and bystanders to report incidents of bullying. Authoritarian teachers typically model bullying behavior by running a classroom based on hierarchy, control, threats, intimidation, and ridicule. “Narcissistic queen bee teachers” desire adoration of popular students, at the expense of less popular students; this teacher tries to be “one of the girls” by colluding in the bullying against the victim and playing favorites. Disinterested teachers send the message that they do not care to be bothered with student problems, and permissive teachers run lenient classrooms in which supervision of students is severely lacking (Sullivan et al.).

### **Recognizing Victims**

#### **Difficulties and Obstacles**

Recognizing the presence of relational aggression is a complex task, because it is not as visible as physical aggression (Bowie, 2007). Because bullying often occurs in locations and at times when adult supervision is minimal or nonexistent in schools, it can be difficult for school officials to know when a bullying incident occurs; in addition, it may be hard to recognize the subtleties of relational aggression even when it does occur



in close proximity to an adult (Bosworth et al., 1999; Elinoff et al., 2004). School authority figures' inability to effectively identify verbal and social forms of aggression appears to be a large part of the problem (Bradshaw et al., 2007). The perceived low levels of female aggression are not actually indicative of less aggression, but suggest that teachers should be looking for less overt signs of bullying (Reid et al., 2004).

A study by Bradshaw et al. (2007) found that staff at all school levels underestimated the number of students involved in frequent bullying; however, both middle school students and staff members tended to report the greatest exposure to and concern about bullying. In fact, over 50% of middle school students surveyed reported that bullying was a moderate or serious problem in their school. Results of this study suggested that a discrepancy of over 20% is present between middle school students' reports of bullying behaviors and middle school teachers' estimations of their existence (Bradshaw et al., 2007).

Hazler et al. (2001) constructed the *Bullying Situations Identification Instrument* to assess adults' identification skills in regards to bullying situations. The measure consists of brief scenarios that include the presence or absence of the three primary characteristics of bullying (harm is done, the act is repeated, and imbalance of power exists). It was administered to school teachers and counselors, with disappointing results. When physical conflict was involved, the school authority figures were more likely to identify the situations as bullying, even when they did not meet all three criteria. However, when verbal, social, or emotional maltreatment was presented, the adults were less likely to identify the scenarios as bullying situations. Those professionals who did



identify such situations correctly seemed to have a greater understanding of the dangers inherent in verbal, social, and emotional abuse. The results suggested that school authorities are less likely to intervene in situations involving elements of relational aggression because they do not recognize these incidents as harmful (Hazler et al., 2001).

This is similar to the findings of Newman and Murray (2005) and Pellegrini (2002), who found that teachers were more likely to recognize and intervene in situations involving physical or direct verbal aggression as opposed to indirect or relational aggression. In a study by Leff et al. (1999), teachers identified fewer than half of those students that other students identified as frequent victims or perpetrators of various forms of bullying. Educators often incorrectly assumed that adolescents in conflict were equal socially, psychologically, and physically (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004).

Elementary school teachers more accurately identified bullies and victims in their classrooms than did middle school teachers, which may be reflective of the limited contact middle school teachers have with students when compared with elementary school teachers (Leff et al., 1999). This may also be due to developmental factors in students, as bullying becomes more covert with age, and therefore may be more difficult for teachers to recognize. This emphasizes the importance of communication among middle school teachers in identifying bullies and victims. In addition, peer reports were significantly more accurate than teacher reports in identifying bullies and victims. This may be because peers view each other in multiple settings and are likely to have greater exposure to bullying situations. Regardless, studies show that teachers are usually among the last to know when bullying occurs (Pellegrini, 2002). Therefore, it may be helpful for



teachers to seek the input of students, as the interactions between peers are qualitatively different than those between teachers and students (Leff et al., 1999).

Several studies indicated that adults who were bullied as children were more likely to perceive bullying as a moderate or severe problem at the school where they were employed; this may imply that those who have experienced victimization are more likely to recognize its presence in various forms (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Adults who have not experienced bullying may not recognize relational aggression or its harmful effects (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). In addition, there is evidence to suggest that some educators normalize all forms of bullying as a typical part of development that teaches kids to be resilient and self-confident due to the misperception that it is an inevitable and relatively harmless aspect of development (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Pellegrini, 2002).

A study by Close and Conoley (2008) found disappointing and frightening results. Teachers were less likely to intervene in situations where the victims were believed to be homosexual, bisexual, or transgendered, and some allowed bullying as a method of satisfying their own aggressive impulses toward a particular child or group. This highlights the necessity of self-awareness and empathy on the part of all school authority figures.

### **Recognizing Characteristics of Victims**

The indirect and covert nature of relational aggression among adolescent females can make it difficult for school authority figures to identify victims and aggressors (Trim, 2009). However, common characteristics are present among many victims of peer maltreatment. They are typically introverted, shy, timid, sensitive, quiet, passive, and



submissive (Beran & Violato, 2004; Olweus, 1993; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). They also tend to be more anxious, insecure, fearful, cautious, and distressed, as compared with non-victimized students (Cranham & Carroll, 2003; Olweus, 1993; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Victims may appear to have low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and difficulty asserting themselves (Cranham & Carroll, 2003; Fekkes et al., 2005; Kenny et al., 2005), and they are likely to have poor communication and problem-solving skills (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). They are apt to react to bullying by withdrawing or crying easily (Olweus, 1993; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). A sudden or gradual decline in the quality of their school work may also be observed (Olweus, 1993; Sullivan, 2000; Sullivan et al., 2004).

Victims are typically social outcasts and are likely to be viewed as “different” by their peers. They may have a transient school history and exhibit a desire to fit in at any cost (Roberts, 2006). Victims usually have few friends, and lacking the protection of peers, these individuals are likely to be defenseless against bullies (Beran & Violato, 2004; Olweus, 1993; Sullivan, 2000). They are typically isolated, sitting alone during lunchtime, recess, and classes (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005; Trim, 2009), and they may attempt to stay close to adults because they relate better to parent or teachers than peers (Olweus, 1993; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Victims are often chosen last for teams or group work, and have difficulty speaking up in class (Olweus, 1993; Sullivan et al., 2004). School authorities may notice that victims tend to receive an excess amount of negative attention from peers, often in the form of teasing, snickering, snide remarks, or nudging each other when the victimized individual enters the room or



speaks up in class (Sullivan, 2000; Sullivan et al., 2004). They are likely to be ostracized from peers much of the time, except when they are being taunted.

### **Characteristics of Victims' Families**

Evidence suggests that victims may come from overprotective or enmeshed families (Smith, 2004). Victims typically describe their parents as overly anxious, protective, and over-involved (Beran & Violato, 2004). This may be because the victim's parents perceive their child as anxious and insecure, and as a result, attempt to avoid conflict in the home because they do not believe the child could cope with it (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Such parents may become over-involved in their child's activities as a way of compensating for the child's social deficits (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). In this way, the parental tendency to shelter such children may be both a cause and consequence of bullying (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). Reid et al. (2004) also found that victims tended to come from close-knit families with highly protective parents, where they may have had few opportunities to work through conflicts. Therefore, victims may not have learned skills for resolving conflicts independently and assertively, resulting in overdependence on the help of parents and teachers (Reid et al.; Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). When such youth reach adolescence, and seeking the help of adults is deemed socially unacceptable, they do not have alternative strategies for dealing with bullies.

### **Intervening in Bullying Situations**

Bullying has a negative impact on the overall school climate (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001), and it is important to send a clear message that bullying will not be tolerated.



The importance of a universal bullying program involving all students is necessary, as trauma is widespread among bystanders who witness bullying as well (Carney, 2008). Most bullying programs are reactive as opposed to preventative and do not account for the unique gender-specific factors underlying female-on-female relational aggression (Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005). The importance of educating students and school authority figures on the broad spectrum of bullying behaviors was stressed in the literature (Elinoff et al., 2004). The first step in achieving this is to educate school officials about identifying signs of relational aggression and the subsequent negative effects of such interactions (Yoon et al., 2004).

Current research indicates that educators may be intervening inconsistently and infrequently in bullying situations (Craig et al., 2000). Because relational aggression can be difficult to observe, students may misinterpret teachers' lack of intervention as a message that bullying is acceptable (Yoon et al., 2004). Almost 70% of middle school students felt that their school was not doing enough to prevent bullying, whereas over 50% of the staff members believed their prevention measures were effective (Bradshaw et al., 2007). In fact, 51% of students reported having seen adults watching bullying and doing nothing to stop it, and 61% believed that school authority figures made the situation worse when they intervened. Yet, 84% of middle school authority figures reported that they have effective strategies for handling bullying situations (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Yoon (2004) found that while 85% of teachers reported intervening "always" or "often," only 35% of students agreed with this assertion.



A study conducted by Fekkes et al. (2005) found that when reports were made to adults, victims indicated that teachers were successful in stopping the bullying almost half the time. However, the remainder of the students who reported being victimized felt that nothing changed or the bullying became worse. A similar study found that 55% of the students who reported bullying felt things got better, while over 40% felt that the situation did not change or became worse (Pellegrini, 2002). Students reported that teachers made the bullying situation worse when they embarrassed students, made assumptions, acted unfairly, gave one of the parties involved in the conflict more power, forced the opposing students to be friends, used putdowns or sarcasm, asked worthless questions, or didn't believe the students (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2009).

### **Victim Responses to Bullying**

Victims' typical responses to bullying included ignoring or minimizing the incident, retaliating, or asking an adult for help (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). Forty-nine percent of middle school students utilized avoidance of certain locations at school as a strategy for resolving bullying (Pellegrini, 2002). Many victims realized that retaliation was an inappropriate response, but noted that it produced positive changes in the bully's behavior (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). Girls were more likely than boys to confront their perpetrator in instances of relational aggression (Kenny et al., 2005).

According to Remillard and Lamb (2005), adolescent coping strategies consist of two types: emotion-focused strategies, such as ignoring, withdrawing, avoiding, and expressing one's self negatively, and problem-focused strategies, such as seeking external support and creating a plan of action. They found that girls utilized social support,



wishful thinking, and tension-reduction activities more often than males. In self-soothing, girls were more likely to employ intimate, interpersonal, emotional, and contemplative resources. Girls also demonstrated greater problem-solving, support-seeking, and internalization than their male counterparts, though both genders used distancing and internalization tactics to cope with relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb).

### **Common Advice to Victims**

Recent research suggests that common advice given to victims is ineffective in reducing bullying (Close Conoley, 2008). Suggestions for victims in dealing with bullies often include: Walking away, ignoring the bullying, asking the bully to leave them alone, reporting the incident to a school authority figure, or fighting back (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Some youth indicated that adults issued mixed messages of peaceful conflict resolution and fighting. Victims reported that recommendations to ignore the bullying often led to continued victimization (Espelage & Asidao, 2001).

Four categories of responding to bullying were cited by Reid et al. (2004). The first was aggressive responding, typically recommended by fathers, which tended to escalate the problem and result in physical conflicts. Passive unconstructive responses ignore the bullying behavior, but essentially meet the bully's demands. Passive constructive responses, which involve quick exits and support seeking, may actually hinder the victim, because they do not learn to resolve the conflict independently. Assertive responses, whereby the victim calmly refuses to comply with the bully's



demands, resulted in the most effective outcome and reduced likelihood of further victimization (Reid et al.).

### **Current Intervention Programs**

Numerous school bullying prevention programs currently exist, though none have been proven completely effective. The STOPP program developed by Orpinas & Horne (2006), which stands for Stop, Think, Options, Plan, and Plan Working, was developed to increase students' ability to handle the impact of bullying. It provides specific guidelines for students to remember when they find themselves in a bullying situation.

The Safe2Tell program ([www.safe2tell.org](http://www.safe2tell.org)), created in Colorado in 2008, works under the assumption that students often have the most information about problems occurring in the school. This mission statement of this program is "to ensure that every Colorado student, parent, teacher and community member has access to a safe and anonymous way to report any concerns to their safety or the safety of others, with a focus on early intervention and prevention through awareness and education."

The Bullying Project is based on Olweus' research (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). It promotes a school-wide zero-tolerance policy on bullying, in which students are taught how to stand up to bullies, ask for help from an adult, and reach out to students who may be in need of help. Interventions with both bullies and victims are utilized, with counseling for the bully to work on developing empathy, and support for the victim through peers, and individual and group counseling (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005).



Bullybusters is an anti-bullying program in which short skits are acted out about common bullying situations in the classroom in order to promote discussion on the subject (Smokowski & Holland Kopasz, 2005). A zero-tolerance policy is explained following the skits, and students are asked to take positive steps toward decreasing bullying.

The No-Blame Approach occurs when a group of students, including students who have been known to engage in bullying behavior, discuss with a teacher how the situation can be improved for the victim by her peers; this approach depends upon social and moral peer pressure (Owens et al., 2001; Rigby & Barnes, 2002). The Method of Shared Concern employs moral peer pressure as well, and it is the teacher's responsibility is to bring the bully's feelings of shame and unease into conscious awareness in order to establish shared concern for the victim without blaming or punishing the bully (Owens et al., 2001; Reid et al., 2004). This method provides victims with the opportunity for authority figures to seek them out, instead of having to seek help from authority figures (Rigby & Barnes, 2002), and has been cited as powerful short-term technique for ending bullying (Reid et al., 2004). Peer counseling and peer mediation have been posited as useful intervention strategies as well (Owens et al., 2001).

Elinoff et al. (2004) compared five school school-based prevention programs for school violence: Bully Prevention Program (Olweus, 1993), PeaceBuilders Program (Embry, Flannery, Vazsonyi, Powell, & Atha, 1996), Providing Alternative Thinking Strategies (Greenberg & Kusche, 1998), Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (Aber, Jones, Brown, Chaundry, & Samples, 1998), and Second Step Violence Prevention



Curriculum (Grossman et al., 1997). The primary goal of all of these programs was to alter the school environment in some way, and all of the programs involved considerable training for school staff members, including teachers, aids, and administrators. In addition, the programs provided procedures for obtaining parent involvement and encouraged generalization across situations by involving various members of the school staff, student family members, and community members. Secondary prevention strategies were created for situations in which the beginning signs of the problem were present, and the goal was to prevent the development of more serious problems. This type of intervention focused on students with identified risk factors related to aggression or victimization, and typical interventions include social skills, problem-solving, anger management, and assertiveness training for victims and perpetrators. Tertiary prevention strategies were designed for individuals who had established problems with peer aggression, and the goal was remediation of the problem or a decrease in problem effects. The authors suggested that school psychologists should become involved in all three levels of prevention, but noted the importance of all school personnel understanding the behaviors that constitute bullying, the impact of bullying, and the goals of intervention (Elinoff et al.).

Edmondson and Hoover (2008) evaluated a bullying program that partnered schools with the health department in a Midwestern town, with a focus on overall health and wellness utilizing the core features of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. This included providing opportunities for awareness and involvement on the part of adult authority figures both inside and outside the school setting, conducting a climate survey



to assess bullying patterns and information, holding an anti-bullying day for students where desirable behaviors were discussed, creating classroom rules against bullying and holding class meetings to practice group decision making and problem-solving through nonviolent conflict resolution, and facilitating serious talks with bullies, victims, and parents. The researchers found that after three years of implementation, feelings of safety were increased and incidents of bullying decreased, with the overall climate of the classroom and school environment showing positive improvements in attitudes toward bullying (Edmondson & Hoover).

It is important to note that zero tolerance policies can send a dangerous message to adolescents (Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003). Although stating that violence will not be tolerated, it also suggests that victims and bullies will not be heard and judgment is not needed to solve discipline problems. Such policies emphasize the reaction to disciplinary problems, but do not focus on preventing these problems in the first place. While student victims need to see that consequences occur for the bully in order to decide that reporting is worthwhile, a harsh punishment for the bully may result in resentment and anger on the part of the bully, leading to retaliation and further victimization, whether perpetrated by the bully or her friends (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). In addition, when students are repeatedly informed that the school does not tolerate or have bullying, victims may believe it is their own fault (Sullivan et al., 2004).

### **Levels of Intervention**

**State level.** State laws have been the primary vehicle for legislature announcing acts to reduce bullying (Limber & Small, 2003). Several states currently have anti-



bullying laws in place, though they vary by region. However, of the states that specifically address bullying initiatives, approximately half actually define the behaviors that constitute bullying, and these definitions vary by state (Limber & Small, 2003).

Nebraska lawmakers passed a measure to prevent bullying schools in 2008, but the measure did not describe specific steps districts need to take to prevent such behaviors (Honawar, 2008). Maryland lawmakers also approved a bill that requires the boards of education on state and local levels to create policies that end bullying, harassment, and intimidation through physical, verbal, written, or electronic means; however, again, the bill did not give specific instructions to schools on how to accomplish this (Honawar, 2008). Georgia laws defined bullying only physically, citing injury or immediate bodily harm as identifiers (Limber & Small, 2003). Connecticut's statute defined bullying as an overt act, and Colorado's definition included written or verbal expressions, or physical acts and gestures; however, neither of these encompassed the covert acts typically perpetrated through relationally aggressive means (Limber & Small, 2003). Louisiana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Oregon, Washington, and West Virginia considered bullying to be the same as harassment or intimidation (Limber & Small, 2003).

It may be beneficial for state departments of education to provide detailed information to schools about the identified effectiveness of already established anti-bullying programs, the elements of effective prevention measures, and issues to consider in selecting a program (Limber & Small, 2003). Additionally, while many of these programs already noted differences based on race, color, national origin, sex, and



disability, they did not cover the differences students cited as reasons for victimization, such as weight or clothing (Limber & Small, 2003). It will be important for schools to incorporate this language into their intervention policies.

**District level.** School boards are usually given the responsibility of developing anti-bullying policies in school districts (Limber & Small, 2003). The typical requirement is for schools to implement policies for prohibiting bullying on school grounds, as well as providing opportunities for anonymous reporting by students and parents, required reporting by teachers, and steps for investigating the reported events (Elinoff et al., 2004). Consistent district-wide anti-bullying policies would launch standards and practices within all schools in an effort to reduce confusion about definitions of bullying. The development of policies on a school-by-school basis might encourage greater ownership by students, school personnel, and parents. However, these two approaches need not be mutually exclusive concepts (Limber & Small, 2003).

A distinction should also be made between mandated and encouraged reporting, and issues of liability should be described in detail. A comprehensive school-wide approach designed to change the environment of the school in relation to issues of bullying should be designed; instead of bullying being a common occurrence, it should be universally recognized as an unacceptable act that results in consistent consequences. Severe punishments for bullying, such as school expulsion, may actually hinder the willingness to report bullying (Limber & Small, 2003).

**School level.** School counselors and school psychologists can serve as advocates for student victims, and can initiate changes in policies regarding bullying prevention and



intervention (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). These individuals can participate in several roles, including assessing the nature and extent of the problem, intervening in ways that assist the bully and victim, and establishing effective policies within the educational setting that promote appropriate social interactions between students.

Assessments should be conducted in individual schools to assess the extent of the bullying problem, the types of aggressive behaviors that students employ, where the bullying occurs, and teacher and student perceptions of the authority figures' ability to intervene (Craig et al., 2000). Such assessments are likely to be most helpful in the form of anonymous, school-wide questionnaires (Yoon et al., 2004). Many of the current surveys on bullying focus almost exclusively on direct verbal and physical aggression, but indirect and relational forms of aggression have been neglected (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). It would be useful for schools to combine such surveys with questionnaires specifically created to assess relational forms of aggression, such as the Peer Assessment of Relational Aggression developed by Crick and Grotpeter (1995).

Many current interventions focus on providing the victim with social skills, problem-solving, and assertiveness training to improve upon their relationships with peers (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Kenny et al., 2005; Pellegrini, 2002); however, most students viewed factors that are more difficult to alter as reasons for being bullied, such as being unattractive or overweight, wearing out of style clothing, having a different ethnic background from the majority of students in the school, or being a lower socioeconomic status. Therefore, it may be advisable to include interventions that address morally-based issues for aggressors, such as combating social prejudice and



teaching adolescents to create a more respectful and accepting environment (Bosacki et al., 2006).

Other methods of decreasing bullying behavior included putting bullies in extracurricular activities, giving them positive attention, sending them to another school, creating a reward system for good behavior, and doling out consequences for negative behavior (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Some children felt it would be useful for bullies to learn what it is like to be on the receiving end of such behavior, because this would encourage the bully to stop. A small number of students believed that support groups and individual counseling would be beneficial for bullies and victims (Espelage & Asidao, 2001). Role reversal techniques were suggested for bullies as a method of developing empathy for their victims (Kenny et al., 2005).

**Training for educators.** Currently, it appears that students have great pessimism about the potential success of bullying interventions strategies employed by educators (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004). School personnel need to acknowledge that they have a lack of credibility in students' eyes when it comes to dealing with bullying effectively (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). Opening the lines of communication between students and school authority figures can be difficult, since early adolescence is a time when students are considerably resistant to adult authority and are less interested in taking part in classroom discussions about bullying, as compared with elementary and high school-aged youth (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). In a study on bullying in Australian schools, Rigby and Bagshaw (2003) found that "about 40% of students around the age of 14 are either actively against collaborating with teachers to try to stop bullying, or are unsure whether



or not they want to collaborate” (p. 542). In fact, between the ages of 10 and 14, a sharp contrast occurs; the number of students who have negative opinions about teachers as prospective resolvers of peer conflicts more than doubles. The number of adolescents in middle school who reported that positive outcomes occurred after telling an adult authority figure was only two thirds the rates of elementary-aged children. One study found that female students were more inclined to collaborate with teachers, but further research did not support this; however a significantly higher number of females felt that students and staff should work together to end bullying in the school setting (Rigby & Bagshaw).

A significant element in deterring bullying is the school authority figures’ confidence in their ability to handle social situations (Bosworth et al., 1999). School personnel need to be provided with training to recognize and understand cycles of popularity and isolation among adolescent females, and they need to be educated about how to respond to relational aggression (Brown, 2003). Many teachers complain that they are not trained in effective intervention strategies to deal with bullying, let alone relational aggression, and therefore do not have the knowledge or skills to handle the situation effectively (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004).

In a study examining attitudes and interventions of elementary school teachers in regards to bullying, Yoon (2004) found that almost a quarter of the teachers reported ignoring bullying behavior because they believed it was helpful. A large number of teachers were unwilling to become involved because of a widely accepted belief that relationally aggressive behaviors are short-lived and developmentally appropriate in



middle school (Yoon et al., 2004). Yoon (2004) found that teachers who perceived bullying as a serious offense and reported higher levels of self-efficacy and greater empathy were more likely to intervene. Teachers who had greater awareness of the negative consequences of bullying on the victim were also more likely to report intervening (Yoon).

Training programs for teachers and other school personnel should emphasize that bullying is not primarily a problem of male physical dominance and that relational aggression occurs often and has numerous negative consequences (Hazler et al., 2001). Mullin-Rindler (2003) suggested that middle school personnel should identify potential situations, times, and areas where individuals are likely to be perceived as easy targets in order to provide increased supervision. This may include paying special attention to new students or those who are nontraditional in behavior or appearance. This would also assume that educators are present in areas where high levels of bullying occur, such as hallways, bathrooms, and cafeterias (Close Conoley, 2008; Craig et al., 2000; Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Providing training programs that emphasize empathy would be beneficial in increasing educators' understanding of victimization (Craig et al., 2000). In addition, if teachers were trained on how to be aware of facial expressions, body language, and nonverbal cues in relational aggression, they may be able to more effectively identify the behaviors involved, as well as differentiating between the perpetrators and victims (Craig et al., 2000).

Mishna and Alaggia (2005) offered eight suggestions for teachers working with victimized students. First, promote an environment that addresses the range and severity



of bullying, one in which students can anticipate feeling heard, understood, and protected. Second, be able to identify potential signs of relational aggression and do not be afraid to ask direct questions. Listen to the victim, ask how she is feeling, and find out what specific help she needs; sometimes all the victim needs is someone to listen, not someone to fix the problem (Trim, 2009). It is important open the lines of communication about bullying in the classroom, and to differentiate between expressing anger and aggression (Trim, 2009).

Third, cultivate a relationship in which students do not feel pressure to report bullying, yet are aware that they can choose to do so at their own pace and comfort level (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). Because of the common fear of retaliation among both victims and bystanders, one solution is to offer anonymous reporting via a telephone hotline or email (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004). Fourth, anticipate and minimize the stress a victim may experience as a result of reporting and remember not to give guarantees about outcomes that might lead to disappointment or frustration. Fifth, listen, validate, and attempt to understand the victim's experience, instead of focusing on an objective viewpoint, as this creates a sense of trust in adults (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005).

Sixth, consider the legal and ethical issues surrounding reporting obligations and limits of confidentiality; there needs to be a balance between respecting a victim's wishes to maintain confidentiality and promoting autonomy, while still fulfilling obligations as a teacher (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). The victim's dignity needs to be upheld and confidence maintained, even in circumstances involving mandated reporting (Roberts & Coursol, 1996).



Seventh, address how difficult it was for the adolescent to report the bullying and consider all of the factors related to reporting (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). When approached by victimized students, it will be important for an educator to understand the possible ambivalence of the reporter; praising a student's choice to inform them about the problem and labeling it as courageous or self-caretaking can be helpful (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004). Finally, adolescents are more likely to share the victimization with their peers, so be sure to work with all students in regards to how to handle reports of bullying (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005).

Graham and Bellmore (2007) also listed suggestions for teachers in responding to bullying. Teachers should never ignore a bullying incident that they witness; they should always respond to these incidents by communicating with the perpetrator that their actions are unacceptable and help the victim to feel less powerless about the situation. Additionally, witnessed bullying incidents should be used as "teachable moments," (p. 144) encouraging conversations with students about bullying and other difficult topics. It is important for teachers to remember that they are role models who should set examples using their own behaviors; by this, the authors mean that adults should be aware of the peer harassment that occurs among faculty members and abstain from targeting each other and students. Teachers should also request outside help when needed, such as in instances where they do not feel trained to handle the situation (Graham & Bellmore).

**Training for students.** Students need to be asked to create their own rules about bullying and should be provided with information about strategies for preventing and responding to victimization (Graham & Bellmore, 2007). Specifically, both victims and



bystanders need to be given a script with appropriate language for responding to and intervening in bullying situations (Reid et al., 2004). Such scripts should provide methods for using assertive statements, resisting manipulation and threats, responding to name-calling, enlisting support from peers, leaving conflict situations, and remaining calm in the face of bullying (Reid et al., 2004).

Because student bystanders are typically present during bullying situations, Reid et al. (2004) suggested that an effective tool in combating bullying may be to utilize these bystanders in placing social pressure upon the bullies to condemn such acts, instead of someone in authority providing a consequence. Peer support systems involved in intervention strategies should aim to turn bystanders into defenders (Smith, 2004). Punitive methods imposed by authority figures are likely to provide only short-term results because they reinforce the value of hierarchy and dominance, which are central aspects of bullying (Reid et al., 2004). Social peer pressure would be likely to provide more lasting results.

**Summary of interventions.** Twemlow & Sacco (2008) offered these suggestions in creating a successful school violence prevention model. Encourage participation in the development of the program from all school members in order to increase accountability and “buy in.” Frequently assess how safe students feel within the school, and increase awareness and understanding of power dynamics among the students. In addition, make the “undiscussable” (p. 27) problems discussable – nothing should be hidden or unmentionable. End “pathological bystanding,” (p. 26) as this perpetuates the problem but does not encourage bystanders to take any responsibility in changing things. Identify



natural leaders within the school and guide them in acting altruistically. Overall, the problem needs to be defined, boundaries set, a time table established, and continual evaluation of the program needs to occur on all levels of the school hierarchy, including students and authority figures (Twemlow & Sacco). A school-wide primary prevention program “should operate under the assumption that bullying is a systemic social problem and that finding a solution is the collective responsibility of everyone in the school. Systemic prevention requires changing the culture of the whole school” (Graham & Bellmore, 2007, p. 142).



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides information about the research epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and research methods used in this study. In addition, the stance of the researcher is discussed, as well as an explanation of the grounded theory process.

#### **The Researcher**

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in this qualitative study. This allowed for a great deal of flexibility in data collection methods, because I was able to respond to participants based on the emergent nature of their responses within the immediate context of our interaction. However, I strove to be aware of my own biases throughout the research process; I realized that my decisions regarding the research topic, theoretical perspective, methodological approach, and construction of the grounded theory, were all reflective of my beliefs and values (Charmaz, 2006). It was my hope that through writing memos and journaling about my experiences as a researcher, I was able to find a balance between my own constructions of meaning and the views of the participants in this study. For example, I was aware of my tendency to feel sympathy for the victims, and anger towards bullies and others who do not stand up for the victim, and I attempted to keep these feelings from interfering with the meaning of the participants' responses in the study. Through journaling about my own experiences and reactions to the participants, I tried to create a boundary



between my own meanings and the meanings the participants are putting forth. The following section describes my stance as the researcher, based on personal and professional experiences, which may have influenced the research process.

### **Choice of Research Topic**

In deciding upon a dissertation topic, I was given the same advice repeatedly: “Pick a topic that interests you completely, because you will live and breathe it for an entire year, if not longer.” This led me to the reason I chose to become a psychologist in the first place, more than a decade ago.

During the year of the Columbine High School shootings, I was a senior at a high school only a town away from Littleton, Colorado. I was shocked and devastated by the aftermath of such an event, yet intrigued by the question everyone wanted an answer to: “Why did this happen?” Numerous reasons were promoted by media outlets, but of course no one truly knows the answer to such a question. It was reported by many students that the perpetrators of the violent incident were outcasts, often bullied and teased, and this was attributed as at least part of the reason for the rampage. While I would never condone such a violent act, I could not help but feel a twinge of sympathy for the shooters. I began thinking about all of the students in my own school who were bullied, and the intense level of distress I felt upon witnessing such behavior. It pained me to see an innocent peer being picked on for inexplicable reasons, and it frustrated me that school personnel did not seem to do anything to stop it.

For this reason, I chose to work with victimized populations in the role of a therapist, in hopes of understanding their plight and eventually empowering them to



move beyond the role of a victim. I have worked with numerous victimized populations, including children who have been abused and neglected, adolescents involved in the legal system, and women who have experienced domestic violence. In deciding upon a dissertation topic, it made sense not only to follow this theme of victimization, but to return to the roots of my interest in the subject.

The majority of the research on bullying has focused on males, and only recently has female-on-female bullying become an area of concern. In reading the literature, I came to better identify and understand my own experiences of being bullied by female peers in school on occasion, and this led to the realization that many adolescent females may not even be aware that they are being bullied because of the nontraditional style of bullying that often occurs among females. In addition, if the victims themselves have difficulty identifying bullying, how much more difficult must it be for outsiders, such as teachers and school administrators, to recognize and put a stop to such behavior? I am a firm believer in the uniqueness of every individual and her or his story, and therefore a qualitative study focusing on the depth of female-on-female bullying experiences was a natural conclusion.

### **Background of the Researcher**

I consider myself to be a minority when it comes to my racial-cultural identity. While I am East Indian racially, I was adopted by Caucasian parents in the U.S. at a very young age, and therefore I consider myself to be “American” in a cultural sense. However, I’ve found that most people initially judge me based on skin color and appearance, often leading to questions about where I was born, what language I speak,



and what type of food I eat. This has been a valuable, albeit sometimes irritating, lesson for me: I try not to make assumptions about anyone. I attempt to be open-minded and nonjudgmental, allowing individuals to share their story with me, to teach me about their experiences and beliefs from their unique perspective. I believe this has helped me to be comfortable and competent in working with clients and research participants from various populations and backgrounds. My hope is that my own experiences will be a constant reminder to remain open-minded, as well as a reminder to remain aware of my own biases.

### **Research Model and Paradigm**

Four qualitative concepts guided me throughout the research process: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods (Crotty, 1998). The application of each of these elements to this study is described in the following section.

#### **Epistemology**

Epistemology is a theory of knowledge that describes how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998). I chose to use constructionism as an epistemological approach for my study. According to Crotty (1998), constructionism asserts that “all knowledge and all meaningful reality [are] contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between humans and their world” (p. 42). Therefore, all meaning is constructed by individuals based on their distinctive interactions with the world. Constructionism asserts that interactions and experiences do not have meaning until it is imposed upon them by the individual experiencing them within a social context. However, it is important to recognize that we are born into a world already filled with



meaning based upon cultural values and norms. Culture can be both restraining and liberating in this sense, because it teaches us how to identify and view experiences, but may cause us to be resistant to potential meanings outside of our cultural norms (Crotty, 1998).

For this reason, it was extremely important to be aware of the cultural biases I held as the researcher. For example, valuing independence and the individual being over the collective group is a typical bias of the Western society in which I have grown up, but depending upon the cultural background and values of the participants in this study, this may not be a value the participants hold. In relation to this, in a school setting, it can be difficult for school authority figures to expend energy and attention upon one individual in need of assistance, at the expense of the collective group, such as a classroom full of students. As a psychotherapist, I am also biased in believing that the context of a situation supersedes all other performance factors. For instance, if a child performs poorly in academics, I am inclined to explore the contextual factors influencing the poor performance, such as home life, mood, relationships, and general quality of life; however, in academic settings, great emphasis is placed upon standardized test scores and measures of achievement, wherein context is rarely considered. I attempted to be respectful and open to the demands placed upon educators in academic settings in regards to such measures.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Crotty (1998) described theoretical perspective as how we choose to view and make sense of the world. I chose to use constructionism as the theoretical framework for



my study, which is similar to the epistemological definition of constructionism. From the theoretical perspective, constructionism asserts that meaning is never created, but is instead constructed by each individual as she or he engages in interactions with the world and attempts to make sense of these interactions. Charmaz (2000) asserted that there is no such thing as “truth” because each individual makes sense of the same reality in different ways, resulting in multiple relativistic realities. In addition, further interactions and experiences have the power to adjust or solidify the meanings constructed based on past experiences. I believe that constructionism is well-suited to the grounded theory methodology due to the constructive nature of developing a theory, as well as the necessity of attempting to understand the views of the participants in identifying themes.

### **Methodology**

A traditional grounded theory methodology was used to collect and analyze data for this study. Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, and is often synonymous with the term “method of constant comparison.” The purpose of this methodology is to simultaneously and systematically collect, code, and analyze data in order to generate an integrated, consistent, and reasonable theory that is grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The theory is inductively derived by studying a phenomenon using a systematic set of procedures to arrive at a hypothesis, to be tested at a later time (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This type of methodology typically results in a substantive theory, which is a theoretical explanation that evolves from a particular problem within a specific context (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of



the grounded theory approach is to create analytic categories and a theory that are directly “grounded” in the research data (Charmaz, 2006).

Four criteria have been noted as essential in creating a well-constructed grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These include fitness, understanding, generality, and control. Fitness implies that the theory should fit the substantive area being researched, meaning that the theory must be derived directly from the data regarding this specific area of inquiry.

Understanding proposes that the theory should represent the reality of the participants and be readily understood by them. The findings should reflect the participants’ words and meanings, and the theory developed from their meanings should make sense to them, as well as to other professionals studying this particular phenomenon.

Generality indicates that the theory must be comprehensive and abstract enough that that it is still applicable within a reasonable variation of daily situations and contexts. The theory I developed is broad enough that it is reasonable to assume that it could apply to similar adolescent female-on-female bullying situations within the middle school setting, outside of the specific context in this study. While it could not be generalized to the point that it is labeled a universal truth regarding this phenomenon, it is extensive enough to encompass various aspects of similar situations.

Control is described as the ability of participants to have some sense of power over their action or reaction to the phenomenon at some point in time (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). If participants did not have this sense of control, cause



and effect would be inevitable as far as how the participants' responded to bullying; however, because participants' had the power to choose how they reacted to a bullying situation, the theory developed from the data will take account of the various components that were present when a participant chose how to react.

The process of developing a grounded theory involved several elements, including simultaneous data collection and analysis, a three step data coding process, comparative methods, memo writing to produce conceptual analyses, theoretical sampling, and the development and integration of a theoretical model (Charmaz, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). All of these elements are described in further detail in the research methods section.

## **Research Methods**

### **Participants and Setting**

The participants included five adolescent females, who self-identified as victims of female-perpetrated bullying within the middle school or junior high school setting, and four middle school faculty members, including three teachers and one principal. The number of participants was dependent upon the information I received through interviews, as I gathered data until the point of saturation, when no new information could be added to the developing categories of information in the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000). All of the participants were recruited from middle schools and junior high schools in the Rocky Mountain and Midwestern regions through purposeful sampling. A homogeneous sample was identified, focusing on specific criteria for the participants (Creswell, 2007), described as follows.



Five adolescent females attending middle school or junior high school, who self-identified as victims of female-perpetrated bullying, were chosen as participants. The criteria for inclusion in the study were decided by a brief phone interview with potential participants in which they described the types of bullying behaviors they had experienced, the frequency with which they had experienced such behaviors, and the interventions used in response to the bullying. Inclusion was based upon the generally accepted definitions of bullying and relational aggression, in which the victim experienced repeated intentional harm-doing perpetrated by an individual or group who had greater physical, psychological, or social power than the victim (Hazler et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Varjas et al., 2008). The bullying behaviors experienced included verbal, emotional, social, or physical means of harming the victim. In addition, the bully-victim relationship was one that developed within the school setting. Demographic information on the students is listed in Table 1.

Three teachers and one principal who were employed in middle school settings were chosen as participants in this study. Criteria for inclusion were decided by a brief phone interview covering the types of bullying the individuals had witnessed and their responses to these actions. Inclusion also required that the individual had been employed at the middle school for at least one academic year prior to the beginning of the interview process for this study, so that the individual had experienced working in the setting being studied. Both genders were acceptable for the purposes of this study and both were encouraged to participate. Demographic information on the school authority participants is listed in Table 2.



Table 1

*Student Participant Demographic Information (using pseudonyms)*

Name	Age	Grade	Ethnicity	Family Status
Amy	15	9	Caucasian	Single bio. mother Regular contact with bio. father Three older bio. sisters
Charlotte	14	9	Caucasian	Married bio. parents One younger bio. brother
Kristen	15	9	Caucasian	Married bio. parents Two younger bio. brothers
Kyla	15	9	Hispanic- American	Single bio. mother No contact with bio. father One younger bio. brother
Nora	14	8	African- American	Married adoptive parents One younger adopted brother

Table 2

*School Authority Participant Demographic Information (using pseudonyms)*

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Position Title	Family Status
Connor	30	Male	Caucasian	8 <sup>th</sup> grade Earth Sciences teacher	Married No children
Devon	29	Male	Caucasian	6 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grade Physical Education & Health Sciences teacher	Married No children
Greg	32	Male	Caucasian	6 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grade Physical Education teacher	Unmarried No children
Sara	46	Female	Caucasian	K-12 Principal	Married Two children



## **Procedures**

I requested to conduct my research at numerous middle schools (sixth through eighth grade) and junior high schools (seventh through ninth grade) within the Rocky Mountain region; I was granted permission by two principals to complete research within their schools. Additionally, these principals agreed to send a brief description of the goals and participation requirements of my study to colleagues whom they believed may be interested in the research topic; one of the school personnel participants, Connor, was recruited from the Midwest using this method. In one junior high school, I provided a 15-minute presentation to the faculty members during their staff meeting describing the premise of my research and requirements for participation; I provided handouts summarizing the information to each faculty member following the presentation, which included my contact information. I was also permitted to post student participation recruitment flyers in the girls' bathrooms and locker rooms at this school. In one middle school, the principal spoke with her faculty members and students on my behalf to recruit participants for the study and provided them with the same handouts and flyers I created for the junior high school. Two of the student participants, Kyla and Nora, were recruited independently of their schools, as they learned about my study through word of mouth by students at the participating schools.

An incentive for participating in the study was a raffle, in which four \$25 gift cards for Target were given away following the completion of all participant interviews; two gift cards were given to adolescent participants, and two were given to school personnel participants. In addition, the schools that agreed to participate in helping me



recruit volunteers for my study received a synopsis of the findings of my study following its conclusion.

When potential participants contacted me to confirm their interest in participating in my study, I engaged in a brief phone interview with each to evaluate whether they met the inclusion criteria requirements for the study. All of the interested individuals were accepted for participation except one; the individual declined had been teaching at his current school for less than one year. Interviews were scheduled by phone and all but one of the participants were able to engage in a face-to-face interview; Connor, a teacher participant, engaged in the study independently from his school and completed only phone interviews due to geographical distance.

An informed consent document describing the study in detail was given to participants prior to or at the beginning of the in-person interviews; student participants were required to have at least one guardian accompany them to the initial interview in order to provide consent. The consent and assent forms were signed by the adult participants, guardians' of minor age participants, and minor age student participants. Due to geographical distance, Connor completed his consent form electronically through e-mail before engaging in the interview. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic being studied, the limits of confidentiality were emphasized in the consent and assent documents, especially my responsibility to report imminent threats of harm to self or others.

Participants were interviewed in a semi-structured format (Merriam, 1998). Interviews occurred at the researcher's office, participants' schools, and participants'



homes, outside of regular school hours. All of the participants except for Kyla, Devon, and Connor completed one in-person interview lasting approximately 45-90 minutes; Kyla and Devon each completed two in-person interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, and Connor, who participated from a different region of the country, completed two 45 minute phone interviews. The number and length of interviews were dependent upon the amount of information each participant had to share on the research topic. All of the participants engaged in brief clarification interviews with me by phone or e-mail after their initial interviews were transcribed.

The purpose of multiple interviews and follow-up clarifications was to fill in missing information in the developing theory, a technique known as theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Theoretical sampling involved a continual alternation of focus on my part, between the information collected by participants in interviews, and the categories of the developing theory. As new concepts were derived from the data presented by participants, they were formed into the categories of information that eventually provided the framework for the evolving theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As the amount of pertinent data grew, the categorical themes were elaborated upon until it seemed that no new information could be obtained (Charmaz, 2006). This was known as reaching the point of saturation. Sampling ended when the point of saturation, also known as redundancy, was attained (Merriam, 1998).

All of the interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed by me, and each of the participants was given a pseudonym from a pre-determined list of names to protect their confidentiality. I decided not to allow participants to choose their own



pseudonym, as they may have inadvertently chosen the name of another participant. The audio-recordings, transcribed interviews, and my notes and memos on the developing theory were kept in a file locked in my home office. Following the completion of the first rough draft of my dissertation, the audio-recordings were erased. The signed copies of the informed consent and assent forms will be retained for three years following the completion of the project, to be maintained by my research advisor.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection included the responses and behavioral observations of participants during semi-structured interviews. In addition, I kept a written record of my ideas regarding the development of the theory in memos and journal entries, also to be considered as data.

Data were analyzed using the traditional three step process described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). First, open coding was used to break down, examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize the data. I used a sentence-by-sentence analysis to begin constructing meaning from the data and wrote notes on the general concept or idea of each sentence of the transcribed interview. During this step, categories were labeled with codes that were based upon the properties and dimensions of the data in each category. Properties were the characteristics pertaining to a particular category, and dimensions denoted the location of a property along a continuum (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, a category was “Reporting,” and the property involved the frequency of such actions, while the dimension ranged from “never” to “often.” The categories were labeled using in vivo codes, which included generally accepted terms



suggestive of significant meaning, participants' original wording capturing the meaning of an experience, and shorthand terms specific to the particular group being interviewed (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987). Such in vivo codes included terms such as "Differences in Appearance" and "Fear of New Relationships." In conjunction, I used memo writing throughout all three of the analyzation steps in order to keep track of my thoughts about the data and my developing conceptualization of the theory, which allowed me to step back and analyze my conception of the codes and emerging categories of the phenomenon being studied (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987).

The second step in analyzing the data were axial coding, a set of procedures that allowed the data to be restructured and integrated in new ways following the breakdown of data in the open coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While the goal of open coding was to break down the transcribed data sentence-by-sentence in order to create categories of relevant information based upon themes, the goal of axial coding was to connect the categories in new ways. Once new connections between categories were developed, the phenomenon was viewed from a new perspective, so that a theory could be developed. I chose to literally cut the transcriptions apart and rearrange them into new groupings based on the categories developed.

Connections were made between influential conditions on female-on female bullying, the phenomenon of bullying, the context of bullying, any intervening conditions, the related actions and interactions of participants, and the consequences of such interactions, as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Influential conditions included events that led to the occurrence of the phenomenon, with the phenomenon as



the central idea or event related to a set of actions or interactions focused on managing the phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon was adolescent female-on-female bullying, and influential conditions of bullying included the physical appearance or social status of the victim. Additionally, influential conditions related to the decision to report the bullying included fears and expectations of response. The context of the phenomenon was a particular set of properties that were representative of the phenomenal conditions under which interactional strategies occurred, such as bullying occurring in hallways where teachers were not present to supervise students. Intervening conditions were structural circumstances that influenced the interactional strategies pertaining to a phenomenon; these conditions were facilitating or constraining within the specific context. Intervening conditions included faculty recognition of a victim and whether the victim chose to report the bullying. The action and interactional strategies were responses devised to manage the phenomenon in relation to the perceived conditions, and the consequences of such actions were the related outcomes. In this study, the action and interactional strategies were the interventions imposed or not imposed by school authority figures in response to the bullying situation. Consequences of the interventions included potential effects on the victims. I constructed a model to help me visually link the relationships of these elements together in creating an integrated grounded theory, which is presented in Tables III through VIII in Chapter V, along with a narrative report of the findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The third and final step in the analysis process was selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This involved selecting a core category with



significant meaning, and systematically linking it to other categories in order to validate relationships and fill in categories that were not yet saturated with pertinent information. For example, I linked the category of “Social Status” with the category of “Acceptance” to connect the potential reasons bullying occurred. Throughout the research process, I continually validated the relationships between the influential conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences against the data provided by participants in order to ground the theory in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order to organize this information in a way that made the developing categories clear to me, I developed a visual model called a conditional matrix. This was an analytic diagram that displayed the wide range of conditions and consequences related to bullying (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It consisted of both macro (e.g. school) and micro levels (e.g. interpersonal interactions) of action and interaction in order to clarify the connections between them (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Rigor in Qualitative Research**

The importance of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in the research is described in the following section.

#### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness describes the quality of a study and assesses how well a study does what it is designed to do (Schwandt, 2001). It consists of four factors in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In the following section, I give a description of these terms and the techniques that will be used to achieve the overall quality of the study.



## **Credibility**

Credibility assumes that the results of the study are representative of participants' views and meanings. As the only tool of data collection, I must provide assurances of fit between the participants' perception of their experiences and my own reconstruction and representation of these experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1989). Credibility required a strong sense of trust and rapport between the participants and me (Creswell, 2007). In order to create the best fit possible, I utilized member checking, peer examination, triangulation, and continued awareness of my own stance as a researcher.

Member checking is the process of soliciting feedback from the participants in order to validate the credibility of my findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Schwandt, 2001). This gave the participants the opportunity to review the accuracy of the findings based on my construction of meaning and provide associated input (Creswell, 2007). Participants of this study received a copy of my notes by e-mail regarding categorical themes and were encouraged to read and provide feedback on the notes so that I could make necessary adjustments based on their perceptions.

Peer examination is the process of reviewing the research process with peers in order to maintain the integrity of the study and evaluate the conceptualization of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). I enlisted the assistance of two graduate students who are working on doctoral degrees in the field of clinical psychology at the University of Wyoming, who were practicum students at my internship site. These students had already completed a qualitative research course. I provided them with interview transcripts and my notes about categorical themes so they could examine these and



provide me with feedback. Feedback included information about the methods being utilized, the meaning of data, and my interpretations of the data. Through debriefing with these peers, I was provided with an external check on my research process and interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2007). This check also gave me an opportunity to process my thoughts and feelings surrounding the research process, with the peers acting in the role of devil's advocate to explore pertinent biases that may have been influencing the research process (Creswell, 2007).

Triangulation is a means of scrutinizing the integrity of my own data interpretations through using multiple data sources and multiple methods of gathering data in order to examine my conclusions from more than one perspective and accurately confirm emerging conclusions (Schwandt, 2001). I interviewed multiple participants about specific aspects of early adolescent female-on-female bullying and gathered data through interview content and interview behavioral observations.

In addition to consulting with the participants, I also attempted to be aware of how my own experiences and biases influenced the research process (Merriam, 1998). At the beginning of this chapter, I noted potential sources of influence, including my worldview, assumptions, and theoretical orientation. I engaged in reflexivity throughout the study, critically self-reflecting upon my biases, assumptions, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and values (Charmaz, 2006; Schwandt, 2001). Through memoing, the activity of writing process and personal notes on the research process, and the process of reflexivity, I tried to increase my theoretical sensitivity toward subtleties in the meaning of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and self-awareness of my biases and



the ways in which they may have influenced my interpretation of the research. I discussed the ideas in my memos and personal notes with my research advisor and peer examiners, and focused on the areas that I felt were significant and those that I was struggling to understand and define.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is important in assessing whether the findings are representative of and consistent with the data being presented. I was responsible for ensuring to the best of my ability that the research process was “logical, traceable, and documented” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 258). In an effort to do this, I employed triangulation, peer examination, and an audit trail. Triangulation and peer examination were described in the section on credibility, and the use of an audit trail is described below.

An audit trail is a written record of the conceptualization and decisions made throughout the inquiry process (Merriam, 1998; Schwandt, 2001). It is a systematically maintained system of documentation that includes various components: generated data, a statement of the theoretical framework, explanations of ideas developed to make sense of the data, descriptions of procedures used to analyze data, notes on findings and interpretations, process notes, personal notes, and copies of the interview questions (Schwandt, 2001). My audit trail also included interview transcriptions and evolving notes about the emerging categories and theory.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with the objectivity of the study, and the importance of establishing that the interpretations of the study are not only discernable to me as the



researcher, but to other people, including the participants, other researchers, and readers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1989). It required linking assertions, findings, and interpretations to the data in a readily understandable manner. This allowed for the verification and possible replication of the study (Schwandt, 2001). I utilized member checking, peer examination, and an audit trail in an effort to attain confirmability. All of these methods were described previously, in the sections covering credibility and dependability.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the generalizability of the research findings to the population being studied (Merriam, 1998). More specifically, my responsibility as the researcher was to provide readers with ample information about the experiences of the participants, such that the readers are able to establish the degree of similarity between these experiences and the cases to which my findings might be transferred (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1989). To enhance the transferability of this study, I used modal comparisons and thick descriptions.

As a part of the coding and analysis process, I compared my participants and their responses and experiences with similar individuals, contexts, and situations through the process of modal comparison (Merriam, 1998). This involved comparing the experiences of the student victim participants with one another, and the experiences of the school authority figures with one another. In addition, all of these experiences were compared with relevant literature on the topic of relational aggression; it is important to note that there were not any specific or substantial theories of relational aggression among



adolescent females found in the current literature, and therefore the data collected in this study was not compared with a specific theory. This increased the strength of the conceptual linkage of data relationships, noting similarities and discrepancies between studies and circumstances.

I worked toward the point of saturation in collecting data, meaning that I collected data until it appeared that no new information could be added to the already collected data in order to better understand a category, or gain greater theoretical or categorical insight (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Once I reached the point of saturation, I was able to provide thick descriptions and rich information about the data to the reader (Schwandt, 2001). By giving thick descriptions of the data collected, I was able to determine how closely the experiences and perceptions of participants' in this study resembled findings from similar research studies. Such thick descriptions included circumstances, meanings, motivations, intentions, strategies, and interpretive characteristics of participants' experiences (Schwandt, 2001), as well as detailed quotes from interviews, using the original language of the participants to maintain accuracy and genuineness.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE PARTICIPANTS

Nine individuals participated in this study. The student participants ranged in age from 14- to 15-years-old, and the school faculty participants' ages ranged from 29- to 46-years-old. Eight of the participants were from the Rocky Mountain region and one was from the Midwest. Five were female students who had been victimized through relational aggression; at the time of the interviews, one was enrolled in eighth grade at a middle school, three were enrolled in ninth grade at a junior high school, and one had just recently transferred to ninth grade at an alternative high school after having experiencing difficulties at her junior high school. Three of the participants were male middle school teachers. One participant was a female middle school principal.

This chapter provides a brief introduction of each of the participants, as well as the adolescents' stories of being bullied by peers. The participants are categorized by student or faculty status and presented in alphabetical order.

#### **Introduction of the Student Participants**

##### **Amy**

Amy was a 15-year-old Caucasian female who was in ninth grade in the Rocky Mountain region. She lived with her biological mother. Her parents were divorced and her father lived approximately one hour away from her home; she indicated that she saw her father most weekends. Amy had three older biological sisters, one of whom lived out-of-state, and two of whom lived with Amy and her mother while they attended



college. Amy's family was originally from a large city in the Midwest, and they moved to the Rocky Mountain region when she was in fourth grade. Her parents divorced shortly thereafter.

Amy was a quiet girl with a shy smile. She was petite and plain, sporting straight light brown hair and no make-up. She appeared much younger than her stated age, her initial appearance suggesting a girl of 11- or 12-years-old. She exuded a sense of innocence and a naïve desire to please others. She exhibited a strong introspective quality, and seemed to value her privacy. She seemed sensitive and easily injured in regards to her emotions and, though she wore her heart on her sleeve, she tried to be guarded in expressing how her experiences had impacted her, often laughing or minimizing their effect.

Despite these apparent vulnerabilities, Amy displayed a wisdom and confidence beyond her years in regards to her faith. She had a strong Christian identity and a desire to live in accordance with her values, regardless of the unpopularity of such beliefs in most adolescent-aged individuals. Much of the meaning Amy constructed from her experiences of being bullied were formed within the framework of her religious beliefs. When asked about her experiences of being bullied by female peers, Amy shared that she was victimized through relational aggression by her best friend when the two girls entered eighth grade. She attributed the bullying to growing apart and developing different interests; Amy believed strongly in her Christian faith and wanted to become more involved in religion, while her friend became a cheerleader and seemed to desire a



new identity based in popularity. Amy described what she learned about herself through the experience:

In eighth grade I had a best friend who was my best friend since fourth grade, since I moved here. And in the Bible it talks about being a 'doer' for Christ, instead of a 'hearer,' and when we read that we were like, 'Oh, I want to be a doer for Christ!' So I was really excited about that going into eighth grade. And so I think the biggest part was that I felt alone in my faith...and I was just left standing there like, 'Yeah, I still believe in God, hi!'...But I think that was good for me, I'm glad I went through that...I think a really major thing was I learned how to be alone. And I think that's preparing me for something that maybe might happen in my future or like when I'm older, or even in high school, just being alone in my faith. I definitely learned how to do that, and I feel pretty confident in that.

Amy's statement was indicative of the positive meaning she chose to construct from her victimization experiences, based on her strong religious convictions and belief in the spiritual meaning of all events created by a higher power. In describing the unexpected shift from friendship to bullying, Amy noted,

I think maybe she was finding herself, type thing. She started doing the things like ignoring me, and she never got to the point where it was directly to my face – she would never say anything...But it was like she just slowly kind of disappeared and she did little things that got to me...She would make faces that were mean, at me. Sometimes her and her new friends – it sounds so little and stupid – but they'd give me looks and stuff...nothing in person, not to my face, so it wasn't horribly direct. I think something that was happening is that she would talk to my other friends about it and then, so they would start thinking things and saying stuff. Nothing, like, rumor-wise was ever really spread, so...yeah (nervous laugh).

Amy went on to describe the initial changes she noticed in her friend's behavior, before she began to disengage from Amy's life:

I just remember when I would be with her and another friend, she would say things to the other friend to almost try to make me jealous, like she's better friends with this person. And that was kind of, I don't know, you feel like a little bit of a third wheel, type thing. She would just say I'm annoying and stuff to people...I think the biggest thing that was hard through it was, for so long I had



trusted her and for so long she was like my best friend, so it was just really weird. When we would be with certain people, she would, like, exclude me a little bit more. Which she had done in the past, too, so I kind of expected that, but...I'm not just somebody who is just like, 'Okay!' So, ya know...You could just tell, in her personality, she started just acting differently than her normal way. And I think since I was so close to her I noticed those things.

Amy shared the significant impact the situation had on her:

During it, it was really bad. Because I did take all those things heart, and it was really hard because she was so close to me – she was like a sister to me! I don't know, I really – it sounds so strange when I say this – but I really felt like my best friend had died, because she was somebody completely different, and that gets me every time (tearing up)...

And actually, I remember – one of the main things she told me that got to me was she didn't want a best friend, and so it's like, 'Okay?!' So then, right after we had the fight and everything, she went and got a best friend and so THAT was hard (crying). It was mixed signals, ya know? It was just weird.

Amy indicated that the entire experience of being bullied by her prior best friend lasted approximately six months. She stated that she still saw her friend during group social activities fairly regularly, but did not believe the two would ever mend their relationship. Amy's belief surrounding the conclusion of this friendship seemed to stem from the meaning she had constructed from her experiences, in that it was time for her to move forward after being victimized because she had learned a valuable lesson about her religious stance and subsequently about her identity.

### **Charlotte**

Charlotte was a 14-year-old Caucasian female who was in ninth grade in the Rocky Mountain region. She lived with her biological parents, who had been married for 16 years, and an 11-year-old younger brother, who was in sixth grade. Charlotte lived in a wealthy suburban neighborhood which she termed "The Bubble" because it was well-



known for being a safe and affluent area. She had lived in the same home for her entire life.

Charlotte shared that her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer about a year ago, and she felt like she struggled to cope with her mother's diagnosis and subsequent surgeries and chemotherapy; she indicated that she felt very depressed and isolated at the time. Her mother was currently in full remission, and Charlotte felt that this was the only "really bad thing" that she had ever experienced in her life.

Charlotte attended public school in this town with the same group of children throughout her academic career. She was placed in an advanced academic program for gifted students when she entered junior high school, a small group of only 150 children in a junior high school that had approximately 600 students.

Charlotte was a physically attractive, assertive, opinionated, and outgoing girl; she presented as the traditional All-American girl, with blond hair, blue eyes, and an athletic build. However, she had significant anxiety and perfectionist tendencies. She had a strong desire to meet her potential as a student and as a person, and she was adamant that her drive and motivation were self-instigated. In addition to being enrolled in the gifted program, Charlotte was also the student class president, a cheerleader, a peer counselor, and a volunteer on multiple social committees at school. Her unparalleled internal drive for success seemed to be the foundation upon which she constructed her beliefs about relational aggression, and the framework within which she created meaning from her experiences. She indicated,



My parents are always telling me to slow down, ‘You don’t have to do all of it, you don’t have to over-commit yourself.’ But I just feel that personal self-motivation, that drive, that I have to do all these things...I just feel like I can do so much better, so I try to do so much better. I feel like I’m settling if I don’t. I just feel lazy and like I’m not striving to do my best, and I don’t like that!

Charlotte recognized that she had been bullied by numerous girls in various situations over the past few years. She noted a mutual dislike between herself and many of the girls, though one was a very close friend before the bullying occurred. She shared that her first experience of being bullied followed her from elementary school into middle school; she was always intellectually gifted, and while this initially seemed to cause her to have a negative reputation, she found that being enrolled in gifted classes once she entered junior high school helped her to discover a place where she could shine. She shared,

In elementary school, I was just a smart girl. I was the little, tiny, smart girl, and that’s all I was. I felt like I was labeled as the nerdy, smart girl who that’s all she did and that’s all she could do. That’s the only thing she could be. Everyone looked down on me and made fun of my grades – I never wanted to tell anyone when I got good grades, except my parents, because I knew they’d be proud of me. And I was proud of me, too, but I knew other kids wouldn’t see it as a good thing.

Charlotte went on to describe the ways in which other girls teased her incessantly by calling her a “nerd” throughout elementary school. She shared how the meaning she constructed regarding her intellectual capacity changed once she was enrolled in gifted classes in middle school:

Then I got to middle school and I was able to have more friends that didn’t know who I was. I got bigger. Like I was physically small, and that didn’t help either. But I got to be normal like everybody else, and I got to actually strive to reach my potential in smart classes, like I’d never been challenged like that before. And that was really nice and gave me a new sense of confidence. Like I can actually



do something about it, and I don't have to just be stuck down here, dumbing down everything.

When asked about the shift in her feelings regarding her intellect, Charlotte acknowledged,

I felt like the general atmosphere changed and my attitude toward things changed. I just was a lot more positive about things and less insecure about things. And since I had more friends, I felt more supported. Like, I will say that the more friends I had, the more secure I felt and everything like that. I guess that was part of it.

She noted the continued underlying ambivalence she felt associated with her gifted intellect, which seemed to be a construction of meaning built within the framework of what Charlotte wanted to believe, based on her natural abilities, and what she felt she had to believe, based upon the societal expectations of her academic world. She expressed:

Now it's great that I'm smart and I want people to know, but I don't want people to know so much to the fact that they can label me as that. I mean, I like the label, but I don't like it at the same time. 'Cause it adds that label, and that kind of limits you to what you can do. But at the same time, being smart's a really great thing and it puts me in a better position than other people. It's gonna help in the future, and I don't know, I feel a lot more confident about it. Because I know that I'm smart enough that I'm not going to fall into all the little petty traps that are gonna happen.

Charlotte also described an incident that occurred during her eighth grade year with a close friend who ended the friendship for unknown reasons. She indicated that her friend simply started ignoring her, causing her to feel uncomfortable within their social circle because her friend was gossiping about her to their other friends:

So last year, I had a really, really good friend, and she just stopped talking to me. And I was really upset by that. And I tried everything I could, but she was completely just gone...I was really upset about that. But she talked to other people about me, but I didn't really care as much, because I was just more upset by the fact that she just, like, left.



When I asked Charlotte why she believed the friendship ended, she stated,

Basically, we were best friends for nine months – really, really close. And then my mom got breast cancer last winter. And I was really upset, and I was depressed, and it just wasn't the normal mood I was in. And I guess that might have been why she stopped talking to me, but I don't know. She never seemed like she was the type of person to do that, 'cause her family had a history with it and her cousin had cancer...I really don't know. To this day, I do not know. She won't talk to me about it, she won't tell anybody else about it, except to say mean things about me to them, so I don't know. I still have absolutely no idea and it's been a year...But I guess I do still care and it does still bother me.

A significant amount of Charlotte's distress over this incident seemed to be related to her need for control and perfection, and the meaning she constructed from this unexpected event was incongruent with such a need, because she was never provided with the information she required in order to understand what had occurred.

Charlotte also detailed a more recent bullying incident with a group of six girls who repeatedly teased her for being "preppy" and scorned her involvement in school activities. She described one incident:

Last summer, there was this girl. She just didn't like me, with this entire group of like six girls. And I sat at my table with all my friends and everything like that, and this was at lunch. And these six girls sat at the end of this table. Everybody knew who they were, nobody liked them, nobody at all. Everybody thought they were trashy, everybody thought they were slutty, and nobody likes them. But they had the attitude like, 'We know we're cool!' and all that stuff...And then, she threw a cookie at me! A literal cookie, she threw at me! And I was like, 'Really? You're throwing food at me? Like seriously, are you five?' And I didn't know what to do, I was just going to ignore it, but it was so ridiculous and it made me mad. And then the lunch lady saw it, and she went over to me and she was like, 'Has this happened before?' And I was like, 'Yeah, like they've thrown food at me all year'...And then she got upset and the lunch lady took it and went to the principal, and the principal talked to the girls and the girls got all upset.

And most of them have stayed away from me, but this one comes up to me, and I came to school the next day, and she's out in the hallway. And she comes up,



directly to my face, and starts saying, 'If you want to fight me, come on! Do it now, hit me!' I was like, 'Oh, if I wanted to fight you, it would be on my own terms, and I'm not gonna hit you, because I really don't want to hit you.' She just, like, got all up into it, and I was kind of freaking out inside. And then my friend, thankfully, walked by. And he just calmly slides in the middle and starts talking to me. And she comes around him, and so I was just like, 'Okay!' So I just walked away, but...I think that was the most direct thing. And she still gives me looks and stuff.

Charlotte shared another experience of being bullied by a female peer in which she stood up for herself, which seemed to be more congruent with her constructed meanings around autonomy and assertiveness. She felt that her one of her close male friends was being manipulated by a girl who was trying to get a negative reaction out of Charlotte by breaking up their friendship. The girl attempted to harm Charlotte's relationship through social networking websites called Facebook and Formspring. Charlotte realized that she reacted with a strong territorial attitude, which had developed from her self-constructed meanings surrounding control and power. However, she recognized that her reaction likely led the girl to feel that she had accomplished her mission. Charlotte explained,

With the Formspring, this girl [Amanda], we had not gotten along at all. We just – I don't respect her, she doesn't respect me – and then she tried going after my friend [David], and trying to get my best friend [David] to stop talking to me, and I didn't like that – at all! So I called her, and I said, 'Can you please stop trying to do that, because it's upsetting to me and I don't want you messing with him?' And she got all – she didn't talk to me on the phone, she hung up the phone, gets on her computer, and starts Facebooking me and all this stuff, yelling at me! And I was like, 'Okay, you have fun with that!' I really don't respect how she yells at me through Facebook. I just don't. Like this girl who came up to me and directly confronted me, I have more respect for her, because she brought it to my face, except the girl who hides behind the computer, I just feel like that's stupid and reflects poorly on you.



So she started calling [David] and asking him to hang out when she knew that we had plans. Or she would just write things on his Facebook, like, 'I love you so much, you're my best friend, let's go do something' or stuff like that. And the only reason she was doing it was she knew it would get under my skin. And that's another reason, because he's such a sweet boy, and I did not want her messing with him, and I just, I got defensive. And I probably shouldn't have done that. I should've let him figure it out by himself. But I was still really upset about it. I was just pissed off and I was like, 'Back off!' And I know I shouldn't have done it, but she was pushing my buttons, she was touching him, and he was my best friend, and such a sweet boy, and I did not want her messing with him. I don't know. I probably should've let him deal with it, but...at the time, it bugged me too much.

Charlotte admitted that mutual feelings of dislike and disrespect were present between her and many of the girls who bullied her. She prided herself on her constant mental reminders to avoid picking on others for factors they could not control; she emphasized that she felt she only defended herself against others' bullying behaviors, and focused on attacking their actions, as opposed to their character. Again, this seemed to be based on the meaning Charlotte constructed from the values of internal motivation, perceived success, and self-control.

### **Kristen**

Kristen was a 15-year-old Caucasian female who was in the ninth grade at a school in the Rocky Mountain region. She lived in a wealthy suburban area with her biological parents, who had been married for 17 years, and her two younger biological brothers, ages 13- and 10-years-old. Kristen had lived in the same home her entire life and attended school with the same group of peers since Kindergarten. She was very involved in sports, especially volleyball and softball. She indicated that the majority of her close friends were teammates.



Kristen was an athletic, attractive girl with braces and long brown hair. She was initially very nervous and guarded, afraid to respond in the “wrong” way to a question, and worried that she would not help me gather the information I needed for my dissertation. Kristen appeared to be a quintessential follower, fearful of being assertive or expressing an opinion or emotion, let alone an unpopular belief. She seemed to strive to fit in with the crowd by not drawing too much attention to herself, simply content to allow someone else to lead while she stayed safely in the shadows. Kristen seemed to construct meaning from her experiences using this framework of inconspicuousness that contained an underlying fear and desire to be heard as an individual.

Kristen spoke a great deal about a peer from the high school next door to her school who had recently committed suicide for unknown reasons. She was adamant that bullying played a large role in the girls’ death, and was considerably emotional over the situation. Kristen expressed,

I don’t know if it’s because I’m emotional and stuff like that gets to me. I don’t know why it does. I’ve never had like a family suicide or anything surrounding suicide at all. It just got so much in my mind of me just thinking about like, ‘Why would you do something like that, and like who was involved with doing something like that...’ I just want the school to become more involved so that it doesn’t happen again. ‘Cause I can’t imagine if it was someone that I knew more than that, ‘cause I barely knew her, if like my best friend was taken from me because of something like that.

In regards to her own experiences of victimization, Kristen reported she was bullied by two girls in her grade through direct verbal means. The girls made fun of Kristen’s voice, telling her that it was “manly,” and used mocking tones and words in an attempt to hurt her. Kristen struggled to recognize their recurrent actions as bullying for a long period of



time, and tried to brush the incidents off as joking even though they bothered her immensely; her willingness to minimize the incidents seemed to fall within her constructed framework of meaning regarding unobtrusiveness and avoidance of conflict. She indicated that the girls still mocked her about it on occasion this year, after already having engaged in the teasing for her entire eighth grade year. She shared,

In eighth grade I was made fun of for my voice, saying it was, like, manly and stuff. It was these two girls named [Jessica] and [Amber]. But I had classes with them, I knew who they were, we weren't like friends or anything, but yeah. I tried to take it as a joke, 'cause I guess that's just me. But I tried not to let things get to me, but it was to a point that I kept telling them, 'I'm gonna tell the principal if you keep making fun of my voice.' And I would not speak out as much in class or like raise my hand in the classes that they were in, because ya know, if I said anything, then they would just...go back at it.

But by telling them that I was telling the principal, they would stop for a couple days. But when they realized that I didn't actually tell the principal, it started again, and it was just that cycle of, like, not doing anything for two days and then starting it again.

I asked Kristen about why she felt the bullying occurred, and she responded,

I have a feeling that – cause [Jessica] was the one that started the whole thing, and [Amber] just kind of followed along. But I know that [Jessica] had been made fun of – she kind of has, like, a square body, so people have said like she's 'The Fridge' or an 'X-Box' or something. So I'm guessing she just did the same thing too, 'cause she learned from it that 'I'm either gonna be bullied or be the bully.'

Kristen shared that the girls teased her for the entire school year, but cited her struggle in defining the behavior as bullying and her subsequent hesitance to report the incidents to a school authority figure:

I guess I just kept thinking, 'If I say I'm gonna tell the principal, then it will stop.' And then I would take every day as, 'Okay, if it's gonna get worse, then I'll do something, but at the point it's at right now, I don't know if they are joking or not.' So I'm wondering if, the whole time they were joking, and I went to the principal, and they just got ticked off then because they were joking around, or



not. So I figured if it's gonna get worse, then I'll know or not if they're joking. But it never really got worse, it just kind of stayed in the same spot of – it never got worse, but it never got better, so I just kept, like, brushing it off...And I'm sure that, how I was reacting to it by just laughing, that they figured, 'Okay, we can keep doing this because she's taking it as a joke.' And then, of course, people are afraid to blow up at other people, not knowing whether or not they were joking.

I inquired about Kristen's beliefs surrounding the line between joking and bullying, which seemed to be strongly connected with her constructed meanings around a subtle existence, and she answered,

I don't know, because it really WAS bothering me. And every single day, I was like, 'Okay, if this is the day when it gets worse, I'm going to tell the principal,' but it never got worse, it just stayed exactly where it was...I guess if they got more people doing it, where it was, like, at the point where I didn't even have classes with those two girls, but there were other people in a different class that would do it, as well, or like...I don't know, if they – 'cause they would say this one line, like, 'Hey, baby!' but say it really deep. And I guess if they started saying, like, every sentence I said, and repeated it in that voice or something, I don't know, then I would know it was time to tell the principal.

Kristen admitted that one of the girls was in a class with her at present, and continued to tease her about her deep voice on occasion. She shared that she believed she and the girl were "sort of friends," and indicated that she was still unsure whether or not to report the incidents to an adult, for fear of the repercussions that may fall on her or her reputation.

Kristen expressed a significant fear of being labeled as a girl who "couldn't take a joke." Such a label would be contradictory to the framework of meaning she had constructed regarding blending in unobtrusively with her peers.

### **Kyla**

Kyla was a 15-year-old Hispanic-American female who was a high school freshman in the Rocky Mountain region. She and her nine-year-old brother were being



raised by their biological mother. Kyla had minimal contact with her biological father growing up, and he was currently in prison. She expressed no desire to have a relationship with him at present. Kyla was born with a cleft lip and had three correctional facial surgeries to date; only minor signs of the previous surgeries were still present above her upper lip.

Kyla and her family had relocated multiple times in the past five years due to conflicts with extended family and financial struggles; they lived in a homeless shelter for several months when she was in seventh grade and had just moved to the state she was currently living in. At present, the family was surviving on government assistance while her mother searched for employment. They rented a small home and leased out a trailer in the backyard to tenants in order to make ends meet. Kyla shared that the family's electricity had been shut off several times in the past few months due to an inability to pay the bill.

Kyla performed fairly well in school until later in elementary school, when her family began to have significant financial problems and conflicts with extended family members. She and her family moved to a new state when she began seventh grade, and she was bullied so severely that she chose to transfer to another school when she had to repeat the grade due to failing multiple classes. Kyla attended the same school for her second year of seventh grade, eighth grade, and the beginning of her ninth grade year. However, she was diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder shortly after starting her ninth grade year, and when she brought her prescribed medications to school without notifying the school nurse through expected procedural norms, the school



counselor falsely accused her of illegally selling her medications to other students. Kyla and her mother decided to have her transfer to an alternative high school in the same area to avoid further conflict and accusations. Therefore, between the time that Kyla scheduled her interview with me and engaged in the initial interview, she had transferred to the new high school. I felt that she was still an appropriate participant for the study despite these unprecedented circumstances because she had been a junior high school student so recently.

Kyla was a tall, thin girl with short, stylish hair dyed in bright colors. She exuded a sense of wisdom beyond her years and often exhibited a serious look of introspection and contemplation. She was compassionate and supported the underdog in any situation, which she attributed to her empathy after many years of being the underdog. Kyla seemed to construct meaning from her bullying experiences based upon the difficult life she had led, in which she typically felt like an outsider or someone who was at a continuous disadvantage, despite recognition of her considerable life experiences for a girl of her age.

Kyla was bullied by girls in both the middle school and junior high school where she attended classes over the last few years. She shared that she was picked on severely in sixth grade, and when her family moved to a new state and she began her seventh grade year in a new school, she became the bully because she did not want to be put down any longer. However, Kyla noted that the tables turned on her very quickly, and she was again bullied through relational aggression and physical aggression by girls in



her new school; this seemed to serve as reinforcement in her constructed meanings of being a social “underdog.” Kyla explained the series of bullying incidents:

Well, when I was at [middle school], a rumor started about a girl having, like, sexual relations with me. And I took it to heart because I was like, ‘Why would you even think that about me?’ I was only in sixth grade, but sixth grade was a middle school where I was at. So it was just like mixing really small children with high schoolers, and it just seemed like I was more sensitive than the other ones, because they were just like, ‘Yeah, that’s funny!’ as they’re walking way. And I was still just sitting there trying to figure out why they would even say something about me like that.

Shortly thereafter, Kyla’s family moved to a new state, and she chose to engage in bullying towards other students in her new school:

Then after we moved to [a new state] in seventh grade, before I was bullied myself, I would try and seem cool, and kind of, like, joke about how someone looks. And then I’d make the rest of the class laugh about it. I don’t know, I didn’t really think about it then, but I’m sure the people I did that to, they didn’t feel very well. Like, I’d call them fat or say that they’re mom dresses them funny, and everybody would start laughing, because it’s, ya know, kind of socially acceptable.

However, Kyla indicated that the tables turned on her very quickly, and she found herself in the role of victim once again:

Almost right after I first started, I got made fun of a lot for my scar here (pointed to cleft lip scar). Like, they would say that my mom hit me or something like that, and ruined my face and a bunch of other things...because they said that, then other people started saying it and it was just – it kind of isolated me and that’s kind of what hurt the most, ya know? I used to cry a lot about it, but now, it’s just part of me, ya know?

Kyla shared that the aggression became physical with one girl who bullied her:

Well then in seventh grade, there was this girl...and when she introduced herself, it kinda made me laugh when she told me her name, so other people made fun of her for it, too. And she kinda made a lot of friends after that, and she started hitting me and stuff like that. Like, just little taps on the back of my head. But to me it was like she was punching me in my face. And I don’t know, you kinda like



– if someone doesn't like you, and they make it outright to you, it would be taken a little bit more harshly than if you didn't know. It was strange how it all went down. 'Cause my aunt went to school with me one day, and she threatened the girl. And that's when that all stopped. I think it was a problem just because I was trying to ignore the problem. Standing up for yourself is really the only way to stop it.

Kyla's experience of being bullied by peers seemed to yield the greatest impact when compared to the other student participants, as she reported that she switched schools at one point due to being bullied so severely. However, Kyla seemed to recognize the importance of assertiveness and compassion in stopping bullying situations, which were traits she developed through her own victimization. Kyla's constructed meaning of herself as an "underdog" seemed to be shifted into a positive sense of identity in this way.

### **Nora**

Nora was a 14-year-old African-American female who was in the eighth grade in the Rocky Mountain region. She lived in a middle-class suburban neighborhood with her adoptive parents, who had been married for 20 years, and her 8-year-old adopted brother. Nora was fairly close to her parents, though she felt that she and her mother had never fully understood one another and often get into arguments. She felt that her mother placed a great deal of pressure on her academically and had very high expectations of her performance in school and extracurricular activities. Nora believed that her parents were fairly strict and moderately overbearing, and she expressed feeling embarrassed by them much of the time because they treated her like a young child.



Nora's family moved from the East Coast immediately following her sixth grade year of school to the state where they were currently living, and Nora had been at the same middle school for both seventh and eighth grade. Before moving, she was very involved in intellectual extracurricular activities and sports outside of school, but since moving, she had only joined the school volleyball team. She received mostly A's in her classes, with the exception of only a few B's. On the East Coast, she was enrolled in several gifted classes, but the school she was presently attending did not have any such programs.

Nora was a petite, light-skinned African-American girl who looked younger than her age and seemed eager to be liked and to please others. She exhibited a traditional teenage tendency to appear cool and aloof, yet seemed very unsure of herself and lacking in self-confidence or a genuine sense of identity; this underlying confusion in her developing sense of self seemed to provide the foundation upon which Nora constructed meaning from her interactions with her perpetrators, which was characterized by self-doubt. Nora outlined the struggle she endured in attempting to discover who she was and what that meant for her social life:

I was always kind of the nerdy, quiet kid. I was really popular in elementary school early on, but as I got older, it seems like what was cool before changed. I was scared to do a lot of the things the cool girls in sixth grade were doing, like starting to smoke cigarettes and drink – and it's not like I could have done anything like that with my parents around anyway. When I moved, it was like a way to reinvent myself. I tried not to be nerdy anymore. I didn't join the clubs that were considered nerdy and I just tried to be like the cool kids and like everybody else. I wanted to be popular so bad and I guess I still kind of do, but now I know it's really hard to be who I want to be and still have popular kids think I'm cool.



Nora identified that she had been victimized by female friends and acquaintances through relationally aggressive behaviors. She also recognized that she had engaged in direct verbal bullying against another girl at school, and realized how terrible she felt for making fun of someone for something that she had been devastated by when the situation was reversed. Nora shared these contradictory incidents:

So in sixth grade my mom found this store that had different, like, brand name shirts and stuff printed on the label or whatever, but the shirt wasn't actually one, it was just like a fake one, basically. Like, the tag had Jersey's t-shirt or whatever, like a normal cheap two dollar shirt. The print on the front, though, was like shirts that are brand name and expensive, and I felt pretty proud that I got to wear one finally, and finally I can be – at least look cool. [The popular girls] are not gonna notice me or think I am cool, because they all just kinda think I'm, like, nerdy and quiet, and I don't know. They just don't have like a lot of respect for me, I guess.

But so, one day in the locker room, this girl came up to me and pulled back my shirt and was just like, 'I just wanna look at your tag real quick.' And I was like, 'Okay?' I didn't really know, like, why she wanted to do that or anything, that's really weird, but I just had that feeling of dread in my stomach because I knew that, 'Oh my God, she's gonna see that it's not real, and how would she even know to look?!' It's like they just expected me to screw up or to not be cool or something. And then she didn't say anything, she was just like 'Okay.' But she just grabbed at my shirt, like even if I would've said no it wouldn't have mattered, she was just gonna look anyway.

And then when I got to class after, we had the same class after gym, and I saw her talking to one of her friends, and they were both, like, looking at me and whispering and giggling and pointing. And it's just so stupid – it's just a shirt, why do they have to make such a big deal about it and make me feel like shit? Just to make themselves look better? It's just so stupid.

Nora expressed the shame she experienced, and the subsequent frustration over her own response to the situation:

Like, why did they have to take that away from me, finally feeling good about myself or about something that I had? And it shouldn't bother me, like I don't know why it does, but they just managed to make me feel really bad. And I



could've said something to them and I didn't, I just sat there, and I'm sure my face was red and I pretended I didn't notice, but I probably should've said something, but I just felt like there was no point.

Nora went on to share an incident in which she made fun of another girl's clothing shortly after she moved from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountain region, in order fit in with her new friends:

I'm really, really not proud of it. Like this girl, who – she was kind of nerdy because she always wore this shirt with this country singer on it that, like, who our age like listens to country music? And she's just kind of out of place, I mean she has her group of friends, but they're just kinda nerdy or whatever, and, like, overdramatic, like theater people and it just was kind of weird. But I remember one day at the lunch table, I was talking with a group of friends and I was making fun of her country shirt, and I didn't realize she was standing at the end of the table. And she just kinda looked at me, and I looked back at her, and I just felt like horrible – horrible! Like, her face was red, and I didn't know what to do, and I should've, like, apologized. When I look back on it now, I should've said something to her, but at the time, like, everybody was laughing and I didn't want to do something stupid like go and apologize to her, and make them think that I was a loser.

Nora went on to rationalize her behavior, in the typical fashion of self-constructed meaning formed through self-doubt and uncertainty:

But, like, I know I've done it to people, just like it's been done to me. Sometimes it's easier to be the person who's making fun of other people, because then at least it's not you, ya know? Nobody likes to be the one that's being made fun of so...sometimes it's easier to be the person who's doing the teasing. But I'm not proud of it, I know how it feels and I tried really hard not to – especially since that time, and seeing that girl's face whenever...I've tried really hard not to be like that.

Like, even kids who sit alone in the lunchroom and stuff – if I was really popular and stuff, maybe I would go sit by them and people would be okay with it, and, like, maybe they'd think, 'Oh, maybe I should get to know this person and be friends with them.' But I feel like I'm just as much of a loser as they are most of the time, so if I sit with them that just makes me more of a loser. But I felt bad for them.



Nora also described a recent occurrence in which two of her best friends decided to exclude her, and wrote her a note to let her know that they were not interested in being friends with her any longer:

This year was the worst. Two people who were my best friends, like, we were always hanging out together and they know everything about me and... One day – we all shared a locker – we didn't have to, but just because we were friends we shared a locker and had all our stuff in there. And one day, I was walking up to my locker, and they were both there and they were just leaving. So I was like, 'Alright, hey girls, how's it going?' And they were just kind of like, 'Whatever,' and they just kind of brushed me off. So I opened the locker and it was like, 'Okay, that was weird.' And there was a note in there for me from both of them, basically just saying that they didn't like me anymore and that was pretty much it, like, we weren't gonna be friends anymore.

When asked how she felt about this experience, Nora expressed,

And I had no idea. I didn't expect it at all. I was crushed, I felt horrible. My two best friends who knew everything about me, and suddenly they hated me and I didn't understand why and I don't know (tearing up)...

I inquired about why Nora believed this had occurred, and she described a fluctuating sense of responsibility between her prior friends and her own faults, which reflected the meaning she had constructed from her experiences based in self-doubting confusion. She pondered,

I think it was partly 'cause they really wanted to be friends with this girl they think is cool because she, like, her parents are rich and they live in this mansion... she drinks a lot and smokes pot and I don't really – I don't feel safe doing those things, and I don't really wanna do that stuff, but I think they – I mean, I've never even smoked a cigarette before and – they, I think, would just do anything to be friends with her, and I wonder if they thought I was, like, holding them back, 'cause maybe she thinks I'm a nerd or whatever. But I kind of feel like now they just hang out with her, and I walk by them and it's just cold stares and just meanness. And there's just no reason to be like that with somebody who used to be your best friend.



Nora's continued frustration and confusion over the relational aggression she experienced at the hands of her closest friends seemed to be emotions common to all of the participants in this study.

### **Introduction of the School Faculty Participants**

#### **Connor**

Connor was a 30-year-old Caucasian male who taught eighth grade Earth Sciences classes at a middle school in the Midwest. He had been married for four years and had no children. He earned a Master's degree in Educational Foundations six years ago. Connor had worked at the same public middle school for three years, and prior to his current position, he was an eighth grade Earth Sciences teacher at a public middle school in a different district. He and his wife lived in a middle class neighborhood and the school he taught in had students from middle and upper-middle class neighborhoods.

Connor was a charming and charismatic individual who expressed overwhelming enthusiasm in regards to his current teaching position and an unparalleled concern for his students' wellbeing. He believed most of his students found his enthusiasm to be contagious, as he had developed numerous science-based extracurricular activities over the past two years which were very highly attended by students from all grades. Connor admitted that he had not been personally victimized through bullying until adulthood; in fact, he shared that some of his current colleagues bullied him severely during his second year at the school using relational aggression, to the point that he sought counseling and considered leaving his job. While he believed that professional boundaries were important, he was adamant about the power of sharing personal experiences and incidents



he witnessed as a youth with his students in order to help them work through bullying issues of their own. His own experiences of being bullied by colleagues seemed to create the foundation of his constructed meanings and subsequent understanding of his students' experiences of being victimized by peers. Regarding his experience of being bullied the previous year, Connor noted,

I was bullied on a daily basis by my colleagues via nonverbal communication, verbal communication, written communication – it was some of the most immature, petty stuff you could ever imagine, and it just wore me down...At the same time last year, I'm receiving e-mails from parents saying, 'My son or daughter has never loved science so much!' Like many, many emails! And at the same time, I was ready to call it quits and get out of education, because I did not feel like I could take anymore of this bullying...That recent episode helps me very easily stay in touch with what it feels like to be bullied and how it impacts everything...I can't really share [this story] with my students because those colleagues are still there, but it helps me, kind of under the radar, keep an eye out for signs and symptoms of being bullied like that.

### **Devon**

Devon was a 29-year-old Caucasian male who taught Physical Education and Health Sciences to students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade at a middle school in the Rocky Mountain region. He earned a Bachelor's degree in Physical Education three years ago, and had been teaching at his current school for one and a half years. This was his first academic position; previously, he worked with youth of all ages in recreational sports and coaching. Devon taught at a public middle school in an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse town. He lived in a lower-middle class neighborhood in the same town as the school. Devon had been married for seven years and had no children.

Devon was an amiable and easygoing individual, and he conveyed a strong passion for fairness and the physical health of his students. He had an open and genuine



attitude and appeared unconcerned with anything but expressing what he believed was true; he was willing to admit to his own limitations and the limitations of his school in an effort to better understand the problem of relational aggression and discover possible solutions in preventing it. Though he only recalled one incident of being physically bullied by an older peer in elementary school, he acknowledged the significant impact such victimization could have upon adolescents. Of his own experience, he stated,

I remember one time, in elementary school, I forget what grade I was in, but I wasn't very old. And one of the older kids kind of locked me in the bathroom stall and just was like teasing me and making fun of me, and I couldn't get out...[It was] scary. I was very nervous and scared about getting out and everything. I don't know if that really affects how I deal with bullying now – I suppose probably somewhat, but I wouldn't say I'm necessarily conscious of it.

Devon's beliefs about relational aggression among his female students seemed to be constructed within the framework of honesty and simplicity which characterized his responses.

### **Greg**

Greg was a 32-year-old Caucasian male who taught Physical Education to middle school students in grades six through eight in the Rocky Mountain region. He also coached boys' basketball and co-ed track at the school. Greg earned a Bachelor's degree in Kinesiology and he had been teaching at his current school for three years. Previously, he was a high school physical education teacher and coach for three years and a substitute teacher for two years. Greg was unmarried and had no children, though he and his girlfriend were in a long-term relationship on the road towards marriage.



Greg taught at a fairly upscale charter school in a town that consisted of a diverse population in regards to ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The grade levels were separated into elementary, middle, and high school, and each school was housed in a different building. He lived in a middle class neighborhood in the same town as the school, though the majority of his students came from upper-middle class families and neighborhoods.

Greg was a confident, likeable individual who responded to interview questions in an open and honest fashion. He was frustrated by the lack of training he had in regards to social and emotional problems within the educational system, and his understanding of relational aggression came from his experiences with students. He did not believe that he was ever bullied in school, and asserted that he was often the person who befriended outcasts; however, he admitted that he may have bullied peers at times for fun, though he felt that it was never meant to intentionally harm anyone. Greg spoke of his own experiences as an adolescent:

I saw bullying going on and I tried – well, like I said, I got into some of it and I realized it was hurting. I never intentionally went out and tried to bully someone, I just did something stupid and it came across that way. I always tried to get everyone to get along with each other and I brought in all kinds of different people. I was that kid where, honestly, I hung out and I helped a bunch of other kids come to me and we all kind of hung out. But I would bring in new guys into our group all the time. But I've always been real accepting of people. I really feel that way. And I feel like that's helped me become a teacher, because maybe that's why I teach middle school P.E., it called me.

The meaning Greg constructed from his experiences appeared to be based within a belief system emphasizing conformity to expected norms and traditions, and an assumption of optimistic outcomes.



**Sara**

Sara was a 46-year-old Caucasian female. She was the principal of an upscale K-12 charter school in an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse town, in the same school where Greg was a physical education teacher. Sara was married and had two children. She earned a Master's degree in Social Work more than 20 years ago and ran a small child and family psychotherapy practice in her hometown for several years before returning to school to earn her Master's degree in Educational Leadership. Sara worked in Special Education Administration for 15 years, and this was her fifth year as the principal of the charter school.

Sara had a calm demeanor, yet her presence seemed to demand a certain level of respect because of her confidence and keen awareness of the people around her. Though she had a background in mental health, she worked in the field only briefly before pursuing a career in education, and she spoke like an educator during the interview. It was clear that the constructed meanings of her experiences related to bullying were strongly influenced by her role as a school administrator. It was apparent that she was extremely proud of her school, her faculty, and her students, and felt that her school is uniquely positive, especially when compared to most of the public schools located in the same area as her school. Because of such opinions, she seemed to respond to the interview questions in a manner that minimized the potential problems her school had with bullying, instead emphasizing the effectiveness of their intervention methods and positive school environment as a whole.



Sara indicated that she had never experienced bullying personally, and said,

I was just always in the mix, ya know? I was just always – back in the day – tall and slender. And in middle school I remember being tall right away, but that was good, I was good at basketball. I mean, when you get into athletics, you get positive strokes for being a good athlete...Everything I really know about bullying has been through experiences with my students, and my experiences as an LCSW. I used to do [therapy] groups with adolescent girls and their families, and we did a lot of work with bullying.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced the nine participants in this study. The five students and three of the school faculty members were from the Rocky Mountain region, and one school faculty member was from the Midwest. The students ranged in age from 14- to 15-years-old, and the adults' ages ranged from 29- to 46-years old. All of the school authorities were Caucasian. Two of the adolescents were Caucasian, one was African-American, and one was Hispanic-American. The participants' socioeconomic statuses ranged from lower-middle class to upper-middle class. Their family backgrounds varied; three of the adolescents were from intact families, and two were being raised by a single mother, though one had regular contact with her father as well. Three of the adult participants were married, one of which had two children, and one participant was unmarried. The participants' life experiences and specific experiences with bullying were diverse.

The following chapter explores the participants' perceptions of relational aggression among female students in middle school. Specifically, the experiences of the victims, the perceived effects of bullying, the decision of whether to report bullying, the



ways victims' are identified, and current prevention and intervention strategies are examined. The perceptions of the student victims and school authority figures will be closely compared in an effort to understand the phenomenon of relational aggression among middle school girls and create more effective prevention and intervention strategies.



## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS

This study explored the phenomenon of early adolescent female bullying in the middle school setting. The perceptions of self-identified student victims were compared with those of school authority figures in the areas of victim experiences, descriptions of bullying behaviors, effects upon the victims, factors involved in adult recognition of the victim and students' decisions to report bullying, and related intervention and prevention strategies. These topics reflect the key research questions that guided this study.

This chapter presents the participants' responses to the interview questions and outlines the categories and subcategories developed from data. The perceptions of the student victims and school educators are compared, contrasted, and connected within the framework of the six components of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998):

1. Influential conditions (triggers of relational aggression)
2. Contextual factors (the context under which relational aggression occurs)
3. Phenomenon (a description of relationally aggressive behaviors)
4. Intervening conditions (factors which influenced recognition of the victims or the decision to report bullying to an authority figure)
5. Action/Interactional strategies (prevention and intervention methods in relational aggression situations within the school setting)
6. Consequences (effects of bullying upon the victims)



### **Relational Aggression Prevention and Intervention Theory**

The adolescent and adult participants described multiple perspectives in regards to each topic presented, using personal experiences and abstract reasoning based upon personal beliefs and opinions to formulate their responses. Tables III through VIII list the categories and subcategories discovered within the data; each table is dedicated to one particular component of grounded theory, mentioned above. The “Similarities” section of each table details the concepts recognized by both the students and educators in regards to a particular component of the theory. The “Discrepancies” section in each table lists two columns; the concepts identified in the student column were those verbalized only by the student participants, and the concepts noted in the faculty column were those identified only by the educator participants. The findings for each grounded theory component are identified by the categories and subcategories listed within the table, and each table is followed by a narrative description of the categories and subcategories.

#### **Influential Conditions**

The participants identified several triggers of bullying, which are delineated in Table 3 and described in the following section.



Table 3

*Influential Conditions*

Categories/Subcategories Identified by Students and Educators	Categories/Subcategories Identified by Students Only	Categories/Subcategories Identified by Educators Only
Social Status <i>Acceptance</i> <i>Bonding over a common enemy</i> <i>Competition</i> <i>Jealousy</i>	Social Status <i>Deflection of negative traits</i>	
Differences <i>Appearance</i> <i>Personality traits/behaviors</i>	Differences <i>Lifestyle/background</i>	
Natural Progression <i>Identity formation</i>	Natural Progression <i>Willingness to experiment with risky behaviors</i>	Natural Progression <i>Testing limits</i> <i>Hormonal changes</i>
Entertainment		
Home Environment		

**Social status.** All of the participants indicated that social status was a significant cause of bullying. There was a collective belief that girls feel the need to harm each other through relationships and emotional manipulation in order to extend their own popularity or reputation of being “cool.”

**Acceptance.** It seemed that acceptance was a quality everyone desired, especially as peers became more of a central influence in daily functioning. Greg, a physical education teacher, explained, “To me, everything’s pure acceptance with middle school kids. Everyone wants to fit in, and no one has the confidence to be an individual yet, and then they use it against each other.”



Charlotte, a ninth grade student, recognized the need within herself to be accepted and liked, though she believed she had learned to put it into a healthier perspective than some of her friends:

I know even me, if my friends go and hang out without me and I'm not invited – or other girls who go through that same thing – and they're like, 'Oh great, I'm losing all my friends! This is completely horrible! This is the end of the world! They didn't invite me, and everyone's gonna go get together and talk about me and all that stuff!' And I've gotten better about that, like, I really have gotten more secure about it. But I know a whole bunch of girls who completely freak out.

***Bonding over a common enemy.*** One reported way to achieve acceptance was to bond over a common interest – in this case, such an interest seemed to be the shared action of tormenting a peer. Kyla recognized,

People want to, like, be accepted, instead of being the person they're making fun of, so that they're not allowed to talk to people anymore. Because basically what happens – no one wants to talk to the loser, so they just join in making fun of them... Maybe it makes them feel a little bit bigger than the other person, and they think that if they make fun of them, too, they'll be accepted by the person who started it.

Kristen, a ninth grader, believed once that bond was formed it could be difficult for a victim to dismantle it in an effort to end the teasing, especially once a group's social power had been established and they were viewed as "cool" by the majority of students. She revealed,

People who challenge other girls – like, there's a group of girls and you can tell, they're popular and some of the other girls think they're popular, too. But those girls, if somebody tries to challenge them, then that girl is completely targeted, not only by that group of girls, but by everybody else who wants to be friends with those group of girls. And it's just like a chain reaction.



This is congruent with Greg's earlier statement that most adolescents are not yet confident enough in their own identities and beliefs to challenge other students, for fear of being victimized themselves.

**Competition.** All of the participants identified competition over resources – such resources typically being friends and boyfriends – as a key cause of relational aggression among adolescent girls. Devon, a physical education and health teacher, expressed, “It’s just that people start to form their cliques, and everybody wants to be in the cool group. So sometimes, to get there, you’ve got to put other people down.” Sara, a principal, laughed, “With the girls, it’s usually about a boy! Ya know, it’s relationships, something, ‘She went to the sleepover without me!’ or what’s so important to them at the moment.” Kyla articulated a dichotomous belief about the nature of bullying in general, in which students had no other option but to be the bully or be bullied; she expressed that most girls fall into one of the two categories at any given time, though it may rotate. She explained,

It’s kind of like a competition, like, everybody wants to seem better than one another –to have a place, with people underneath you, I guess. They just want to be able to say, ‘I’m better than you!’ It’s pretty much just like a dog-eat-dog world. If you’re gonna put someone down, someone’s gonna put you down.

Charlotte described an unspoken, yet supposedly widely understood social system within the school setting, in which the goal was to increase one’s social status. She described,

I think a lot of it is you have to get the perfect boyfriend and you have to get the good friends, and that will bump you up. And then you can get the upperclassmen friends and all that stuff. And I know in eighth grade that’s a huge thing, is hanging out with the freshman and hanging out with the sophomores.



It's all about the desire to want to be better, I think. At least for me, you want to hang out with – it's all about levels, and you want to keep raising yourself up levels, and in order to get up you need to get more friends or more boyfriends, or you have to have a bigger house or nicer clothes. And it just like keeps bumping you up...It's mostly the friends you're with, and who you go to lunch with, and if you go off campus when you're not supposed to. It's just stuff like that. It's how you act, what you do, who you hang out with, it's just all about the getting up to the next level, generally, I think.

She openly explained this linear progression of developing social status as a way of moving through hierarchical levels of popularity and emphasized the significance of possession and attainment of people and things that would expand one's popularity. She emphasized personal insecurity as a factor, and the value of the "right" friends and boyfriends as a way of increasing one's societal rank:

Basically, girls want possession, they want things, they want her as a friend, they want him as a boyfriend, they want these grades – it's all about taking possessions from everyone and having everything for yourself...A lot of girls are really insecure about EVERYTHING, and none of them have self-confidence at all, and I guess those things bring them more reassurance and that makes them feel like, 'Oh, I deserve this, and I can feel like I'm a better person because I have all these things.'

The faculty members and the other student participants agreed with the reasoning Charlotte verbalized involving a linear progression in social status based upon a girl's relationships.

***Jealousy.*** Individuals who displayed desirable qualities were viewed as competition and generated a strong sense of jealousy. In order to alleviate feelings of jealousy, the enviable characteristic was minimized or put down in order to make it appear unimportant or undesirable. Charlotte felt that she embodied this concept and connected with it strongly after being bullied by peers for being intellectually gifted



throughout elementary school and into middle school. She realized that she began to question whether being smart was a positive feature. She described her own ambivalent feelings about being intellectually gifted: “Some people look down on it like, ‘Oh, she’s smart and she flaunts it around!’ But I feel like people who look down it are the ones who don’t have it themselves and are just jealous of it.” Kristen, who was devastated by the recent suicide of a classmate with whom she played on the same volleyball team, indicated that she believed the girl was bullied because she was physically attractive. Greg described a similar circumstance with a new student in his Physical Education class who seemed to be threatening to the other girls because of her positive qualities:

You know this, one girl, she’s cute, she really good at sports, she’s very successful. And some of the preppy girls, or whatever you want to call them, they don’t know how to handle it. And they don’t know how to handle kind of being second tier to her. And especially since they don’t know her yet. So they’ll try to rally the troops and make her feel bad.

Greg’s perception of the situation exemplified several of the influential conditions in relationally aggressive behavior, including jealousy, competition, bonding, and acceptance.

***Deflection of negative qualities.*** The alternative side of jealousy seemed to be awareness of one’s own undesirable characteristics; in an effort to avoid others recognizing potentially negative facets about one’s self, attention was deflected to another individual’s perceived shortcomings. Oftentimes, such flaws were obvious physical deformities or appearance characteristics that strayed from the culturally accepted norms surrounding physical attractiveness. Kyla described the ways in which other students made fun of her for the scar from her cleft palate surgery: “They would all



point it out and tell me my face was ruined, or say that my mom hit me and ruined my face.”

Generally speaking, in regards to competing for social status, all of the participants indicated that adolescents targeted individuals who were perceived as higher in rank in an effort increase their own status, and then targeted individuals who had less social influence than themselves as a way of maintaining and securing their position. It appeared that going after stronger individuals occurred less frequently than the targeting of potentially weaker individuals.

**Differences.** Differences in a victim’s appearance, behavior, background, and lifestyle were considered reasons for bullying by both the students and school authority figures. Once again, factors that strayed from a commonly accepted norm within the culture of the school were identified as targets.

**Appearance.** Such differences related to physical appearance included weight, skin color, clothing, and hairstyle. Nora, who was an African-American girl attending a predominantly Caucasian-populated school, noted the unfair, yet seemingly predictable nature of choosing a victim based on appearance:

I think people just pick out anything that they don’t like. If they think you’re weak at all they pick on you, like, if you don’t look exactly right. I don’t look exactly like any of them, you know? I’m not a blond-haired, tall, skinny girl, and I think they just pick on me like it gives them something to be friends about.

Amy found the same to be true in her school: “There’s so much judgment – if you don’t look right, or if you don’t dress the right way, or your hair looks weird, then girls will talk badly about you.” Sara recognized that a girls’ appearance was likely to make her a



victim, just as Nora and Amy had shared. Sara admitted, “It’s that physical thing, ya know? I’m just thinking of a situation, the girl with the real thick glasses and braces, and she’s an easy target. And that’s so hard to see.” Sara also discussed the differences in development among girls, and the stage their bodies were at during middle school. The exceptional variability in the physical development of middle school girls seemed to be a key factor, in her opinion.

Charlotte emphasized the potential unpredictability of bullying among girls, as their friends dictated what was acceptable as far as appearance. Yet, Charlotte expressed confusion over the seemingly fine line between appropriately following fashion trends and being viewed as completely unoriginal by peers, citing “disadvantages and advantages to all of it.” Her responses suggested a fickle nature of relational aggression, and the constant awareness girls needed to have regarding how their actions were being perceived by peers. She emphasized a never-ended constantly-fluctuating balancing act to determine what was communally acceptable at any given moment.

***Personality traits and behaviors.*** Personality traits and behaviors deemed socially unacceptable or unexpected were also identified as reasons individuals were victimized; student participants indicated that level of intelligence was a significant issue, and teasing occurred with girls who were extremely smart, as in Charlotte’s case, and those who were cognitively delayed. Greg struggled to articulate the differences among teenagers that led to victimization, until I empathized with him regarding the cultural inappropriateness of adults admitting to recognizing such differences. He confessed,



I guess the only way to kind of fix these problems is to be honest about it, I mean, yeah for sure. There [are] certain kids that you're just like, 'Oh, man!' I mean, in P.E., if the kid has two left feet and is not like everyone else, she might get picked on a little bit. I'm looking at kids who, let's say, physically they might get picked on because they're different or they're slower or whatever. I've got a kid that, he's big – he's a sixth grade kid that is six-foot-two, probably 250 pounds, and something's not quite right, he's really lacking in coordination – so he's going to be last on all of our dynamic movements, and our warm-ups, and our fitness activities.

Greg's hesitation to verbalize his ability to identify students who were likely to be victimized simply based on appearance or first impressions was common among the educators; they seemed uncertain regarding whether it was appropriate to describe students' in such a harsh or stereotypical manner.

However, in regards to personality traits and behaviors, not all victims were perceived as innocent when it came to being victimized. Kristen admitted that she believed some victims may cause the bullying to occur by intentionally acting in ways that they knew were not socially acceptable or expected. She expressed ambivalence regarding girls' reasons for acting differently; on one hand, she believed that if a girl knew she was being made fun of for acting a certain way, she should change her behavior. However, Kristen almost wistfully recognized that there may be a positive reason for someone to continue acting unusually:

I don't know if she knows [they're making fun of her] or not. 'Cause she continues to do stuff that, like, people would see as being weird or something. And you think if she knew, she would change it – but then again, maybe she just is proud to be herself, and doesn't want to change something like that.



Greg expressed similar opinions, yet shared another perspective, which suggested that he believed some individuals may be at fault for their own victimization status and have some awareness of the consequences of certain appearances or behaviors:

Well, I think with some people that's actually a way to find attention and to single themselves out, and just stand out. They bring it upon themselves to not fit in, and they want the group to actually – to gain any kind of attention, negative or positive, it's worth it – to get the attention. And they may do something so all nine girls go, 'Whoa!' And then they're isolated, but ya know, maybe that's an attention thing. I don't know, 'Look at me, I'm different,' kind of thing.

While Kristen identified a potentially optimistic reason for persevering with atypical behavior, Greg viewed it as a considerable hindrance, and asserted, “Ya know, sometimes maybe the social environment of school is sometimes not ideal for every personality.”

***Lifestyle and background.*** Differences in a girl's lifestyle and background were recognized by the students as reasons to be victimized, as well. The faculty members did not indicate recognition of these particular factors as influential conditions in bullying.

Amy expressed her own struggle with losing a best friend who no longer shared her passion for religion:

I think we had different interests. I love God and so I go to church all the time and I try and live that out, and she didn't want to do that and didn't want to be a part of that, and didn't want, I feel like, didn't want to be tied down with me.

Amy linked this with her friend wanting to become more popular with her cheerleader friends, who were more interested in “partying” than going to church. She believed that her friend felt it would hurt her reputation if she were to associate closely with Amy socially, as peers often categorized Amy as being “boring” or “uncool” because of her religious beliefs.



Nora felt there were no limitations to the reasons peers chose to tease her, and she found many of the reasons to be ridiculous and petty when she stepped back to view the situation more objectively. Yet, she remembered how hurtful it felt to be ridiculed, and how meaningful the targeted traits of ridicule seemed to be at the time. She described a number of ostensibly innocuous idiosyncrasies that seemed to make her a target of mockery:

My parents would pack me healthy lunches. I wouldn't have, like, Twinkies and crap, I would have sandwiches and carrots, and not fancy Starbucks and crap like some people have...So I would have, like, my healthy lunches and stuff and people would make fun of me for that, or like...I used to have really good posture. I would sit up straight and I didn't even notice because I was in gymnastics for a long time and stuff and was in good shape. And people would make fun of me even for sitting up straight and then I realized like now I slouch a lot more...or they would tell me my skin was the color of poop or whatever, because they're not used to anybody who's Black.

Nora's experiences encompassed the seemingly ridiculous nature of the characteristics targeted by her aggressors; yet she identified the feeling of significance she felt about those issues at the time, highlighting the extremely present-focused spirit that seemed to typify adolescent bullying.

Both Kristen and Charlotte, who attended the same school, described a boy in their grade who was ridiculed for dressing poorly, because his family was struggling financially. They understood and emphasized that the boy had no choice in the matter and was not necessarily responsible for looking different, but was treated as if it was within his control to change, regardless of the circumstances. As Nora summarized, "They make fun of people who are overweight or they're parents don't have a lot of money, and that's not something that people can help."



**Natural progression.** Many of the participants perceived bullying as a natural part of growing older. Most of the adults expressed the opinion that bullying, in some form, was inevitable in the progression of development; they acknowledged that they had experienced or witnessed it as children, and continued to recognize its presence in the school system today, causing them to believe it was impossible to eradicate. It seemed to be viewed as a theoretical rite of passage. Greg explained,

I think, to some extent, that's growing up, that's nature, but I don't know what you can do. You can only get involved so much, certain things happen with certain people and it's sad, it's negative, and all you can do is do your best. Ya know, somebody in my position, to try to get other kids to rally around the kid, but in the end, unfortunately, sometimes there seems to be some victims and I don't know how you get around it.

**Identity formation.** Relational aggression was assumed to be an aspect of beginning to discover one's own identity as a shift in independence took place. While the students recognized some aspects of identity development within bullying situations, such as personality and interests, the adults felt that identity formation through relational aggression involved testing limits to learn whether certain interactions were acceptable. Based on a her own situation, Amy explained,

I think it really is more of finding yourself. Like they're just really trying to find what works, and when they're not sure of themselves, when they say things, and kids laugh, ya know, that are cool people, they're like, 'Oh, I'll just keep doing that!' type thing. I don't know, it's like a confidence – they're trying to find their self-confidence or boost it. People feel like they have to experience it or something, ya know?

Sara asserted, "I think some of it is part of growing up because you're trying to figure out who you are." She went on to state, "You might make a comment and not think that it was mean, or it truly was in jest or something, but it's how the person perceives it. It's



their sense of reality.” She emphasized the ambiguity present in attempting to understand a bully’s intentions, such as whether a comment is meant as a joke or with the purpose of causing harm; she came to the conclusion that every single person would perceive the situation differently based on their developing identity. In determining whether bullying had occurred and how it would impact the recipient, Sara believed the most important factor was how it was received by the potential victim. Amy offered the same belief: “I really think it’s up to the person, like, they can decide whether or not it will affect them.”

***Testing limits.*** Many of the adults suggested that girls did not often recognize the harm they were causing when they engaged in relational aggression, regardless of how hurtful the victim perceived the situation to be in that moment. Greg recalled his own youth in which he teased peers because of self-reported “stupidity,” without recognizing the harm it may be causing. Greg continued his thought with the unprecedented idea that the increased frequency of bullying in middle school-aged girls may be due to a shift in adult expectations of their behavior. He explained,

Kids are, especially in seventh and eighth and ninth grade, they’re starting to grow up and they’re starting to realize, ‘Hey, I can’t just be mean to kids and that’s not okay.’ When you’re young you feel like you can say something and it’s like, ‘I can’t believe how honest that kid is.’ But you really shouldn’t be that honest, that’s inappropriate.

He and the other faculty members viewed much of the identity formation as a method of testing limits to assess what types of interactions were acceptable as a person became older, though this was not a subcategory identified by the students.

***Growing apart and risky experimentation.*** Growing apart from previous friends and developing new relationships was deemed a reason for bullying, as this shift in



relationships was not typically perceived as mutual. This was the case with Amy and her best friend of four years; Amy was taken by surprise when she realized her friend was no longer interested in pursuing her faith and attending church regularly, and she was fearful of experimenting with her friend in “partying” types of behavior. Nora experienced a similar circumstance, in which her friends wanted to experiment with alcohol and illegal substances, and she was uninterested in doing so, which resulted in the eventual termination of the friendship. All of the students identified a willingness to experiment with risky behaviors, such as alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity, as reasons for relationships ending in middle school, though the faculty members did not express this belief.

Connor acknowledged witnessing this natural shift in relationships with his students, as well, sometimes due to circumstances outside of their control. He shared,

There’s the shifting of friend groups as you move from one school to another... You either end up making new friends because you’ve got, due to school boundaries, you’ve got no choice but to make a new friend group, or... sometimes, I think students just grow out of their friendships and then you’re thrown to the wolves kind of among friends. I think a lot of that friend thing is what might bring about a lot of bullying.

***Hormonal changes.*** The teachers and administrator viewed bullying as a partial extension of hormonal changes during a difficult transitional period in life, which was not a factor identified by the student participants. Sara recalled what it was like for her as a girl going through hormonal and physical changes in development, and verbalized her recognition of the similarities in her students now:

I do believe that hormones are a very real thing... I think it’s a piece of it, ya know? Just figuring out your hormonal swings that you’re having and their



changing bodies, some of them are just trying to get that figured out. Because some of the girls, you can see, ya know – it's trying to figure out where they fit into this world. Their body's changing, everything – and rapidly, bless their hearts! And they all change at different paces. You've got some girls who probably like to still play with Barbie's, and then the girl sitting next to her likes to dress like Barbie. 'Cause that where she's at.

**Entertainment.** There was a common belief that females were attracted to dramatic situations and some relationally aggressive behaviors were perceived as a source of entertainment, though none of the participants believed that the perpetrators recognized their behavior as such. The female participants recognized boredom and entertainment as noteworthy triggers of relational aggression; however, the males explained that they understood very little about “girl drama,” as Greg phrased it.

Charlotte described the potentially detrimental effects of living in a town which saw very few serious problems related to safety, finances, or general wellbeing:

There's not really many big issues that these kids have to deal with. I feel like the standards here are really so different that like – I've been in like the perfect little bubble and my family has always been fine, my parents don't fight, like nothing has ever been shaken to me. Like, we live in such a nice place and there's nothing that's, like, horrible that's gonna happen, like, huge problems. And I know a lot of people who live like that, too.

So in order to shake things up, that's why they start feeling upset or they start targeting other people, and just stuff like that. I feel like there's nothing else so people feel the need to create issues, because people want the attention, because they're not getting it from everything else. So they have to break out of their perfect little mold and do other things. And they thrive on the things that really aren't a big deal because they don't know what the big deal is. They have nothing else, so they just create all the drama...I don't know, it's just it's a really nice environment to live in, but it's also kind of toxic to some people.

Sara wholeheartedly agreed with Charlotte's perception, and exclaimed, “They looove the drama! They get to go to the counselor and talk about whatever it is that set off the



issue, or the bullying, or the conflict – even the witnesses are like, ‘We saw this...!’”

Kyla summed it up by saying, “Most girls, they just try to find something – anything – that you’ll react to them with.”

**Home environment.** All of the participants assumed the bully’s home environment was an influential factor present in relationally aggressive incidents. The school authority figures believed that instability or conflicts in the home were likely to cause problems that would lead to bullying or victimization, especially parents who role modeled hurtful behaviors. As Connor expressed,

I have seen parents, and [heard] just through informal conversations with colleagues, who will describe parent-teacher conference examples where it sure sounds like the parent was trying to bullying the teacher in the conference, whether it’s regarding a poor test score or a late assignment or how the teacher teaches... There has to be bullying that goes on at home and that translates into how kids bully. If the kid’s parents come to school and they’re bullying the kid’s teacher, they’re going to learn from that. They’re going to learn that that’s how you get your way and solve problems.

Devon concurred, “Kids pay attention to the adults in their lives, they’re all role models – for good or bad behavior.”

Parents who role modeled bullying behaviors were viewed as a significant source of the problem not only because they indirectly taught their children how to bully others, but because of the shift in the need for power and control experienced by children who lived in such environments. Kristen expressed, “I know that a lot of bullies don’t have a very good home life, which is why they do what they do. Because at home, they don’t feel very powerful – but at school, they rule the school by their bullying.” Her belief



suggested the need for some form of equilibrium within an individual's sense of control over their world.

Nora and Kyla shared a belief that even positive parenting styles could lead to inadvertent victimization of the children, whether the parents were appropriately strict or overbearingly overprotective. Nora disclosed,

My parents are strict, but only just kind of a little bit in a way – they don't let me – like, the cool kids can go out and drink and party and their parents don't really care what time they get home, and they always have, like, expensive clothes and stuff. And like, my parents have money, but they don't think it's right to just spend it on certain brand name clothes or whatever, so they don't buy me that stuff.

She realized that her parents' priorities when it came to finances, clothing, healthy living, and safety were likely positive things in the long-run, but felt they were not viewed as such by popular peers at present. In this way, it seemed that Nora felt that her healthy and stable home environment led to her being a target of bullying by perpetrated by peers who had less desirable home environments; this was consistent with the presence of influential conditions such as jealousy or deflection of attention from undesirable traits.

Kyla also found that certain types of parenting led to girls being victimized by peers. She shared, "People who depend on lot on their parents, or even on the teacher, because they always have adults there and they haven't learned to do a lot themselves, they tend to have a lot of issues with being teased, too." She attributed this to early adolescence being characterized by a newfound sense of independence and testing limits, and individuals who did not choose to celebrate those factors were typically viewed as weak or abnormal, therefore leading to them as targets of bullying.



**Summary of influential conditions.** The influential conditions that led to bullying as identified by the participants in this study included: the desire for social status and acceptance of peers; differences in appearance, personality, behavior, and lifestyle; the natural progression of growing older and developing one's identity through relationships; a potentially unconscious desire for "drama" as a source of entertainment; and aspects of a girl's home environment.

### **Context**

Two factors were identified by the participants as essential contextual features under which relational aggression occurred: lack of adult supervision and anonymity. These factors are outlined in Table 4 and described in the following section.

Table 4

#### *Context*

Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Students and Educators	Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Students Only	Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Educators Only
Lack of Adult Supervision	(None)	(None)
Anonymity		

**Lack of adult supervision.** All of the participants acknowledged bullying was more likely to transpire under the context of poor supervision or a lack of supervision within the school setting. If school authority figures were not present, there was nothing to stop the perpetrators from engaging in relationally aggressive actions toward the victim; no one with recognized power was present to protect the victim or dole out



consequences to the bullies. Middle school presented the opportunity for greater independence and unstructured time for the students, where they were no longer monitored by one teacher all day long like they were in elementary school. Additionally, there were fewer teaching aids and volunteers to supervise a greater number of students during lunchtime and hallway passing periods. Therefore, Kyla shared, “Places like the hallway, the locker rooms, the bathrooms, lunch, recess – they’re all fair game for it happening really bad right then and there.”

Sara indicated her belief that bullying was inevitable, regardless of the frequency and intensity of adult supervision within less structured time periods and locations within the school. She felt that aggressors took advantage of any situation in which bully-related interactions were possible. She shared,

Well, typically, when kids bully each other, they don’t do it when somebody can see it. So, I mean, the teacher’s job is, they’re busy teaching or whatever, so kids are focused on the bullying during that time... They know when to bully and when not to bully.

Charlotte expressed a similar opinion: “The really mean girls, they know what to do, so they avoid it. Like, they’re smart about it and it doesn’t get recognized, and you don’t get punished for that type of thing.” Sara and Charlotte’s responses indicated that students were intentionally manipulating the situation to preserve covertness.

**Anonymity.** All of the participants stated that the secretive nature of relational aggression produced significant difficulties in detecting its presence. Girls attempted to hide their behaviors from adults, and sometimes even from their victims, through indirect forms of bullying such as spreading rumors and gossiping. In cases where bullies did not



want to be detected by the victim, cyberbullying became a valuable tool of torment. The anonymity of new social networking websites, such as Formspring.com, created prime conditions under which to engage in indirect verbal persecution without the fear of being caught or punished.

Charlotte described Formspring as a site where girls could create profiles and ask one another questions anonymously in order to learn more about each other; she labeled it as a “vile situation” that had evolved into people leaving anonymous hurtful and nasty messages for one another. Kristen concurred with the temptation provided by anonymous social networking sites: “There’s the website called Formspring, and it’s all anonymous stuff, so people can post things without them being traced back to them.”

From an educator’s perspective, Sara expressed shock that so many parents allowed their children to have social networking profiles on sites such as Facebook.com without any knowledge of their children’s actions on such a site. She exclaimed,

The cyberbullying is just outrageous! If parents aren’t on it, reading Facebook, who knows what’s going on? There’s more of that that goes on, and at this school actually, I would think, a larger percentage of bullying happens outside of the school, because kids don’t have use of electronics bell-to-bell here. And we have the firewalls that prevent that. I think there’s clearly bullying that happens in between the halls and in classes and in the locker room, and at lunch, surely it happens. But I think there’s a lot more outside of school...I mean, we’ve got kids that, you know, like the elementary kids even have Facebook, so it’s like, ‘Really parents? Really!’ Or you know, older siblings set it up for the younger kids and the parents aren’t even aware that’s going on.

Additionally, it was noted that cyberbullying had its own set of benefits and detrimental effects upon the victim. Unfortunately, the victim may never know the source of the bullying, which could be detrimental. However, the students indicated that a benefit



could be that the victim may be afforded privacy when reacting to the bullying, and therefore avoid face-to-face public humiliation to some extent; it was noted that electronic public humiliation could bring its own set of difficulties, such as the inability to erase a hurtful comment posted online.

**Summary of contextual factors.** Both the students and faculty members indicated that the two most significant contextual factors to predict relational aggression among adolescent girls were a lack of adult supervision within the school setting and the innate anonymity of social networking websites.

### **Phenomenon**

The participants were asked to define two aspects of the phenomenon of relational aggression, including describing the behaviors involved in such interactions, and defining the experience of the victims. Their responses to these topics are outlined in Table 5 and described below.



Table 5

*Phenomenon*

Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Students and Educators	Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Students Only	Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Educators Only
DEFINITION OF BEHAVIORS:		
Direct Forms <i>Verbal</i> <i>Written/electronic</i>	Direct forms <i>Nonverbal</i>	(None)
Indirect Forms <i>Verbal</i> <i>Social manipulation</i>		
Cycling of Statuses		
EXPERIENCE:		
Traumatic	Distressed by Meaningful Nature of Interaction	(None)
Victims as Collateral		
Occurrence Over Extended Period of Time		

**Definition of behaviors.** I asked each of the participants to describe the behaviors involved in “female bullying” incidents. Several categories emerged from their responses, including direct and indirect forms of aggression, social and emotional manipulation, and a recurrent cycling between bully and victim statuses. Connor described the various manifestations of relational aggression that he had witnessed among his female students:

Bullying, in my opinion, is very much multi-faceted. I think there’s physical bullying, which most people would identify with right away. There’s emotional bullying, teasing, which is something that just drives me insane. There’s social bullying, like excluding people from groups, which I see constantly. So really,



picking on people verbally, physically, excluding, and there's that nonverbal communication that can also be bullying that's pretty commonplace in middle school. I think those are the main forms I would identify.

***Direct forms.*** Direct forms of relational aggression reported by students and school authority figures included verbal and written/electronic means of torment. Behaviors such as name-calling, teasing, and sending mean text messages or e-mails were noted.

The significance of harming victims through words on an emotional level was emphasized. Sara stated, "They're meaner with their words," and Devon agreed, "Girls, I think, find a way to be more emotional really. They're trying to really hurt each other." Amy indicated that direct forms of relational aggression typically involved "rude, direct, name-calling," and Nora expanded upon the behaviors: "They make fun of your clothes, and your hair, and your face, and say all kinds of stuff about you that usually isn't even true." These statements suggested that any aspect of an individual was fair game when it came to direct verbal means of harm.

Direct verbal aggression also occurred through written and electronic means, such as notes, text messages, or online posts. Charlotte described the impact cyberbullying could have upon girls when mean messages were posted directly to the victim's profile. She indicated, "I know there's this new website out called Formspring and a whole bunch of my friends were really upset by that last year...because [they were] just leaving nasty comments and stuff, and a lot of them aren't friends anymore."

The students identified nonverbal types of direct bullying, such as pointing, giggling, and mean staring, which were not recognized by the school authority figures.



The student victims indicated that these types of interactions were some of the most common when it came to relational aggression; the faculty members' lack of awareness surrounding such a significant aspect of emotional harm seems important to note.

Charlotte explained, "You can tell with glaring – and as it's called here, 'grilling.' It's just like this huge thing where it's all about the nasty looks." Nora declared,

They look at you mean and they stare at you like you're just not even worth anything...like if you walk into a room they'll look at your weird or giggle about you, and you know they're talking about you, because it's obvious they're looking right at you and they're laughing. Sometimes, they even just point right at you, like they don't even care if it hurts your feelings.

***Indirect forms.*** Indirect forms of relational aggression were identified as more common occurrences among adolescent girls than direct forms. Indirect forms included gossiping, spreading rumors, and social manipulation; these were typically recognized as the more covert forms of behavior associated with relational aggression, in addition to the direct nonverbal means described previously.

The student participants described their perceptions of the indirect verbal behaviors involved in bullying. Amy realized, "It's a lot of gossip, like what you see in the movies – I never thought it would be like that in real life, but it is, it's weird." Kyla agreed, "There's probably a lot more rumors with girls," and Kristen shared, "I never think it's directly – it's always behind someone's back. I've never seen face-to-face bullying, actually, it's always through other people that word is spreading around." Charlotte responded, "It's really very secretive, a lot more with the rumors and saying things about other people." Sara noticed this trend of indirect harm, as well:



What I see is a girl will tell a girl to tell a girl something. Or they'll write a note and it may or may not be anonymous, and get it through a friend to the girl they're bullying – they try to be anonymous like that to avoid getting in trouble.

These responses indicated that peers were often utilized as the tool of indirect verbal aggression, and were expected to continue passing along the harmful information until it reached the victim and she became aware of being targeted. This meant that by the time the victim was aware of the harm, it had already been passed along through multiple aggressors, and the original perpetrator may never be identified.

Social manipulation was classified by all of the participants as the most harmful type of relational aggression. Such behaviors included social exclusion, ganging up on the victim, and attempting to control an individual's actions through peer pressure and threats. Charlotte described the secretive nature of social manipulation by explaining, "It's stealing the friends, stealing of other things like that. It's just a lot of pulling strings, generally." Charlotte emphasized the desire for possession of "more" – more friends, more boyfriends, and more socially-rewarding resources. She felt that many of these things were obtained through stealing them from other individuals; there did not seem to be a way of sharing or compromising, in her opinion.

Kyla reasoned, "They like showing that they have the control to change how you act around other people, I guess...like finding or making ways to make it so you aren't able to talk to other people." Being able to manipulate a victim's relationships appeared to be a way of proving an aggressors' higher social status.

Amy stated, "They just are a little bit two-faced, because they act a certain way around some people, and then completely opposite around others," and she identified



this type of manipulation as a way gaining the trust of the victim in order to later betray that trust, often through public humiliation. She believed that in her situation, her friend acted differently around the people she wanted to be friends with by putting Amy down as a way of impressing them and making herself look better.

Oftentimes, it seemed that girls did not have the ability to perpetrate social manipulation independently; as a caveat, it required the collaboration of multiple individuals in order to inflict emotional damage on a victim, which appeared to be another form of bonding and establishing social power. Sara observed, “I see a lot of two against one...it’s a lot of ganging up against each other.” Greg noticed the same types of behavior:

Girls are really trying to hurt each other as far as making someone not feel welcome or accepted...I have this group of girls in my head right now that I’m thinking of while we talk about it – ‘Look at the three of us, if I can gain up more people on my side, I’m gonna hurt this person worse!’

*Cycling of statuses.* A constant cycling between bully and victim statuses was identified; the participants recognized that it was often difficult to predict who might be the aggressor and who might be the victim on any particular day, because the balance of power shifted so frequently and rapidly for unexplained reasons. As Nora shared,

It just happens all the time. It seems like with all girls, there’s always somebody that’s being picked on, and people that you used to be friends with and suddenly are not, and you don’t know why. They stop sitting with you at lunch or stop calling you, and you don’t know why.

Sara summarized, “You’ll have a group of three girls and they alternate who’s on the in and who’s on the out.”



**Experience of victimization.** Detailed descriptions of the students' victimization experiences were presented in the previous chapter. They ranged from direct to indirect methods of aggression, including social manipulation, cyberbullying, mean looks, and verbal teasing.

***Traumatic.*** All of the girls labeled their experiences as hurtful and devastating, as well as being confusing or unexpected. When the school faculty participants were asked what they believed the experience of being bullied was like for female middle school students, they too recognized the hurtful nature of such interactions. Connor admitted, "I have to imagine it is nothing short of traumatic." Sara expressed a similar sentiment: "I just think it destroys them. And I think, at that moment, that's the most important thing, what was said to them or threatened to them." Devon expressed his belief about how it must feel for girls to be treated so cruelly by their peers: "I'd say it could probably be very lonely, and just feeling, maybe worthless, because you don't fit in."

Kyla and Nora admitted to engaging in relational aggression against peers for a period of time, in an effort to feel that they were in control of a bullying situation for a change; however, both teens recognized the harm they had induced and felt regretful and guilty following their harmful interactions. As Nora stated, "I'm really, really not proud of it."

***Distressed by meaningfulness of interaction.*** The students indicated that they felt embarrassed and frustrated with themselves for allowing the bullying to impact them in such a hurtful manner; they wished to be able to brush the incidents off as unimportant,



but could not ignore the meaningfulness of the interaction and emotional reaction that ensued. Kristen shared,

I think the first time it happens, most people just take it as a joke, like I did. But if it happens repeatedly is when you start questioning, like, 'Is it true what they're saying? Because if it was a joke, they wouldn't be saying it a million times over and over, 'cause jokes get old.' And you start realizing that it's not joking anymore, it's serious bullying. So yeah, I guess that's the point of realization, when it continues to happen, it doesn't just stop there.

Kyla described how furious she was with herself for taking the teasing so seriously:

Like, when I look back, it's just like, what kind of people would want to do that to someone else? And like, how could I take that so harshly? I'm kind of disgusted with myself. Like, why would I even want to care what they thought about me, ya know? Take it or leave it, ya know?

The girls' statements indicated that a part of them recognized they should not take the bullying seriously because they knew it was wrong, but a larger part of them took it to heart and allowed it to negatively impact them.

*Victims as collateral.* All of the participants identified the phenomenon of students as tools in one another's quest for social status. Greg illustrated a large picture view of the situation in which girls are attempting to gain social status and acceptance by bringing their peers down through relationally aggressive behaviors. He noticed that oftentimes people simply became a means to an end, and were reduced to mere tools in a perpetrator's pursuit of social acceptance. He explained,

Kids are just – they're just little individuals, and they're trying to figure their own way out. And sometimes there seems to be, well, collateral, really. Kids become collateral in the process of these other people trying to develop, and to some extent, that's just kids being kids and that's nature being nature.



Greg's statement suggested that using individuals for one's own needs was a common aspect of development. Charlotte described the impact of being such "collateral":

I just feel like I put so much into it, and I cared about her so much, that I think that she didn't care about me as much in return, and she didn't put as much trust into me as I did into her. And, like, I kind of felt used. And I just felt stupid for doing it and not realizing that she didn't put as much into it as I did.

Charlotte recognized that she had been used and treated as unimportant, and identified the emotional pain that was produced by the interaction. This also fits with Amy's story, in which she thought that her best friend did not want to be associated with her any longer because she was not willing to experiment with other risky behaviors, even though her friend wanted to be associated with girls who engaged in those activities.

***Extended period of time.*** Many of the participants thought that bullying occurred over a longer period of time with girls when compared to boys. Greg shared, "I guess what I've seen is that it'll last longer...girls can maybe drag it on like a week or two." Kyla acknowledged the extended period of time over which the interactions transpired, as well: "It lasts a lot longer for girls – boys get bullied and it's hitting and punching that's over in an hour. Girls spend weeks or months going at each other." Sara viewed the extended reach of cyberbullying as exceptionally harmful to adolescent girls because of the public humiliation associated with such interactions, and the potential permanency of electronic comments was perceived as an ongoing trauma. She acknowledged,

I just think that cyberbullying is rough...an ongoing hurt. And they're all ongoing, but it can be meaner and deeper, if you send it, ya know, on your Facebook...I think it makes it all worse. Because now, whoever has the access to read that, can. So then it just is now bigger. It's a terrible feeling for a girl, and she has to live with knowing it's out there, in the universe, every day.



When it came to what the experience of being bullied by a peer through relational aggression must feel like, Connor concluded: “You can see it just tore the kids apart, because they can’t understand what the heck is going on within their friend groups. That drives them crazy. It just kills them.”

**Summary of the phenomenon.** The participants identified numerous categories in regards to the phenomenon of relational aggression. Both students and school authority figures noted direct means of harm, including verbal and written/electronic forms, as well as indirect means, such as verbal abuse and social manipulation. Only the student victims identified direct nonverbal forms of bullying. The participants also noted that there appeared to be a continuous cycling between the roles of perpetrator and victim in relationally aggressive interactions.

In regards to the experience of victimization, all of the participants recognized the traumatic aspects involved in such interactions. Victims were often labeled as collateral, and bullying between females was reported to last for an extended period of time. The student participants identified an aspect of resentment within their experiences, as they did not want the bullying interaction to be meaningful, and were distressed by the fact that they were significantly affected by it.

### **Intervening Conditions**

Two intervening conditions were present in this study, which resulted in four possible avenues of action. First, school authority figures may or may not recognize a student who is being victimized. Second, students may or may not choose to report being victimized by peers to a school authority figure. The presence and type of intervention



utilized in a particular bullying situation was dependent upon which of these conditions occurred. The intervening conditions are listed in Table 6 and detailed in the following section.

Table 6

*Intervening Conditions*

<i>Categories/Subcategories Identified by Students and Educators</i>	<i>Categories/Subcategories Identified by Students Only</i>	<i>Categories/Subcategories Identified by Educators Only</i>
	RECOGNITION:	
Lack of Training and Accurate Understanding	(None)	(None)
Changes in Mood and Behavior		
“Educator Fatigue”		
Presence of Student-Teacher Relationship		
	REPORTING:	
Burden of Proof	“Kid Code of Silence”	(None)
“Kid Justice System”	Fear of Being Labeled	
Strength of Student-Teacher Relationship	Lack of Recognition	
	Uncertainty about Authority Roles	
	Unknown Adult Response	



**Adult recognition of the victims.** The first intervening condition in relational aggression among adolescent girls was whether or not school authorities recognized the victims.

***Lack of training and accurate understanding.*** All of the adult participants were frustrated by the fact that they had not had any formal training or education in regards to adolescent bullying, which they felt put them at a considerable disadvantage when it came to recognizing victims in order to intervene. Greg reported, “I probably took a class or something, but, like, eight or nine years ago in school, so I don’t really remember. But I mean, everything I’m saying about it is just from experience and being around the kids.” Sara agreed, and felt grateful for her mental health training: “In Ed Leadership, they don’t do any training. No. It’s my training as an LCSW.” All of the educator’s responses suggested an intense need for greater education and training among school authority figures focused on multiple aspects of relational aggression.

Connor recognized his own experiences of being bullied as the sole reason he was able to identify student victims of bullying. Earlier, he described a situation in which he was bullied by his current colleagues. Here, he explained an experience in college:

I had a split up within my own friend group in college, because some of my friends were starting to get into some substances that weren’t exactly appropriate and I wasn’t really into. And we all shared the same friend group, so I pretty much said, ‘You know what, you hang with these guys, and I’ll just create my own friend group.’ So for about a year and a half in college, maybe almost two years, I was just kind of lost and drifting and didn’t really have friends. And God did that impact me! So I really will never forget how it feels to feel friendless or to have a loss like that. I almost felt like there was some bullying leading up to that, as far what pushed me to say, ‘You know what, I’m just going to leave this friend group.’ And from that, you feel thrown to the wolves, and you’re just very



vulnerable to – I mean, I just nosedived right into education, but I could see how that would lead other people to maybe fill that void elsewhere.

Connor's eagerness to understand his students seemed to result in a strong willingness to self-reflect upon his own experiences insofar as they would assist him with his students.

The student participants expressed minimal confidence in teachers' and administrators' abilities to recognize victims of relational aggression. Charlotte expressed,

Some teachers are completely oblivious to what goes on, it's very secretive. And unless it's verbally yelling at each other in the hallways and stuff like that, it's not recognized at all. I know some girls get so affected by it that they have to leave class, and they have to go out and cry in the hallways and stuff like that. And that's the point where teachers recognize it... This year we had two girls yelling at each other in class, screaming at each other, and the teacher had to get in the middle of it because it was just destructive. Otherwise, I don't think teachers and administrators really recognize it, 'cause all of it's so sneaky, and a lot of it's not face-to-face. So you can't really identify it.

Nora did not believe that school authority figures recognized bullying situations or victims in covert situations, either. She sadly stated, "I don't think they really notice. They've never said anything to me – like, maybe they notice I'm being quieter or something, but no one's ever said anything to me, so I don't know if they notice it or not." Kristen described a perspective that combined Charlotte's and Nora's beliefs based on her own experience:

Without someone actually saying something to them, I don't know if they'd know whatsoever. 'Cause I know with the voice thing, I don't think any of my teachers knew about it at all, especially the classes that we were in. It would just be like little side comments saying it... But I don't think the teachers were aware at all of what was going on.



The infrequency with which the girls felt that school authorities recognized their distress was alarming; lacking recognition of the victims on the part of faculty members was consistently reported by the students.

Sara inaccurately assumed that students would report to a faculty member when they were being bullied; this was illustrated in her response to the question of how she identified victims: “Usually it’s when they tell somebody.” However, Greg, who worked in the same school as Sara, realized, “They respond pretty well when I initiate that with them, saying I see something’s going on there.” When I inquired whether any girls reported bullying to him without him taking the initiative to verbalize recognition of the problem to the victim, he stated, “Ya know, I can’t say I do,” and Devon reported a similar experience: “It’s happened every now and then, but not a lot, where they just come and tell me about it spontaneously. Usually, it’s when I take the initiative that they admit it.” Their observations suggested that students preferred to have a school authority figure initiate the conversation that would lead to a report of victimization.

***Changes in mood and behavior.*** The faculty members identified several other signs that helped them distinguish a bullying situation and victimization of a particular individual. They noted significant changes in mood, such as crying excessively or acting out angrily, and alterations in behavior, such avoidance of a certain group of girls or disengaging from class, as signs to be cognizant of in identifying victims. Devon indicated,

From what I’ve seen, it’s more of the girls who get left out of stuff and they’re upset because nobody will want to be their partner in something we’re doing in class or something like that. I kind of notice, maybe her being upset when she’s



around a group of girls or if she always comes away upset, or just tries to completely avoid certain people. It could be angry, sad, crying, just any kind of changes where she isn't like her normal self, or maybe she just has to walk off and cool off.

The students identified all of these behaviors, including changes in mood, crying often, and isolating, as signs of victimization. Kyla added to these factors:

The signs I went through were not eating, trying to avoid going anywhere with anybody else, trying to stay next to the teacher at all times, not talking and laughing like the rest of the kids, starting to be, like, dirty, because I didn't care how I looked anymore. I think that [teachers] can make sense of what's going on, because of how the room changes when a certain person comes in. Like, I used to come in the room and it would automatically be quiet, so I know the teacher had noticed something different because they would look up and then just go about whatever they were doing. They're not stupid, they have a brain, I'm sure they can figure it out. They've probably gone through it themselves. I think that they have a sense of what's going on – they don't know exactly – but I'm sure they could figure it out if they tried.

***“Educator Fatigue”.*** The students acknowledged that it could be difficult for faculty members to recognize bullying because of the obstacle classified as “Educator Fatigue,” which resulted from a combination of the adults’ personal and professional lives. Nora and Kristen emphasized the limited time most teachers had to help students with personal issues, and Amy offered, “I think it’s really hard for them to realize or notice, because they’ve got a lot going on their lives, too, ya know? With my teachers, I’ve seen they definitely have their own set of problems.” Greg recognized this obstacle in adult recognition, as well, and reflected personally on the apathy that could overtake educators; he made a vow to avoid such apathy through increased efforts in awareness:

It’s not an easy job, being a teacher with all these kids every day. And you can get tired and you can just try to get through it. And you can teach class and not look many people in the eye all day, you know what I mean? It happens, we’re all human...I really need to put forth that every day, find a way to have effort in



the day. Teaching is very tiring, anyone could tell you that, and it's easy to just get through the day and you won't see a lot of things. You just have to keep your eyes open. You have to pay attention.

Connor described a potential solution to the natural apathy that could arise in individual educators at times, proudly sharing the method his current school utilized in identifying bullying situations. He noted,

We are fortunate, at this middle school, to have team meetings every day for 45 minutes – actually 41 minutes – and, three of the five days a week we focus specifically on students that are doing well, students that are having difficulties, bullying types of issues. And that's where we get to just hone in on students, with all these teachers at once, and just say, 'Have you noticed that this student seems detached, why do we think that is?' Someone will notice, 'Well, these three girls are no longer hanging out with them, I see them at lunch not seated by them.' So it gives us an opportunity to really identify with those students, and sometimes even bring them into a meeting and say, 'What's going on? What can we do to help?' Or talk to the parents. Or, you know, just very informally and casually on the side, say, 'Hey, what's going on? How ya doin'? What's the deal?' So that's how I recognize that, is through a discussion with my teammates, and then I think just from personal experience growing up, and six years in the classroom.

Connor seemed to believe that a team effort provided a buffer for those individuals who were experiencing personal issues or apathy, as it could be compensated for by team members through a collaborative effort; this decreased the chance of a victim falling through the cracks and avoiding identification.

***Presence of a student-teacher relationship.*** Without the presence of a strong student-teacher relationship and a true understanding of each student as a unique individual with a distinct personality and needs, the barriers to recognizing victims of relational aggression were deemed almost insurmountable by all of the participants. Amy noted that when girls are bullied, "That's when the people around them really need to notice when things change in their life and how they act differently and stuff." Charlotte



shared, “Teachers can notice if you’re close to a teacher, and you have a close relationship with them. Like if their grades start dropping or something, those are signs you need to be aware of.” Devon agreed,

I think the more you know the student, the more you’re able to tell if their demeanor – if they are upset. So I think that student-teacher relationship needs to be really strong in order to recognize those subtleties. You can tell how their attitude changes just a little bit, where they might just be completely disengaged now. Whereas, if you don’t have the relationship with them, you might just be like, ‘Oh, they’re just being one of those kids who doesn’t want to participate.’

This suggested a particular type of girl may be more likely to go unrecognized by adults when she is being victimized by peers through relational aggression. When students were quieter or less engaged in school overall, there was a minor chance that an authority figure would recognize changes in their demeanor or behavior. As Connor put it,

I guess some of the barriers might just be that we don’t know the girl – I mean, a lot of the time, we’ll notice if a student is withdrawn from a friend, because they’re the kind of student who you made a connection with, because they’re the kind of student who their personality is conducive to you getting to know them better. So if there was something going awry, you’d know because of that. So if they’re a more quiet student, someone who you would have less connection with, just due to personality reasons, the chance of the issue cropping up would be decreased due to that, I guess.

Once again, the importance of developing a strong relationship between students and at least one adult within the school setting was deemed vital in effectively addressing relationally aggressive situations.

**Student Reporting.** The second intervening condition present was the student victims’ decision regarding whether or not to report being bullied. The adolescents noted numerous barriers to reporting being victimized; some of these barriers were related to unspoken expectations among adolescent culture, and others were due to specific aspects



among school authority figures. The faculty participants identified only a small percentage of the barriers recognized by students.

***“Kid Code of Silence”.*** The first reporting barrier described by the adolescents was a universally understood, yet unwritten, code of silence. All of the girls indicated that reporting inappropriate or potentially negative behaviors to an adult was viewed as an unpopular course of action by most middle school students. Charlotte recalled an incident last year when she learned that one of her friends was cutting on herself, and Charlotte chose to report it to the school counselor, in direct opposition of her friend’s request to keep it a secret. Charlotte shared,

I know the main issue I struggled with was just betraying her trust, because she had specifically told me, ‘Don’t tell anyone! Don’t go, I have it under control!’ and stuff like that. But I was at the point – I couldn’t deal with it. I could not help her, and I don’t feel like anybody else could, except for somebody who’s professionally trained to do that...I felt horribly guilty, but I was really upset about it. I was like, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have done that, maybe I should’ve just let her deal with it by herself’...saving her life was worth losing her as a friend, [but] I still feel guilty about betraying her trust.

Nora described the shame and embarrassment of reporting that may perpetuate the code of silence shared by youth: “If you are in that position, you don’t want anybody to know you’re in that position.”

Kristen shared an effective method utilized for reporting in her school that seemed to present a solution to Nora’s concerns:

Our school created a thing called ‘Text-a-tip,’ where you can text anonymous information to them and it can’t be traced back to who said or did what, and so through that way, there’s no way for the bully to know...If they didn’t have ‘Text-a-tip,’ I would’ve actually had to physically go to the principal and tell him what’s going on, and they would’ve probably known I was out of class and known I was the one who told the principal...Since we really didn’t have ‘Text-a-



tip' last year – I probably would've done it if they did then, because that's all anonymous, and like, for all they could've known, maybe one of my friends heard me talking about it and texted it.

***Fear of being labeled.*** The girls agreed that reporting to an adult often led to students being labeled as a “tattletale” or “snitch,” which was looked down upon in middle school. Kyla explained,

It's definitely like a rule... ‘You tell on me, then nobody's gonna wanna talk to you anymore,’ ‘cause then you're known as the tattletale and anything fun that we do could be told on, I guess. That's especially true in junior high school when they start growing up a little bit more and they're starting to experiment with things. They try not to involve you at all then, if you get caught telling on them...that label stays with you forever.

While most of the girls in this study seemed disinterested in engaging in risky behaviors, it seemed that none of them wanted to be the individual responsible for putting a stop to others' experimentation.

Kristen expressed that one of the reasons she chose not to report being bullied to an adult at school was because she did not want to be labeled as “serious” or “unable to have fun”:

If they had been joking the whole time, which I don't know if they were or not, then word could've got around that I'm not the joking person and I'm always serious...they'd probably tell other people, ‘That girl's super-serious, don't joke about stuff around her, ‘cause she won't take it as a joke.’

***Lack of recognition.*** Kristen's statement suggested another reason some girls did not report the bullying, which was that they may not have realized they were being victimized. While they may have recognized feelings of emotional distress, many girls did not attach the label of bullying to the interactions they were experiencing, especially in circumstances where the bully was a potential friend. Amy demonstrated this concept:



At the time, it felt so small, and it really was. And to me, looking back on it, I still feel like it set me on an emotional rollercoaster, but that's it. It wasn't to the point that I was having bad thoughts about myself or anything like that. So it wasn't very significant, I don't feel like...[It's] nothing like I was afraid or anything like that. I just felt like it never got very severe, like physically or mentally, but just emotionally.

Amy's willingness to essentially minimize the importance of her emotional distress was consistent with the responses of the other student participants, which suggested severe negative self-beliefs or self-harming thoughts were the point at which the girls' felt the incidents were serious enough to report to an adult. However, Kristen expressed the sentiment that, regardless of the level of distress, talking to an adult about bullying may mean any help they could provide would be "too little, too late." She noted, "I feel like at that point where it's already happened, you can't, like – I don't know what more there would be to talk about. 'Cause you can't take back what already happened." However, she shared how difficult it was for her to recognize the incidents as bullying in the first place:

This is weird (tearing up). 'Cause I always thought like, 'Yeah, if I'm being bullied, I'm not afraid to go to an adult or anything'... But there's a fine line between teasing and joking, and bullying and all this stuff. And I guess I always took it as joking so I didn't feel the need to tell anybody...Because I even said out of my own mouth, 'If it happens repeatedly, that that's when you know it's not a joke anymore.' But I kept seeing it as a joke. Hmm...doesn't seem like a joke anymore to me.

Coming to such a realization appeared to be exceptionally painful and confusing for Kristen.

***Burden of proof.*** Even when the girls did recognize they were being bullied by a peer, they indicated a belief that reporting might not result in any action, because there



would be no way to prove it had happened. As Charlotte put it, “The school can’t really do anything about it when it’s one word against the other word. And some people lie and manipulate the truth, and you really don’t know what’s true.” Sara and Devon had battled through this difficulty, as well. Devon described the challenge of such ambiguous circumstances:

I get a lot of, ‘Well, they’re saying this about me!’ and then I go talk to them, and they say, ‘Oh no, we didn’t do that!’ It’s just kind of a she-said, she-said thing, and trying to diagnose it and investigate to figure what really happened can be a hard process sometimes.

Sara verbalized the limitations of this aspect of reporting, and admitted, “It’s got to be an admission, or someone who saw it.” She identified concrete proof that bullying had occurred in evidence such as text messages or notes.

**“Kid Justice System”.** Both the students and faculty members identified the fear of retaliation as a key obstacle in reporting. Categorized as the “Kid Justice System,” it exponentially hindered the frequency of reporting. As Kyla explained,

It’s like a little justice system, I guess, where they try to handle things on their own. Like, ‘Yeah, you got me yelled at, so I’m gonna get you yelled at. They try to make it even, I guess...the being embarrassed thing is usually a lot worse than the trouble part, because looking bad in someone else’s eyes makes them really scared, so they want to make you feel just as bad as they had, and most of the time worse.

She admitted that such retaliation was a considerable fear in reporting the bullying to an adult:

That was my main fear – if I told the principal or something, they’ll get suspended and when they got back, they would try and prove to me that they’re bigger and better than I am. Try and go around the authority figure and handle it themselves.



Her beliefs indicated that adolescents may prefer to solve their own problems independently, without the assistance or input of adults. Kristen expressed a similar thought about youths' reactions to being reported to an adult for a negative behavior: "Everything about bullying is getting the other person back...Everyone, just being human, wants to get back at the other person." She described her own way of getting back at the girls who were making fun of her voice:

I did tell my friends what was happening. And if anything, instead of telling my parents or a principal or something, they just helped me talk back to them and call her a 'Fridge' again...I guess that everybody thinks that the only way of getting back at someone is just to find another thing to say to them, just like [Jessica] did that to me, just 'cause people told her that she was a 'Fridge.' So maybe, for all I know, getting my friends involved was worse, 'cause it just made the back and forth get more frequent...Us versus them, yeah.

Devon voiced an understanding of this unspoken code of justice among students:

I think a lot of them are scared that something worse might happen if they tell somebody...like the bully might do something worse...the bully's gonna end up blaming them for getting them in trouble, and it's just gonna come back on them even worse.

The other educators acknowledged a similar belief, in that many students were fearful of what might happen to them if they were to share their victimization experience with a school authority figure.

***Uncertainty about authority figures' roles.*** The student victims highlighted a feeling of confusion regarding the roles and related authority level of various adults within the school setting; oftentimes, this seemed to result in uncertainty regarding who to speak to when initiating a report, which made not reporting an easier option. Nora expressed her frustration: "I don't even know who I would talk to about it...If they told



us what kinds of things – like, ‘If this happens, you go to this person, if this happens, you go to this person.’” Charlotte expressed a similar concern stemming from an incident in which she reported a friend’s self-harming behaviors subsequent to being bullied. She admitted, “I just went and I had no idea what the procedure was...So I just went into the counselor’s office and I was like, ‘I need to talk to someone.’”

None of the girls demonstrated awareness of faculty members’ roles when it came to reporting bullying, except in seemingly obvious cases. For example, Kristen indicated that she would prefer to report bullying to the principal, because she perceived him to be the only individual with true authority and power within her school. She stated,

I know that in my situation I would rather go to the principal than a counselor, because the principal can do something, whereas a counselor – you just talk about your anger and talk about what’s going on – unless they can do something? Can a counselor get parents involved?...And see, even just now, I had to ask what stuff they can do, because I don’t know and I don’t think other students know either.

Kristen’s response illustrated a core barrier noted in reporting, which was that students typically did not know the roles of authority figures within the school setting, or had an inaccurate perception of a particular authority figure’s power to end a bullying situation. She expressed the view that principals had the ability to get parents involved, and when a bully’s parents were involved, it caused the bully to recognize the severity of her behavior and make appropriate changes. Kristen went on to indicate that most students would not go to a counselor to report bullying due to the stigma of being called “crazy,” and Charlotte expressed that she did not even know who the counselors in her school were. Greg offered the opposite perspective in regards to his school, which was significantly smaller in student-body population than Charlotte and Kristen’s school:



“We have a [school counselor] now, and they all feel really comfortable going to him, and I think they kind of go there first...he’s staying pretty busy, so the kids are feeling pretty comfortable going to him, I guess.”

*Unknown adult response.* The students’ beliefs about faculty responses to the report also gave them pause when trying to decide whether they would report the bullying incidents. While three of the four adult participants felt that all of the faculty members in their school took bullying seriously, one believed that the level of concern was dependent upon the individual personalities of each teacher or administrator. Connor connected the emphasis of adult awareness in relationally aggressive situations to the middle school setting in particular:

I would say, our whole school, our whole staff – probably dang near one hundred percent of them if given a survey – would report [bullying] as a very serious topic that needs attention immediately...I think based on the two schools that I’ve worked at, both middle schools, amongst those hundred teachers that I’ve worked with, I almost feel like it’s more of a middle school teacher kind of mentality.

Devon, on the other hand, suspected that adult concern was more likely to vary by individual: “I think some people do recognize that it’s there and others think, ‘Oh, they’re just being sensitive’ or something like that.” The students’ beliefs were congruent with Devon’s statement, in that adults may not take the report seriously or might inadvertently or purposely minimize its importance. Kyla indicated,

I think adults kind of take it seriously, but they don’t think it has such large effects as physical [bullying]...They kind of think that it’ll go away. Maybe ‘cause they’ve gone through the high school thing and they know that it doesn’t matter to them now, so they try and put that point of view on the students – but it matters to [the students] now. They don’t remember how it felt when it happened to them, it’s just an outsider’s point of view now.



There appeared to be numerous obstacles in reporting and for a victim to work up the courage to report their problem only to be dismissed or minimized was viewed by the students as heart-breaking. Kyla expressed concern that a report may not even be believed, and alluded to the social participation involved in relational aggression, wherein a greater number of covert bullies could assist one another in denying the bullying, thereby making the victim appear to be lying or exaggerating the incidents.

The girls were ambivalent in their beliefs about whether teachers genuinely cared about the victims. Charlotte articulated the ways in which teachers tended to send mixed messages to students regarding their level of care or interest in incidents that led to emotional distress. She stated,

I feel like there's a couple of teacher who actually care about it. But some people, I can just tell they don't care. Like, 'This is class, this is not social hour, don't bring your emotions into class.' And some teachers try to create that atmosphere where it's a comfortable place and I feel like those teachers care – even if people don't bring it to them, I feel like they still try to help. But there's a lot of teachers, where you can tell they just don't care, they don't want to hear about it, they don't want you to bring it into their classes... 'This is a class where you sit here, do your work, this is academic, and that's all it is.'

The girls believed that most teachers divided individuals into academic and personal components in a hurtful and unrealistic fashion. They felt that if they were not disturbing the academic setting, their teachers were not concerned with any other aspects of their wellbeing.

Most notably, the students voiced a fear of the adults creating a worse bullying situation by responding in an ineffective manner. Kyla illustrated this fear through her experience:



When the girls started calling me a lesbian, I went to the principal for it. And the principal called all the girls down right then and there. And the embarrassment of getting caught telling on them kind of made it worse for me...it just made things even more uncomfortable than it already was, 'cause they would stare at me from across the room knowing what I had done. And I just felt ashamed for doing it.

Nora articulated a belief that adults simply did not understand bullying situations among students, and would respond in a way that they believed made the situation better, without considering the perspective of the victims. She declared,

They wouldn't understand. They would just like try and get us back together and be friends, and like talk with the parents, and just try to fix it – and they can't. That's embarrassing. They can't force somebody to be friends with me just out of pity or something.

Kyla and Nora's accounts were indicative of a significant discrepancy between student and school authority perceptions when it came to beliefs about the most effective ways of intervening.

***Strength of the student-teacher relationship.*** All of the participants felt that the culmination of all of these obstacles could be identified under one significant issue: the student-teacher relationship. If students did not feel they knew their teachers, they did not have trust in their ability to understand or intervene in bullying situations. When asked whether she would ever report bullying to a teacher, Nora exclaimed, "There's no way I would tell them! I don't know any of them well enough to know what they would do!" Connor expressed a congruent belief: "Of the students who don't report, I bet half of them don't think there's anyone at the school that they can trust." With school faculty members who did not display awareness or concern, students immediately distrusted their



intentions or ability to help in victimization situations. Devon highlighted the patience required to develop such trust:

You're not gonna be able to force them to come to you or anything. But maybe try and keep explaining, keep opening up to them, and keep telling them, 'You know I'm here if you need to talk about anything.' I mean, if they're not gonna tell you, they're not gonna. But I think the best thing you can do is keep showing them that you're there for them, that if they do want to talk, that you're there.

All of the participants indicated that trust took time and energy to develop, but seemed to be a key factor in exhibiting genuine care and concern for the victim's distressing situation. This consistent expression of care seemed to be paramount; it conveyed genuine concern without the typically forced feeling present within a hierarchical situation. Devon's approach appeared to be consistent with the needs that Nora expressed regarding her own victimization by peers. She voiced,

It would be nice to just have somebody come up to you and say, 'I know this is going on and it sucks.' Then I would feel like they cared enough to notice and they might want to know more. 'Cause it's not like I want to tell someone who's not gonna listen or doesn't care.

Connor agreed with the concept of adults initiating contact to develop relationships with the students. He described a program he developed within the middle school where he worked that alleged the goal of developing stronger student-teacher relationships built upon comfort, respect, and trust. He asserted,

It comes down to, there has to be at least one adult that the student works with or sees on a daily basis, that they feel comfortable enough with to share that personal information. And we're actually implementing a new program in two weeks that I suggested a few weeks ago, called 'Project Connection.' And it's gonna get to the heart of this very issue. We're gonna conduct a survey of students where they identify any and all adults that they feel comfortable with – to the point that they could approach one of us to talk about a serious issue... They're gonna be given a list of the teachers, and they can check their names or not, and if they only have



one or two teachers checked, we're gonna divvy up those students and work on building relationships specifically with the students who don't feel particularly connected.

It's so that we create a situation where every student feels like they have that one go-to teacher that they could come to with a bullying situation or a problem at home or something like that. Because I think, if a student's comfortable enough, they don't feel like you're gonna just go tell that kid, 'Hey, this kid told me that, knock it off!' But that you'll actually take the time to go through the right channels so that you don't screw up their friendships anymore and embarrass them.

Connor's program appeared to hit on all of the components identified as important by the student participants in this study when it came to the effective development of student-teacher relationships. Such a program would provide each student with a trusted adult whom they could report bullying to at any point during their academic stay at a particular school, eliminating student confusion over who to report to and roles of particular school faculty members in bullying situations.

**Summary of intervening conditions.** Two forms of intervening conditions were present in this study: recognition and reporting. When it came to adult recognition of relational aggression and identifying the victims, the faculty members reported being frustrated with a lack of specific education and training, as they often depended upon their own experiences to understand the phenomenon. Some of the faculty members identified the inaccurate assumption of student reporting as a problem. All of the participants indicated various changes in mood or behavior were signs of victimization, and once again emphasized the importance of the presence of a student-teacher relationship. A belief in school authority figures as fallible human beings was also present. Students identified additional methods of recognition, including changes in



appetite, appearance, hygiene, socialization behaviors, and a change in the atmosphere of a room when the victim entered.

The students noted numerous barriers in reporting, including an expectation of a code of silence among adolescents, fear of being labeled, difficulty recognizing one's own victimization status, uncertainty regarding school faculty roles and authoritative abilities, and the unknown factor of adult responses. Both students and school authorities identified the burden of proof, a fear of retaliation, and the importance of a strong, trusting student-teacher relationship as factors in reporting, as well.

**Action/Interactional Strategies**

The participants' responses to questions about intervention and prevention strategies in relationally aggressive incidents are described in Table 7 and outlined narratively in the following section.



Table 7

*Action/Interactional Strategies*

Categories/Subcategories Identified by Students and Educators	Categories/Subcategories Identified by Students Only	Categories/Subcategories Identified by Educators Only
INTERVENTION:		
Effective Strategies <i>Faculty initiative</i> <i>Student input valued</i> <i>Opportunity to Develop New Relationships</i> <i>Development of Empathy</i>	Effective Strategies <i>Confidentiality/anonymity</i> <i>Nontraditional forms of consequence</i>	Effective Strategies <i>Group communication</i> <i>Nontraditional forms of consequence*</i> <i>Traditional forms of punishment*</i>
Personal Coping Strategies  Strong Support System  Education/Training  Culture of the Environment  Parental Roles	Ineffective Strategies <i>Group communication</i> <i>Traditional forms of punishment</i>	Ineffective Strategies <i>Ignoring/minimizing</i> <i>Traditional forms of punishment*</i>
PREVENTION:		
Skill Development <i>Empathy</i>  Awareness through Education and Training  Atmosphere of Equality	Skill Development <i>Assertiveness</i>	(None)

*\*Supported by only half of the faculty participants*

**Intervention.** The greatest discrepancy between the perceptions of student victims and school authority figures involved the action/interactional strategies employed to intervene in bullying situations. The students emphasized a strong need for development of empathy among bullies and providing creative consequences, as opposed to traditional methods of punishment. While two of the teachers recognized that



traditional forms of punishment may create greater difficulties for the victims, the other two faculty members believed that a consistent zero-tolerance attitude and traditional forms of punishment were useful interventions. The various forms of coping and intervention as depicted by the participants are detailed below.

***Personal coping strategies.*** In regards to student victims' attempts to manage bullying situations independently, they agreed that ignoring the situation was by far the least effective method of coping. Of her own situation, Kyla acknowledged, "I think it was a problem because I was trying to ignore the problem." The girls indicated that ignoring was often equated with submitting to the aggression and accepting the role of a victim in the bully's perception.

The adolescents addressed potentially beneficial coping strategies, as well; such tactics seemed to act as a buffer in alleviating the negative impact of bullying upon the victim. Amy was confident that her religious convictions were a source of strength for her, and Nora indicated that she utilized journaling as an outlet for her pain:

I write in my journal a lot. I write everything in there. And stuff that I would just be embarrassed to tell anyone, because at least it's in my journal and it's hidden, and at least I get it out somehow...I guess mostly, yeah, I just write about it, and that helps.

Both girls appeared to utilize these strategies as a personal source of clarity which provided internal strength.

***Support system.*** Many of the girls acknowledged the necessity of a strong support system in times of emotional distress. Charlotte gratefully emphasized the ways in which her friends and family helped her to develop inner strength and confidence:



I just feel like I have really good friends. I've had the same group of friends since I was in kindergarten, and these girls are like always here for me. I have complete trust in them and I feel like I get a lot of support from them. And I get a lot of support from my parents, so I feel generally very happy with myself...I feel like if I try to adopt that attitude, then I feel so much more confident about myself, and just happier about myself, in general. And I feel like I can push myself when I'm in a happier place and not, like, completely just crumble when things go wrong.

Kyla felt that her friends and family guided her in shifting her beliefs about herself to more positive aspects of her character. Sadly, she noted that one of the most impactful statements in her development towards assertiveness and change was made by her aunt, who was suffering from cancer at the time and passed away shortly after sharing her wisdom with Kyla. Kyla remembered,

Eventually, I had some really good friends, and they were saying to think positive, so I just kind of started thinking like they did. And my aunt, who died of cancer, told me that right before she died. She was, like – 'cause she could see that I was having a bit of a hard time – so she was like, 'You have to be you, don't let them get to you and change you,' and tried to comfort me with it. So when she passed away, I was like, 'I think I'm gonna do it like that from now on.'

Family members were perceived as an unconditional source of support by many of the participants, in that the girls knew their family members would always be on their side.

Kristen discovered that her friends were not only a source of support, but a source of reassurance for her. They helped her to realize that she could choose not to believe the negative things that were being said to her by the aggressors. She noted,

I'm not caring about it as much now, because I know that, like, my friends have told me, 'No, you don't have a man voice or anything.' If I didn't have my friends, I probably would've felt overpowered by them, and especially if they got more people involved in saying it. Whether or not I had a man voice, my friends would just tell me, 'No, it's fine, don't believe anything they say.'



***Education and awareness.*** The students and authority figures recognized that a lack of awareness surrounding relational aggression often led to ineffective prevention and intervention methods. They all highlighted the importance of educating individuals about different forms bullying, as well as providing education around the school's expectations and policies regarding such incidents. At his school, Devon indicated that he was unaware of the specific bullying policy:

I wouldn't say they have a policy about it. I mean, it's something they don't want happening, but there's not a strict policy about what to do if this happens, against bullying...I think there needs to be a school-wide policy, and if the faculty was more open to discussions about it, and trying to figure out why it's happening, they can do what they can to help fix it...I'm not really sure what [the policy] would have to include, but it would be school-wide, instead of each teacher just dealing with it individually. Then the students would know more of the expectations.

Even Sara, the principal of her school, who took pride in her leadership role and development of the harassment policy at her school, admitted, "I don't know, I'd have to look at my handbook," when asked about the procedures involved in identifying and responding to bullying situations.

Devon's point about the students' lack of awareness surrounding anti-bullying policies within the school setting was substantiated by their responses. When the adolescent girls were asked about the policies within their school, none of the girls knew specific procedures for reporting, or even definitions of bullying behaviors in general. Kyla expressed, "There has been [a policy] there, but they don't explain it or anything, I just know there's one. But, it's just like, 'Here's the rule book, read through it if you have the time!'" This poor awareness was deemed to be just as much the fault of the



faculty members as the students, as the school did little to promote understanding of the policies.

All of the girls discussed the brief education they received aimed at anti-bullying measures during health classes in school, and noted an obvious discrimination against relationally aggressive behaviors. Kyla reported feeling frustrated over the poor educational methods employed by the school system in regards to relational aggression. She claimed,

There's something like a week, but not even really that, in health class, where they talk to you about what bullying is. But it's usually just the physical stuff, instead of rumors and things like that. It's more like, 'Don't hit and don't kick! No physical contact!' It's not, 'Don't start rumors!' It's always about the physical types.

Amy felt that minimal aspects of relational aggression were covered during such lectures, but believed it did not matter regardless, because she did not see the majority of her peers taking the subject seriously. She stated,

They talk about it in health classes, here and there. I think it's a little bit of both physical and other stuff – they've hit gossiping, definitely. But not much of anything else. They say some, ya know, like, 'Don't bully, it's bad!' type things. Or 'It'll make the person feel bad.' There's nothing really that I think gets to people about it. It gets to me personally, because I just feel bad for people that get bullied, but nothing really that I've seen. Like most people that I've seen are just like, 'That's stupid!'

Kristen and Charlotte felt that the focus of most educational interventions was unrelated to any type of face-to-face or in-person bullying that occurred in school; instead, they believed the focus was on cyberbullying, and typically emphasized the dangers presented by strangers, as opposed to peers.



Kyla expressed irritation over the lack of clear definitions in regards to relational aggression. She indicated that she felt this was a significant reason that most girls did not even realize when they were being bullied through relationally aggressive means, and felt uncertain about reporting it to an adult for fear of being told it was not present or important. She described the need for more coherent and focused definitions of relational aggression within the school setting:

If there was something specific set up, with different types of behavior listed – not only the physical, but spreading rumors and stealing friends and stuff – that would probably make it easier, because then in your head you can't make seem like it's not bullying. If it was specifically [in the handbook] and you could look at it yourself, it would probably make it seem more real that you're being bullied, and then you'd be able to talk to your advisor without feeling as stressed out about what's happening, like if they had specific rules about how to handle everything, too.

Sara expressed considerable pride in the perceived unambiguous and comprehensive policy her school had developed; however, I tended to understand Kyla's point after reading Sara's school's policy, which seemed to utilize phrasing common among all of the policies I reviewed. The "Harassment Policy" stated,

To provide a positive environment based on mutual respect of each and every person, certain guidelines for appropriate behavior need to be recognized by each student. [This school] recognizes individual differences in culture, race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, and lifestyle preferences. Inappropriate behavior, either verbal, written, or physical, disregards the feelings of others, is demeaning, and will not be tolerated. This includes unwelcome physical advances, unwarranted verbal remarks, and derogatory or discriminatory statements. If anyone has a harassment complaint, see staff or administration.

However, Greg advocated that while education to increase awareness could be a positive step in the right direction, the developmental considerations of such education needed to be addressed, as well as the inclusion of students and school faculty members in such



interventions. He promoted the need for continual reinforcement of such messages to the students:

But, ya know, kids have short-term memories, too, and there's been a lot of apologies and things like that, but I hear after a couple weeks a lot of it wears off and it kind of goes back to where it was. You have to REALLY revisit it with these kids.

Greg described the need for educator awareness and training, as well, separate from the students' education about relational aggression. He shared his desire to learn more and become better equipped to handle such situations:

I think they should have, to some extent, maybe a class that teachers take. Ya know, with all of our in-services – we do so much stuff that I feel like is irrelevant – we might as well do some of this one day and spend time on things to look for with bullying. And ya know, a full day, of maybe things that we should be looking for as teachers, because we're the ones being involved with these kids every day. I mean, I don't know how trained teachers are to actually look for signs. I don't remember the last time my boss ever told me, 'Hey, keep an eye on this.' Or occasionally, maybe a counselor will do that, but ya know, it's not in our training to be counselors, it's our training to be teachers. But maybe if we spend a day or two, and we find out what we should be looking for.

Based on the participants' responses, it appeared that education and training required the inclusion of three methods: student education, teacher and administrator training, and combined learning workshops for the students and faculty members.

***Culture of the environment.*** The cultural expectations and norms created within the school setting were viewed as important deterrents in any bullying situation. Connor described the ways in which his school had implemented an anti-bullying task force, but had not yet utilized the group in an effective manner. He explained,

We just put together an anti-bullying task force at our school, but to be honest, I saw this happen at the previous school district I was at, and it's now here, where we talk about bullying, talk about bullying, but there's so little – the teeth are so



dull behind this machine in how to handle the bullying! So what's disappointing is that we put together these bullying task forces, but not enough – in my opinion – comes from them. I feel like we can say it looks good on paper that we have a task force, but until the day comes someone bullies someone else and the hammer just dropped, and you were out of school for a week and you have to take a course on why it's bad and those kinds of things happen, it feels like pen on paper, but not really anything happening.

He worked at one school in which certain cultural norms were developed through consistency built upon a united front presented by the faculty members. He described the process of developing such an atmosphere:

I do think it's something where it would take a little time to have everyone understand. It has to become a cultural aspect of the school, like for example, an analogy would be...In a school that I worked at previously in another school district, the hallway behavior was insanely amazing. Kids were not loud, there wasn't gum chewing or gum getting stuck on the walls, or anything like that, because over the years, that was enforced. 'No, you don't chew gum here. No, you're not loud in the hallways,' because over time that became part of the school's culture. And then when I go to other schools or talk to other teachers, the hallway behavior is atrocious and that's because people don't enforce it.

So to answer your question, I think if we started, right now, or next year, at some point, and made it very clear that bullying, in any of its forms, will not be tolerated...It's not, oh, a slap on the wrist. It's, if you get caught bullying, you really have something to show for it. And until that happens, I don't think that the problem is gonna get solved. The first year, people might have their arms up like, 'What? What? I get a month of lunch detention because I was bullying?' Then two, three years down the road, people don't question it, they just know it's what happens. Like most new things at schools, it's going to be bumpy at first.

Connor's statement implied an initial resistance on the part of all individuals when implementing a new rule or expectation; however, he seemed to believe that perseverance would produce the desired outcome.

Kyla emphasized the importance of cultural norms within the school setting, as well, and described the ways in which her current school's encouraged, but non-



mandatory, rule to avoid dating other students was helpful in avoiding drama and bullying among the students. Devon and Greg indicated they had attempted to create a classroom atmosphere that touted similar concepts to those Kyla presented. Greg described a very direct approach to sharing the expectations he had of his students, in which he placed a great deal of the responsibility upon himself to role model cooperation and respect. Devon also emphasized the importance of encouraging an atmosphere of teamwork and the development of new relationships. He shared,

I usually try to just handle it as a group, be like, ‘Ya know, we need to make sure that we’re being nice to everybody and including everybody.’ ‘Cause I try to preach that in all my classes, that if somebody wants to be your partner, be their partner, you don’t always have to be partners with people you’re friends with or anything like that. So I just kind of try to make it more a group deal that ‘You need to do this.’ I think it can be beneficial, especially if you set up the class with a lot of teamwork. ‘Cause I think, if you hold them accountable in their teams and everything like that, they come together more. And if you make sure to use different teams throughout the school year or whatever, so they’re not always the same group. If they’re always in the same group, then you’ll have cliques form and you’ll see more of that bullying.

Connor related to the idea of teamwork, not only among the students, but among the educators. Earlier in the chapter, he shared about the team meetings he and his colleagues attended several times a week to communicate about the students’ development in both academic and personal realms of functioning. He indicated that he initially believed the meetings would be a waste of time, but quickly recognized the value in assessing for potential personal problems with students with the help of his colleagues.

Amy noted the importance of student involvement, but indicated that she had witnessed such efforts falling short, even though intentions may have been positive. She suggested that adults needed to consider the meaning of such efforts and who may be



likely to become invested in such efforts, as the goals may actually backfire if the targeted group of students did not choose to participate. She described,

They're starting a thing called 'Operation Beautiful' in my school. They're just trying to promote girls feeling good about themselves. And so one Monday a month, they're saying it's like a 'No Make-Up Monday.' So I don't know, they're trying to do little things. But for the ones it really is targeted towards, they think it's stupid, so I don't know if that works. I think it's encouraging to see that people notice that, and that they're trying to do something about it. But I don't think it will really help, because the girls are going to think more individually like, 'Well, ya know, I wear make-up because it makes me feel less self-conscious,' or something like that.

While "Operation Beautiful" served to promote positivity among teenage girls and sent an encouraging message overall, Amy felt that the program minimized some of the only aspects of power certain victims may have left at their disposal, such as being able to cover up facial scars that would otherwise be the target of ridicule with make-up.

Though the point would be for a victim to feel that covering up her flaws was unnecessary, it may be a long time before a girl developed the confidence to believe in such a message; in Amy's opinion, asking a victim to attempt to learn this message over time within the same situation in which she was being bullied may be asking too much.

***Ineffective strategies.*** While the adults felt that they had an understanding of the interventions that were effective in terminating relationally aggressive interactions, the students disagreed with many of their perspectives. It seemed that the goal of the authority figures was to involve the bullies and victims in group communication, and then send a message through consistent consequences to deter future occurrences of bullying; however, the students indicated that this typically resulted in embarrassment and



retaliation, which lent support to one of the key reasons they chose not to report bullying in the first place.

The faculty members in this study recognized that ignoring or minimizing the problem was an exceptionally ineffective method of attempting to stop the negative behaviors. However, most of the faculty members did not recognize that their typical intervention method of attempting to speak with all of the parties involved was viewed as unhelpful by most of the students. Sara indicated that she found the most important aspect of intervention to be approaching the victims and bullies in an effort to create open communication:

We get to the bottom of whatever was causing the issue. We sit down and have the conversation of finding out what was the catalyst to set it all off... And there are rules. It's like, 'You will listen while they're speaking, and then you will have your turn.' Usually, again, that gray area is revealed in misunderstandings or whatever. It's just communication with the girls and getting to the bottom of it. I guess my training as an LCSW helps me do negotiations and mediation, and finding out what really started it. So it's just talking through it and then coming up with agreements on how it is we're going to get through the day, how we're gonna get through the halls, how we're gonna get through class, how we're gonna focus on why we're really here – which is studying – and lay out some plans like that.

Greg asserted that he often attempts to “address everybody as a whole,” including the perpetrators, victims, and witnesses or friends of the individuals involved. While Greg and Sara’s methods of open communication and finding out the “why” of the situation sounded promising to the educators, the students disagreed with the benefits they perceived. They believed that forcing the conflicting parties to discuss the issue often led to embarrassment and further trauma on the part of the victim. Kyla explained the problem with such direct and open forms of intervention:



Well, a lot of teachers usually try to confront the students right in front of you. They don't try to make it seem like they figured it out themselves, so it kinda makes it worse. The teachers are like the authority figures, so they have power over them, but they also have power over you. And you don't really have any say in how they handle it. So they're probably just gonna make it worse, so why bother with that? If you made it so that it wasn't so obvious that the child got in trouble for bullying, it might seem like less of a problem to them. So then they won't care as much and try to handle it themselves.

Kyla's recommendation was consistent with the fear of retaliation that prevented most girls from telling a teacher or administrator about the bullying initially, and was consistent with girls' beliefs that group intervention led to further traumatization of the victim.

The school authority emphasis on consequences for inappropriate behaviors was apparent in many of their responses. Sara stated,

We have a handbook that we follow, so if bullying is truly the label of what happened, then there's consequences for that. And that guides a lot of what we do to handle harassment...usually it's detention, and then if it continues, in-school suspension to out-of-school suspension, behavior plans, parent notification.

As the administrator, I can make decisions that I feel are appropriate for consequences, and there's a little latitude that I have with that. Just depends on the situation, but typically, it's the same thing: It's not tolerated here. And myself and the assistant principal, we work really closely together, we follow the rules, and the expectation is for teachers to follow the rules and instill consequences. Especially here, there's consequences for inappropriate behavior, whatever it is – word gets out quickly that if you're pushing, shoving, sending, saying things, there's consequences for that if you get caught.

Greg offered the same general perception of non-tolerance and consistent consequences:

“There's always repercussions for acting inappropriately.” The harassment policy at Sara and Greg's school stated as much. It listed parent notification and detention or in-school suspension as the consequences for a first occurrence. In-school suspension, behavioral



plans, and a parent conference were noted as consequences for a second occurrence. Getting caught bullying a third time listed the vague description of “Follow Behavioral Plan.” The innate difficulty noted in providing consequences was once again the burden of proof, which was difficult to ascertain in relationally aggressive incidents.

Parent notification was viewed as having its own potential set of unintended consequences for the victim. Kristen described an incident in which a victim’s parents were allowed to fight a victim’s battle for her, which resulted in embarrassment and expected retaliation: “They let the parents come in and talk to the students instead. Which, that kid, the parents come in and start yelling at the kids for a little bit and the teacher lets them leave after that.”

Kyla expressed her confusion in regards to consequences in general: “I don’t really understand the punishing part. It kind of reinforces bad behavior.” She explained that many students don’t mind being suspended, because they perceive it as “free vacation days from school.” Additionally, she believed many students viewed suspension as something that involved daring or “cool” behavior, and so it may be reinforced by improving their social status. However, even if the perpetrator viewed the punishment in its intended negative fashion, it was likely to come back on the victim in the form of retaliation. Kristen reported a similar viewpoint: “Suspension, I don’t think, really does anything. I think as soon as it’s over, they just go back to being the same person they were – if anything, it’s just a break from the bullying and then it comes right back.” Consensus among the students was that it was difficult to rationalize punishment for an interaction such as ending a friendship or not sitting next to someone at lunch.



While Connor expressed a preference for nontraditional forms of consequence, Devon was the only educator to clearly verbalize the problems with traditional punishment in a congruent manner to the students:

The worst thing is just straight out punishing the bully. I think that's what some victims assume will happen, and then the bully's gonna end up blaming them for getting in trouble, and it's just gonna come back on them even worse.

*Effective strategies.* In combining the perceptions of the student victims and school authority figures, more effective intervention strategies were developed. The most important factor noted by both sets of participants was a strong student-teacher relationship, in which the faculty member had the ability to recognize something was amiss with the student and was able to identify her as a victim of bullying without the student necessarily having to report it. Devon described his initial approach with a victim after identifying her as such, which involved taking the initiative to engage the girl in a discussion:

First and foremost, I talk to the girl who's being bullied. I like to pull her aside and have a one-on-one discussion with her and see where she's at. I just kind of see that she's upset, and I kind of pull them aside and be like, 'Are you alright? You seem a little upset.' and just kind of go from there. Sometimes I've got to dig a little deeper, but usually they do come out and say what's bothering them or going on right there. I think they appreciate it, because they can – I think it shows that I care, to them. So they seem willing to open up.

The students' perspectives supported Devon's approach with victims of relational aggression, as they all appeared to prefer that an adult initiated the discussion about bullying. Kyla agreed,

I'd prefer if they came to me and asked, instead of putting the responsibility on me to do it, 'cause it would seem like I might get in less trouble [with the bully] if the teacher was the one who brought it up.



Connor's earlier description of "Project Connection" promoted ways of enhancing and solidifying strong, trusting student-teacher relationships. His school's team-based approach to identifying victims focused on "assigning the teacher who is more closely associated with the student to have that conversation with them, so they're more in their comfort zone." It focused on pairing off students and teachers based on the students' feelings of connection toward particular teachers, in order to strengthen the student-teacher relationship.

Devon and Connor's willingness to initiate concern was the one thing that some of the students expressed they had needed when they were bullied by peers; they indicated that they were not necessarily looking for an adult to "fix" the problem for them, but to simply listen and validate their pain. Nora highlighted,

All I really needed was someone to notice, like 'Hey, this sucks' or 'This really sucks for you, and I'm sorry you're going through it, and there's nothing wrong with you,' like 'You're okay.' Like 'They're the ones who are being bitches, you're fine, really, you'll make new friends and better friends.' Or maybe not even that, because it kinda sounds like bullshit. But even just to recognize it so that I don't feel like I'm crazy, or like there's something wrong with me. Like I'm being bullied and nobody else even noticed or cares, but say like, 'I see this is going on and it really sucks, and if you wanna just come and just vent to me and just lay it all out on me then do that, that's okay, I'm here for you.'

It seemed that when school authority figures took the responsibility of initiating contact, it led to more effective interventions, overall, in the students' perspectives. In addition, it was noted that this type of intervention, which focused on support and validation, as opposed to problem-solving, was fitting with the "Kid Code of Justice" described earlier in this chapter; instead of engaging in retaliation as a way of managing the situation



independently, the victims would be empowered to handle the situation independently through appropriate means.

Kyla detailed the way in which she would prefer a teacher or administrator approach her when they initiated a conversation to express concern, based upon unspoken rules of popularity among most adolescents. She explained,

It's good if, like, holding me back after class or during recess, or just pulling you out into the hallway and talking to you about it. So that way, like it sounds bad, but that way you look like you're in trouble or something, 'cause that seems to make you more popular, I guess. But making it seem like that's not what's going on at all. So that way they can talk to you about it. Just ask, like, say, 'I've noticed that you've had some issues lately' and tell them, or ask them, or give them proof that they know something's wrong. And then ask them what's causing it, and kind of give them the chance to answer themselves. And then offer up their own ideas if they don't...they might not be able to argue with the logic behind that. And so they'd kind of have to admit to it.

After the student victim has been approached by an educator regarding the problem, the students indicated they would appreciate having the adult ask for their input in regards to how to proceed with resolving the issue. Kyla suggested getting the students' input regarding the next step or course of action, such as whether they wanted an adult to confront the bullies or not. She admitted that in situations where safety was a concern, it would be appropriate for the educator to do what they felt was best even if the student did not want intervention to occur.

Connor described his approach to intervention, which was consistent with the goals Kyla illustrated:

I think you need to find out what the students would define as you screwing it up, and you start from there. You find out, 'What, ultimately, can we do to make this better for you? And what are some things you would not be okay with?' And they might say, 'I do not want you talking to them, to that group.' Okay, then we won't, then you have to stick to that, then find other ways. Or maybe they're



okay with you talking to them, but not in such a way that they think it was initiated by the [victim]. I think in doing that groundwork, that first round of research to find out what the student is gonna be okay with – so that you know how far you can go, and what you can and can't say, and who you can and can't approach – just knowing that right off the bat will prevent you from making like a bull in a china shop emotionally.

Providing students with input and options was deemed considerably important by all of the students and some of the faculty members. Such interactions empowered the students and allowed them to feel that their voice had been heard and acknowledged as valuable. Devon expressed the importance of considering each situation on a “case-by-case basis,” considering the personalities of the students involved and the potential ramifications of certain intervention strategies.

The importance of providing opportunities for victims to develop new positive friendships was noted by the student participants and Devon, a physical education and health teacher. Kyla recalled that when she was severely victimized by a large group of students and felt completely isolated, her teacher was the person who provided the opportunity for her to develop a new friendship, by sitting a new student next to her in class. This served as a way of giving Kyla a “fresh start” with a student who did not know the rumors about her. Devon shared, “I like to make the kids rotate groups and partners throughout the year, so they break out of those cliques and develop new relationships with people they might not have ever given a chance to before.”

Another key factor in effective intervention detailed by the student participants was the option of confidentiality or anonymity for the reporting victim. Nora described the significance of trust and knowing that her words would be kept confidential from the



other students, and possibly even faculty members: “Keeping it confidential. So they don’t go tell everybody, and you feel like everybody knows this about you and you didn’t want them to.” Kristen shared a idea implemented within her school to accommodate this wish: “Through ‘Text-a-tip,’ it’s completely anonymous and everything. You just text it in to say there’s a problem between so-and-so, and it’s done.” The faculty members acknowledged the potential usefulness of such a tool, but expressed mild concern regarding the resources and liability issues that might arise from such means.

More creative forms of consequence that avoided traditional punishment methods were viewed as effective intervention tools by all of the students and half of the faculty members. Kyla indicated the importance of providing a victim with options: “Try to make the student more at ease. Ask them whether or not they’d want to go outside with the rest of the kids and socialize, or stay inside and read a book or something...And have the bully write a paper on bullying or something, make it more like a homework assignment.” Connor listed other potential avenues of redirection in bullying situations: “For the next, however many weeks, you spend your lunch with a counselor learning about the repercussions of bullying, or you have to write a paper, or you have to do something to learn about why it is not okay.” He was resolute in his belief that anti-bullying education was simply another task under the job description of an educator. He asserted,

We are educators. I feel like bullying is just an extension of that and we need to educate on why it’s not okay. And you might have to have some pretty serious conversations about examples of what bullying can cause, otherwise I just feel it’s a band-aid – and a pretty porous band-aid, at that.



While Devon shared Connor's belief in the duty of an educator to assist with personal issues such as bullying, Sara and Greg seemed to draw a deeper line between their responsibilities and parental responsibilities, as discussed in the next section.

Connor admitted that he typically shared a particular story with his students about an overweight student he went to middle school with, who committed suicide due to being bullied so severely regarding his appearance. He described to his students what it was like to attend the funeral and learn from the boy's father that he had been considered a kind individual by the boy, simply because he had not been cruel towards him. Connor indicated that he emphasized the importance of being kind to others with his students, and encouraged them to consider the potential impact of their actions upon others. He noted that he tells them,

‘Look, I’m not saying you have to try to save everybody out there, but for goodness sake, no one should ever treat anybody terribly or bully anyone, because it’s just one more straw, one more straw, and no one deserves to be piled on like that. You might not realize what an impact your one little comment or your one little shun or one little exclusion from a friend group, how much of an impact that could have on someone.’

Connor appeared pleased with the effect this story had upon his students, whom he felt began to recognize the seriousness of relational aggression and pay more attention to their words and interactions. The goal of this story corresponded with Nora's desire for the girls who bullied her to understand the impact of their actions: “I just want them to know how it makes me feel when they do that stupid stuff.” Both of their responses indicated that the development of empathy on the bully's part was a crucial aspect of effective intervention.



***Parental roles.*** The perceptions surrounding parental roles in bullying situations were varied. Sara asserted that any bullying that occurred outside of the school setting was the parents' responsibility to address, even if the bullying relationship developed within the school setting. She stated,

Here at school, I draw the line – if it happens after 4:10pm and not in my building, it is very much a parent issue. I draw a pretty deep line. I can't take care of the outside world, it's a parent's job.

However, Connor and Devon believed that most parents would be supportive of schools developing stronger stances on relational aggression and willing to collaborate with the faculty members to end it. Devon expressed,

I think parents could play a good role in that they could help teachers out, to be like, 'My kid is not acting right, there's something going on.' Ya know, just be more of a voice for their child, because nobody's gonna know their child better than them. So they might see some initial signs first, so maybe they could bring it to the school's or teacher's attention to be like, 'What's going on?'

Greg emphasized the importance of support and stability in the students' homes and family lives to reduce the problem of bullying, but Kristen argued that the home environment may not be as big of a factor in diminishing the effects of bullying or increasing the frequency of reporting as school authorities might like to believe. She realized,

I think the more secure of a home life you have, the more you're likely to tell your parents and they'll tell the principal, who will get word back to the bully and everything. But I feel like I have a pretty secure home life, so I don't know why I didn't do anything to stop it.

She seemed surprised that her stable family life was not as much of a buffer as she had hoped it would be in a bullying situation, and Kristen recognized that not all students



were so lucky; this led her to wonder what it must be like for youth with unstable home lives. She spoke of parents who would be less likely to teach their children that bullying was unacceptable and hurtful: “Part of me is like, maybe the bully’s parents don’t even care what they’re doing. Some parents won’t sit down with them and tell them they’re doing something wrong and hurting somebody.” She expressed gratitude for her parents as kind and considerate individuals; such role modeling of empathy and effective problem-solving on the part of the parents would be beneficial in promoting similar behaviors in their children within the school setting, according to Kristen.

**Prevention.** While intervention was viewed as important by all of the participants, prevention of bullying was deemed just as important, if not more so. The following factors were identified as essential features of an effective bullying prevention program focused on relational aggression.

*Education and training to promote awareness.* A lack of awareness about relational aggression was identified as a key obstacle in its prevention; while physical bullying was more readily identifiable, relational aggression was more covert and difficult for school authorities to detect. Therefore, the participants agreed that it was necessary for both students and faculty members to have greater education and training focusing on recognizing the problem.

Interestingly, almost half of the participants expressed an ambivalent perspective about the ability to truly prevent bullying, which seemed fall directly under the category of lacking awareness due to the belief that bullying was a natural part of growing up. For example, Sara stated, “Bullying’s been going on forever, and it always will, but there’s



ways to minimize it.” When asked if there were potential methods of preventing relational aggression, Charlotte expressed a similar sentiment: “Not really. Because I feel like it’s been going on for years and it’s gonna continue to go on for years. I feel like it’s human nature to want that possession and just all that.” Such beliefs were an obvious hindrance in prevention; if individuals did not genuinely believe bullying could be stopped, it was unlikely that they would be invested in any prevention methods.

However, some participants believed in the ability to end relational aggression and all other forms of bullying. They emphasized the importance of promoting awareness in the areas of recognition regarding bullying behaviors in all its forms, as well as the impact it could have upon the victims. Nora described the lack of understanding on the part of the bullies:

I think everybody just figures like that’s what happens. I don’t think anybody thinks to themselves like, ‘Ooh, I’m bullying someone right now!’...I don’t think anyone likes it as it’s happening to them, but people don’t really think about it while they’re doing it. They don’t think that it’s bullying when they’re spreading rumors about somebody or saying something like, ‘Oh, that girl’s a slut!’ or whatever.

Connor emphasized the importance of prioritizing within the classroom and school-wide setting in order to send a message to students:

I think, sadly, this whole concept of bullying just has not gotten any better since I was in middle school, and that just breaks my heart. And it really confuses me, because I don’t see how an issue that is so profoundly impactful and not terribly difficult to identify can still exist so prominently – I don’t understand why. I don’t think it can be too hard to educate someone on why it so wrong to bully someone. And it’s got to be easier to educate them on that than geometry, is my thing, so why aren’t we, I guess? And because I have personally dealt with it and have seen it so many times, it’s just frustrating because I wish kids didn’t have to deal with that. And it’s why, in the first day of school, I always tell them, ‘I’d rather hear you drop the f-bomb than say something mean about someone’s



clothes, because one of those two is gonna affect people a heck of a lot more, and it's not the f-bomb.' And of course, I clearly make sure I'm not saying you can drop the f-bomb, I just want to let them know that bullying is not okay.

The students expressed the belief that faculty members needed to learn more about recognizing relationally aggressive behaviors. Charlotte stated,

A lot of teachers, they haven't been with that type of action for years, so they don't recognize it as much. Especially with all the new technology we have these days, like, they never had the experience with that, so they don't know how that affects people. But just knowledge of what goes on, I feel like that would change their perspective of things and make them more aware of what goes on.

All of the educators agreed with the need for greater bullying education on their part, yet Greg noted that resources were always an area of concern when developing a prevention program. He claimed,

That's gonna take money, it's gonna take power, it's gonna take individuals to do it. Unless you set up things for that in particular, then I don't know how much you can truly address it. Because the way teaching is, they way it's set up, there's only so much you can do as far as that aspect of it...you have to have some manpower to address it.

While resources are always an area of concern in regards to education, it seemed that not all forms of prevention had to be time-consuming or costly. Sara illustrated a potential aspect of preventative education that required no resources:

It's about having a lot of positive people in the kids' lives. And it's the role modeling of the adults in their world...the saying and phrase, 'The apple didn't fall far from the tree' can be a good thing, as well.

All in all, it seemed that education for all involved parties, including students, faculty members, and parents, was a necessary aspect of prevention. As Kristen summarized,



I think the whole problem involving bullying is unawareness. Because the teachers don't know what's going on, the kids don't know how much it's affecting somebody, the parents don't know what's going on either. Just everyone doesn't know what's going on.

***Equality.*** Another factor identified by the participants as an essential characteristic in effective prevention was a sense of equality. The students and authority figures recognized that the hierarchical nature of many schools created an atmosphere which promoted bullying, instead of preventing it. Greg reasoned, "It's a matter of treating people with respect and understanding that someone's differences are just as important as your differences."

Kyla took the belief in equality a step further – instead of promoting it only among the students, she described the way in which her new alternative high school worked to diminish hierarchies in all capacities:

They try to be more casual about things, so they only use first names. They don't like trying to set up the hierarchy. They just try to make everybody feel comfortable. And all the teachers are on a first name basis there, so you don't feel like you're talking up to people. And they're not talking down to you anymore, because everybody has the same respect level.

***Skill development.*** In addition to education and creating a culture of equality, the participants identified skill development as a crucial aspect of preventing all forms of bullying. The two skills believed to be significant were the development of empathy on the part of the bullies and the development of assertiveness on the part of the victims. Kyla described the program her alternative high school created to teach these two skills before a new student entered the general population:

My school has that Discovery Program. And it's basically two classes that are isolated from everybody else. They're not allowed to talk to everybody else until



they've gone through it and it includes anger management, how to problem solve, and separate classes within there. You have to introduce yourself every day, 'Hi, I'm [Kyla], I'm on a scale of 1 to 10, at an 8,' and for the spiral up, something that made you feel good about yourself or something that improved your life somehow over the past 24 hours.

By the end of it, everybody just feels like they know everyone. Probably for each group, 30 kids to each of them. Which sounds pretty large, because my school only has like 150 kids. But by the end of it, everybody just, like, they all know how you think and stuff like that. So everybody just feels really close-knit. It kind of feels like what you think Alcoholics Anonymous would feel like. Like I'm pretty sure everybody has to clap for anybody who walks into the room who said their name. But by the end of it, the clapping starts to feel really good, ya know? Having people acknowledge that you did something well, kinda makes you feel better about yourself.

When I asked the other student participants to share their thoughts about a program such as the one Kyla described, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Charlotte exclaimed,

I feel like that would be REALLY helpful! Just having people acknowledge that and acknowledge differences between people. Just like I would say, there's always reasons why people are the way they are, and you need to recognize that and understand it. Just like, I feel like that would be a really good idea if you just took the time, 'cause I don't know half the people in my class as well as I would like to. And I feel like if I did, or if other girls did, they would think twice about attacking people for different reasons...It's learning to respect differences. And even just toleration. A lot of people don't have tolerance. There's tolerance and then there's respect, but if everybody could get to that respect level, things would be great, because even just the tolerance level, that would be great, too.

All of the students expressed the belief in a significant lack of empathy within the student body which led to behaviors bullies deemed as "joking" (Amy) or "just having fun" (Kyla), as opposed to recognition of how these interactions were perceived by the recipient.



Connor acknowledged that his own experiences of being bullied were a significant reminder to maintain empathy in all interactions:

I'm a very introspective person. So when I had issues with friends it was very hard for me not to imagine how everyone else was probably susceptible to the same kind of feelings, and I just never wanted that to be something that anybody else felt. It would just seem very common sense to me – 'Boy this sucks for me, I would never want that for anybody else.'

Kristen felt that the understanding Connor described could be developed through avenues such as announcements or education on bullying through her school's in-house television station.

Generally speaking, Kyla felt that the development of empathy was more beneficial in preventing future incidents of bullying than any type of punishment, because it was believed to produce more lasting effects upon the perpetrators. She summed up,

I think teaching people about what it feels like to be bullied would be smarter than just a smack on the wrist and telling them not to do it. Try to make them empathize with the people who are bullied, so that way they don't want to do it again.

In addition to the development of empathy, the second skill the participants identified as a key component in effective prevention was assertiveness training. Teaching victims and bystanders to be assertive when responding to bullies was identified as the most important deterrent in bullying situations, overall. Kyla admitted that she wished she had handled her situation differently, when a girl at her school was repeatedly teasing and hitting her on the bus, by standing up for herself and communicating with her perpetrator. Charlotte agreed with the lesson Kyla learned, and



stressed the importance of teaching girls to take the initiative in working out their conflicts with peers:

I feel like at some point it can become necessary for adults to intervene as, like, a mediator. But I really feel like girls should figure it out themselves, because if they don't figure it out themselves, they feel like somebody is dictating to them, and the problem's not gonna go away. I feel like you need to personally get over it yourselves and figure it out yourselves. There can be an adult there mediating and keeping sure that both people are getting out the things they want to and reaching a compromise. But I feel like it should be part of the girl's problem because the girls are the ones that need to get over it, and not the adult that needs to address everything.

While the girls preferred to have an adult initiate a conversation with them about being victimized by peers, they seemed to recognize that they had to take a considerable amount of responsibility for solving the problem on their own, as well. A communal understanding of the empowerment of every individual within the student body seemed to be perceived by the adolescent participants as disincentive to engage in bullying.

Nora felt that she was ill-equipped to respond effectively to the bullying she experienced. She expressed a desire to become assertive and seemed willing to learn the skills necessary to stand up for herself, instead of depending upon an adult to resolve the situation for her:

I want to learn, like, how to not be afraid to say something to them. 'Cause usually you just let it go, and I just let them make fun of me. I just need somebody to tell me there's not something wrong with me, and that I'm okay – maybe I'd be able to stand up for myself then. Or if other kids saw the bullying, because they know about it more than the teachers and they know how it feels, they should stand up for each other, because usually it's the same girls who are the popular ones who like to make everyone feel like shit about themselves.

Nora's statement reflected two important ideas described by all of the students. First, students did not necessarily want adults to intervene with the intention of fixing the



problem or ending the conflict; more so, the students wanted to feel heard, validated, and empowered to solve the problem on their own. This was consistent with creating a positive spin on the “Kid Code of Justice” identified earlier. Kyla’s statement supported Nora’s desire: “[Adults] think that they can stop it, instead of trying to just give the kid the courage to do it instead of telling them what to do.”

Nora’s second point was that bystanders had a responsibility to stand up for the victims in bullying situations, instead of just standing idly by as a witness and allowing the aggression to occur. Many of the girls recognized times when they had witnessed bullying and chosen not to intervene in order to avoid becoming the target. In the case of indirect bullying, such as gossiping or spreading rumors, Amy guiltily admitted to remaining silent while relationally aggressive behaviors occurred:

Most people kind of let it happen because they don’t want to get involved. That’s the big thing. Unless it was physical bullying, I don’t think I would get involved either, except to be a shoulder to cry on, because I don’t want to get involved...I think if it’s like directly in front of me, I might say something, maybe. But if it’s just something I hear about, then I probably wouldn’t, because I would just want to stay out of the drama.

Therefore, the students reported that, not only did victims need to be empowered to stand up for themselves in an assertive manner, but bystanders needed to be empowered to stand up for the victims. A culture of unity and a collective belief that harm to one student impacted the culture of a school by promoting harm to all students needed to be instilled. The participants noted the collective responsibility of all individuals within the school setting to enforce this communal atmosphere of prevention.



**Summary of action/interactional strategies.** All of the participants indicated that effective intervention strategies required education about relational aggression, the development of school-wide anti-bullying culture, and strong student-teacher relationships. Additionally, valuing student input in solving the problem, the opportunity for the victim to develop new friendships, and encouraging faculty members to take the initiative in speaking with student victims about the bullying were noted as important. The student participants reported confidentiality for the victims and nontraditional methods of consequence for the perpetrators were key factors, as well. However, only half of the adult participants recognized the benefits of nontraditional consequences, while the other half believed consistent traditional punishment was effective. All of the educators emphasized the importance of group communication among the victims and bullies, while the students argued that this led to greater conflict.

An effective relational aggression prevention program was reported to include awareness through education and training for all school members, an atmosphere of equality, and the development of perpetrator empathy and victim assertiveness skills.

### **Consequences**

While the possible effects of bullying were determinant upon the effectiveness of employed interventions, none of the student victims reported that interventions utilized by school authority figures were essentially effective in creating significant long-term benefits. Therefore, the majority of the effects of relational aggression were deemed to be negative. The few positive consequences reported were attributed to the victim's inner strength regardless of the negative messages she received. The consequences of



relational aggression on victims are noted in Table 8 and described in the following section.

Table 8

*Consequences*

Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Students and Educators	Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Students Only	Categories/ <i>Subcategories</i> Identified by Educators Only
Negative Emotions	Changes in Appearance	(None)
Changes in Behavior <i>Decline in academic performance</i>	Changes in Behavior <i>Avoidance behaviors</i>	
Physical Health Problems		
Negative Beliefs about Self		
Fear of New Relationships		
Self-harm		

**Negative emotional impact.** All of the student and faculty participants indicated that negative emotional reactions were common a consequence of bullying. Such emotions included feelings of sadness, hurt, worthlessness, hopelessness, confusion, frustration, and being overwhelmed. Sometimes these negative emotions developed into clinically diagnostic mental health disorders. When asked about the effects of relational aggression upon the victims, Connor expressed, “I think many mild symptoms of depression start to show themselves in these situations. I think it just causes confusion and sadness and trauma. I really think it is just quite traumatic.” He went on to describe the symptoms of depression he noticed in girls who were victimized by female peers: “General sadness, low energy, increased apathy.” Similarly, Nora described the effect it



had upon her mood: “I guess I was depressed or whatever. I cried a lot and stayed in my room and didn’t talk to anybody. And I guess I still do that, but maybe not as bad.” It seemed that temporary clinical depression was present among many of the victims due to situational factors, just as Nora described.

Amy described her own experience of being bullied by her best friend of four years as an “emotional rollercoaster” which caused several “emotional meltdowns” in classes she shared with her perpetrator. She admitted that the continual trauma of seeing her perpetrator on a daily basis was “overwhelming.”

Beyond the present moment of pain recognized by the victims while being tormented, Devon reflected, “I could see where that would even go into adulthood if they’re being bullied severely enough – it goes on for awhile where they just feel worthless most of their life.” Sara explained, “Usually, if you’re bullied, your self-esteem is pretty low. And maybe it just never climbs back up.” Nora remembered feeling this sense of worthlessness and poor self-esteem: “If my best friends didn’t even like me, what then? I felt like everyone hated me and I was just nothing.” While the distress of being bullied by peers was painful, it seemed that the betrayal inherent in the sudden victimization perpetrated by prior friends created even greater emotional distress for the victims.

**Physical health problems.** Four of the five girls recognized that the emotional distress often led to physical symptoms for them. Kyla shared, “Even though it’s not physical pain, it’s there, ya know? Like, it made my chest hurt all the time. You just feel



like crumbling sometimes.” Even Charlotte, who took pride in the fact that she often asserted herself against her aggressors, confessed,

I get completely stressed out and I don’t like dealing with it. I get physically sick, ‘cause I have to deal with grades and with school and everything that’s going on. I get physically sick, and miss school...I get stomachaches, headaches, I just can’t move. Fatigued, stuff like that. I’ve had to miss school. And I don’t sleep well. It’s just, I don’t cope well.

Therefore, it seemed that the emotional impact of relational aggression led to mental health disorders and physical illnesses in many of the girls, and such effects led to academic consequences, such as school absences and a decline in daily functioning.

**Beliefs about self.** Many of the victims indicated that bullying prompted them to have negative beliefs about themselves. Often, they questioned whether the bully was right in sending the message that the victim brought the suffering upon themselves because there was something wrong with her, especially after hearing this message repeatedly, often from numerous individuals. Greg shared his understanding of this unfair consequence: “Acceptance is everything, especially when you’re not sure about yourself – and you start questioning everything about yourself.” In Kristen’s case, she described how she moved beyond simply questioning, to actually believing what her perpetrators were saying:

I didn’t think it was normal, and I’m like, ‘Why do I have a voice that’s so deep?’ And obviously the voices in our heads sound different than what other people hear, so I’m like, ‘Well, what if I hear a normal voice, but then I do have a really deep voice?’ It wasn’t to a point where I was questioning it – it was to a point where I believed it. I seriously thought I had a man voice. I would start asking my friends, ‘Do I have a man-ish voice?’ So a lot of times I didn’t talk around [the bullies], or I would tell everybody, ‘Sorry if my voice is deep!’



Just as in Kristen's situation, Nora began to feel that there was something wrong with her. She wondered, "Sometimes I think maybe there's something wrong with me. Like, why didn't I just want to drink and smoke pot like everybody else does? Why shouldn't I do that, too? Maybe I'm just, like, scared of everything."

This tendency for the victim to blame herself was identified in most of the students. Charlotte explained,

We were so close and I trusted her with so much, and she just was done with it and I don't – I guess I feel like I put way much more into it than she ever did. And that's kind of what upsets me the most, is that I didn't pick up on that. I guess I feel like it was kind of my own fault sometimes, 'cause there's obviously a reason, it's not like she just completely stopped. So there's clearly something I must have done.

While most of the girls continued to search for an answer to the question of what they had done to cause their victimization, Amy recognized the manipulation of some bullies unfairly placing blame upon the victim. Of her own experience, she indicated, I think it was almost like she wanted me – like she wanted it to be my fault. Like if she made me feel like I didn't want to be her friend anymore, that was why she did those things to me, so that it would be on me, and it wouldn't be her fault.

Kyla described her negative self-beliefs as an ongoing inner war with herself. She indicated that this conflict developed after years of being bullied by peers. She explained,

I know it wasn't always exactly how I thought it was, because everyone's going to view it in a different way, but when it's happening to you, you just kind of twist it a little bit. And, I don't know, you start feeling sorry for yourself and then you're mad at yourself for it. It's just like a war in your head kind of, so it just keeps getting worse. You're feeling sorry for yourself and by doing that, you start getting angry at yourself for feeling sorry for yourself, because part of you is



agreeing with the rest of the people. The other part's trying to defend you and make yourself feel better, and then right after you do that, you take it back, you're like, 'Oh, you're just as worthless as they say, you're not worth anything! Why are you even trying to...' I mean, it's kind of strange to think about, but that's like how it goes.

And after awhile, it got easier to compliment myself, so I started feeling better about myself. But still, I second guess myself a lot when I'm taking a test or I'm about to go hang out with friends. Like, just thinking, 'Oh, they're just only hanging out with you because you buy them stuff' or something like that. But I have to, like, stop, take a deep breath, and tell myself otherwise. So I know it'll always be there, no matter what. 'Cause after it happens, it's part of how you think after that.

Kyla's statement suggested a potential lifelong internal cognitive battle regarding her self-worth.

Amy was the only student who felt that she had learned something positive about herself through the experience of being bullied, as she felt that she discovered strength within herself that she might not otherwise have observed. She reported,

I never really doubted myself, because even though I was young, I had a pretty good sense of who I was and what I wanted. So for me, it was like even if they would say bad things about me, it would hurt, but I didn't take those things to heart...I think a really major thing was I learned how to be alone in my faith. I definitely learned how to do that, and I feel pretty confident in that.

Amy seemed be lucky and unique in this way, as most of the girls tended to internalize the negative messages they received from peers and engage in self-blaming behaviors.

**Changes in appearance and behavior.** All of the participants acknowledged that a significant change in appearance and behavior was present in the students who were being victimized. The student participants noticed significant changes in behavior centering on avoidance.



Nora's experience of being bullied by her female peers for wearing "fake" brand name clothing led to her deciding that she would no longer wear the shirts that had been the object of ridicule. She expressed that she felt guilty for not wearing the clothing, because her mother had been excited to give the shirts to her, and she was frustrated with herself for allowing her perpetrators to have this type of power over her; however, none of this was enough to make her feel comfortable continuing to wear the clothing that made her a target. Kyla changed her appearance in an effort to avoid being victimized, as well, though her intentions moved beyond avoidance, to the point of wanting to be a non-entity. She stated,

I kind of went a little bit darker. I started wearing darker clothes. I quit talking to people. I didn't care about my hair anymore. And before that, I was wearing pink and let's put ribbons in my hair, and ya know – it just kinda changed me. I didn't want to draw more attention to myself. So I didn't care anymore, ya know? So I just kinda tried to be invisible.

Kyla shared that she typically isolated herself and chose to be around her peers as infrequently as possible. She described how it felt to perceive that everyone was against her and attacking her from all sides. She disclosed a developing sense of paranoia as she began to assume that all conversations were about her: "I just thought that everybody was thinking it and saying it about me. People would start whispering and then I would start freaking out that they were saying something about me, even if wasn't the case."

Kyla's feelings of isolation and frustration grew, and eventually she felt that she would do anything to be liked and accepted by her peers. She confessed the most serious alteration she was willing to make to be liked:



Some girls were starting to make of me, they were calling me fat and stuff like that. And because of that, I stopped eating. So I wouldn't eat breakfast, I wouldn't eat lunch, and I'd eat a little bit of dinner, but I wasn't feeling very well. I got over that pretty quickly, but still, when someone said that about you, you want to try and make yourself look better in their eyes. So you try to change everything. It was making me feel gross. Like, when you didn't eat, your stomach would start to feel bad. And when that starts to happen, your head starts to hurt and a bunch more things start to happen. You start getting weaker and, I don't know, it's just, 'Why do I even care? I'm hungry, I'm gonna go eat now.' It's just, I don't know, trying to be accepted, it can do a lot of things.

The concept of considering doing anything to be accepted was a consistent theme among the student victims.

Amy remembered not going to classes she shared with her perpetrator for several days, and Nora described similar methods of avoidance:

I still hate going to school - I take different ways in the hall so I don't have to see them. And I always worry about another note being in my locker, so I pretty much just carry everything in my backpack now, which is so heavy.

Kyla shared that she eventually engaged in the ultimate avoidance tactic:

I'd call my mom in the middle of the day to come and pick me up because I just couldn't handle it. And I would just go home really upset about it...it's kind of why I switched out of that school, too, because I just thought that after that, everybody was thinking the same thing about me.

Kristen recalled that she quit speaking up and participating in the classes she shared with the girls who were making fun of her voice. She viewed any verbalizations as "just more ammunition for them to keep making fun of me." Therefore, she was literally silenced by her perpetrators.

The faculty participants seemed to only recognize these avoidance tactics and changes in behavior as they pertained to academic performance, as opposed to the personal impact of bullying upon the victims. Sara recognized,



I think the mental part, they just shut down. They don't focus on anything else. Learning sure isn't taking place – you can't focus on math when you're worried about going to lunch next period and what may or may not happen. They can't learn because they're so worried about what was said to them, or what might happen to them, how their friends are thinking, or do they even have friends, ya know?

Nora confessed that she felt apathetic about school after being bullied by her best friends, and Kyla admitted, “My grades were like 13%, so I was failing horribly.” Devon acknowledged that victimization often affected performance in academics and extracurricular activities. Kyla noticed that being bullied affected her performance in personal hobbies, as well. She noted, “I quit drawing. I quit doing a lot of things I usually liked.”

**Fear of new relationships.** Many of the adolescents expressed a fear of developing close friendships after being bullied by individuals whom they believed they could trust. A strong sense of betrayal led to a significantly diminished feeling of trust in others' intentions and actions. This seemed to result in isolation or developing friendships with groups of people the victim knew were not positive influences, yet accepted the victim just the same.

Nora admitted,

I feel like I'm scared to make friends now, too, 'cause if you make friends and you tell them all this stuff about you and they just turn it against you later, like, why should you trust anyone? They're just gonna do that same thing later that these people did. There's no way to trust anybody. It's scary to think about making new, good friends.



Amy noted a similar feeling of anxiety about new relationships:

I think I definitely have more boundaries now. I guess you could call it a caution. I guess I don't really want that, but that's probably what it is... 'cause I haven't been that close like I was with her, with anybody yet, since that happened.

Sara recognized that such loneliness typically led to poor choices in friend groups. She stated,

They'll go seek somewhere where they feel good about themselves. And sometimes that's not always the best choice of people or groups to hang with. You hang around people who make you feel good, who probably have the same low self-esteem, and don't always then begin to make the best choices in high school.

Kyla admitted that she followed the path Sara described when trying to gain acceptance from anywhere she could find it. She confessed,

I didn't really have friends anymore. The ones I did have were, like, really bad influences on me, so we wouldn't go to school and we'd steal stuff from the store and we'd go back to class. When I started hanging out with those people it was because they were being nice to me, so I wanted to do whatever I could to fit in and make them like me. So I started doing things that were not me at all. So I guess, like, you're just trying to find someone – anybody at all – to like you, so it can cause a lot of other problems.

She admitted to being willing to change her behaviors at the expense of her values and morals in order to feel accepted by peers.

**Self-harm.** The desire to engage in self-harming behaviors, such as cutting or suicidal gestures, was identified by all of the girls. While none of the participants reported experiencing thoughts of self-harm, they recognized how a victim could reach a point of feeling that it was a viable option. Charlotte related,

I know at the middle school, cutting was a huge, huge problem last year. I had a really close friend who started cutting and she was suicidal about being bullied. I had to betray her trust to tell an adult, but it was just what I felt I had to do...I



don't feel the need to hurt myself – it's kind of twisted if you think about it. But I know some girls who have tried it, and I can see why people do it. I just feel bad for those girls who it's at the point that it's so serious about what everybody else thinks about you that you would feel the need that you're not good enough, and you starting believing that you have to hurt yourself. That sucks.

Nora sadly agreed,

I've had thoughts about like getting away, not suicide, like it's never gone that far – but I know that I haven't been bullied that bad compared to a lot of people. But I could see how if it happened all the time, I'd think like, 'I'm worthless, what's the point of me being here if everybody hates me?'

When it came to the negative consequences of bullying, the bottom line seemed to be that they were inevitable and likely to manifest in various forms. As Greg summarized,

It can lead to a lot of things – the list goes on and on. Abusive boyfriends, drugs, sex at a young age, not feeling confident about themselves or not feeling worthy, and that can lead to a lot of other things I'm sure. Eating disorders, it could even go into. Yeah, ya know, thinking that they're a monster, to some extent. And if you can't figure out why you don't belong, then you can only imagine what you might think it is, so that can really twist ya up, definitely. I think everything has an effect on you. As long as you remember it, it's still affecting you.

**Summary of consequences.** The participants noted consequences including negative emotions, negative beliefs about self, and a change in academic performance as effects of bullying. Additionally, the students reported changes in a victim's appearance and behaviors were likely to occur, including avoidance behaviors. The most severe consequences noted by both sets of participants were self-harming behaviors.

### **Summary of Findings**

This chapter detailed the participants' responses to the research questions regarding the influential conditions leading to relational aggression, context under which relational aggression occurred, phenomenon of relational aggression, intervening



conditions of reporting and recognition of the victims, action/interactional strategies, and potentially detrimental effects upon the victims. The following chapter will provide a discussion of the grounded theory developed from the research, as well as the implications and limitations of the study, and directions for future research on the topic of relational aggression.



## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

This study explored the perceptions of student victims and school faculty members in regards to adolescent female relational aggression within the middle school setting. This chapter provides an overview of the study and outlines the Relational Aggression Prevention and Intervention Theory, and the discussion includes a summary of the results, implications for schools, limitations of the study, and future research directions.

#### **Summary of the Study**

Bullying is a troubling and widespread problem among adolescent girls. One study established that approximately three quarters of school-aged females indicated they had been bullied at some point during their academic career (Hazler et al., 1992). Several definitions of bullying are noted in the research, but most agree upon three key criteria: Intentional harm doing, repeated occurrences over time, and an imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator (Hazler et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Varjas et al., 2008).

Relational aggression is the most common form of bullying among females. It involves indirect verbal, social, and emotional means of perpetration (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005). Research has emphasized that relational aggression happens most often during the middle school years (Bradshaw et al.,



2007) because peer influence is exceedingly significant during that time, and adolescent girls depend heavily the feedback of peers in developing their identity and self-worth (Laser Haddow, 2006).

Olweus (1993), an international expert in adolescent bullying, reported bullying as the most common type of school violence to produce negative emotional consequences, including clinically significant mental health problems. Yet, bullying is still one of the most underreported safety problems in educational arenas (Kenny et al., 2005). While educators are likely to correctly identify physical forms of bullying, they struggle to recognize relational aggression because of its secretive nature (Hazler et al., 2001). Research with student victims suggested they perceived that school authorities ignored bullying situations or intervened in ineffective ways, even though educators believed they intervened effectively the majority of the time (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Hazler et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Varjas et al., 2008).

The overarching research question in this study compared the similarities and discrepancies between the perceptions of self-identified adolescent female victims and school authority figures in regards to female-on-female bullying. Multiple facets of female-perpetrated relational aggression were explored in an effort to respond to this question, including: descriptions of female-perpetrated bullying behaviors, experiences of the victims, effects of relational aggression upon victims, circumstances under which victims chose to report bullying to school authorities, school authority figures recognition of victims of female-perpetrated bullying, and perceptions surrounding the effectiveness of current anti-bullying interventions in the school setting.



The participants included five adolescent female students (one African-American, one Hispanic, three Caucasian) who self-identified as victims of relational aggression perpetrated by female peers, and four middle school educators (one Caucasian female principal, three Caucasian male teachers). All of the participants were from the Rocky Mountain region except for one male teacher, who was from the Midwest. Interviews and follow-up clarification contacts were transcribed, and I utilized the traditional processes of open, axial, and selective coding to organize the participants' responses into the six categories present within the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

First, I engaged in open coding to break down, examine, compare, conceptualize, and categorize the data using a sentence-by-sentence analysis to construct meaning. I organized the data through color-coding based on the six components of grounded theory. I used memo writing to track my developing conceptualization of the theory and the emerging categories of the phenomenon being studied (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987).

The second step in analyzing the data were axial coding, a set of procedures that allowed the data to be restructured and integrated into new categories and subcategories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once new connections between categories were developed, the phenomenon was viewed from a new perspective, so a theory could be developed. I chose to cut the transcriptions apart and rearrange them into new groupings based on the categories developed within the color-coded six-component system.



The third step in the analysis process was selective coding, in which I systematically linked categories of information to produce meaning and validate relationships grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In order to organize this information for myself visually, I created an analytic diagram called a conditional matrix, which displayed the wide range of conditions and consequences related to bullying (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

To augment the trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study results, I employed member checking, peer examination, triangulation, an audit trail, modal comparisons, thick descriptions, and continued awareness of my own stance as the researcher (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Schwandt, 2001). A summary of the research findings is described as follows.

### **Relational Aggression Prevention and Intervention Theory**

The grounded theory developed through the data explains the phenomenon of relational aggression, the influential conditions and context that lead to relational aggression, the intervening conditions that precede action/interactional strategies with this phenomenon, and the consequences of relational aggression upon the victims. A summary of the results of each of the six grounded theory components is reviewed in the following section.

#### **Influential Conditions**

Several influential conditions were noted by the participants, with only minimal discrepancies between student and educator perspectives. The participants identified the



desire for social status as a significant precipitant of relational aggression; this included vying for peer acceptance, bonding over a common victim, competition for social resources, and jealousy as reasons to perpetrate bullying. The students identified the deflection of negative qualities as an aspect of gaining social status, as well, though the educators did not verbalize this reason. Differences in appearance, personality traits, and behavior were also considered motives, and the girls recognized differences in backgrounds and lifestyle choices as additional precipitants of relational aggression. In many cases, bullying was viewed as a natural progression in identity development and growing apart from friends. The adolescents believed a willingness to experiment with risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use played a significant role in identity development, and subsequently in relationally aggressive situations. It seemed that students who were less willing to engage in risky behaviors were often targeted as victims. The educators considered many relationally aggressive behaviors to be a way for adolescents to test limits, and identified a shift in adult expectations of youth behavior as a reason bullying occurred during middle school; while brutal honesty was considered endearing in younger children, societal expectations were placed upon youth as they grew older which demanded a certain level of tact. The adults also noted hormonal changes during a transitional period in life as an influential condition in relational aggression.

### **Context**

Two significant factors were identified by all of the participants as the contextual conditions under which relational aggression occurred. A lack of adult supervision created the ideal setting for numerous forms of bullying, such as during hallway passing



periods and cafeteria mealtimes. Additionally, the anonymity of many online social networking sites produced a prime venue for indirect verbal relationally aggressive behaviors through cyberbullying. Both of these contextual factors were strongly dependent upon the covert nature of relational aggression and the bully's efforts to avoid being identified.

### **Phenomenon**

Two aspects of the phenomenon of relational aggression were addressed in this study: definitions of relationally aggressive behaviors and the experience of victimization. The student and faculty participants defined direct forms of bullying, including verbal types, such as name-calling and teasing, and written/electronic means, such as cyberbullying and text messages. The students recognized direct nonverbal means of perpetration such as mean glaring or pointing, which the educators did not identify. Both sets of participants reported indirect forms of relational aggression, including verbal means such as spreading rumors, and social manipulation such as stealing friends. A continuous cycling between the statuses of perpetrator and victim was identified as a key component of relational aggression among adolescent girls; the unpredictable nature of who would be in the role of perpetrator or victim at any given moment seemed to be a distinct characteristic of this form of bullying.

All of the participants indicated that the experience of being victimized by peers was likely to be traumatic and have a negative emotional impact upon the victim. Additionally, victimized students were recognized as "collateral" in another peer's search for identity and social status, viewed simply as a means to an end. Relational aggression



among teenage girls was reported to occur over an extended period of time, lasting weeks or even years. Underwood et al. (2001) attributed this significant length of time to the fact that relational aggression was typically perpetrated outside the initial awareness of the victim, so harm to the victim may not be recognized until after the fact. The students reported that a noteworthy aspect of their experience was feeling distressed by the meaningfulness of the bullying interaction, as they did not want to believe a peer's words or actions could be so impactful to them.

### **Intervening Conditions**

Two potential intervening conditions were present in this study, which resulted in four possible courses of action. First, faculty members may or may not recognize the bullying situation and identify the victim. Second, students could choose whether to report being bullied to a school authority figure.

All of the participants agreed upon the signs adults should look for when attempting to identify victims of relational aggression. These warnings included significant changes in the victim's mood or behavior, such as becoming isolated or disengaged from classes, declining academic performance, crying often or showing other signs of depression, or sudden changes in the atmosphere of the room when the victim entered. The participants identified that recognition could be difficult due to the covert nature of relational aggression, often combined with the fact that educators are fallible human beings with potential problems of their own which may distract them from recognizing signs of victimization. This concept was categorized as "Educator Fatigue." Once again, the presence of a relationship between a student victim and teacher or



administrator was identified as essential in helping adults to recognize subtle or drastic changes in the victim.

All of the participants recognized the burden of proving the occurrence of relational aggression as a barrier to reporting, as it was difficult to prove emotional or social harm had been perpetrated. The distinct concept of a “Kid Justice System” was noted, which seemed to be an unspoken rule among adolescents favoring retaliation, opposed to adult intervention. In addition, the strength of the student-teacher relationship was emphasized as a significant factor in determining whether a student chose to report being victimized or not; adolescents who felt closer to an educator had a sense of trust in the adult’s ability to help them resolve the issue.

The adolescents identified several more obstacles in reporting than the educators, including an implicit code of silence among youth and the fear of being negatively labeled as a “tattletale” (Kyla) or “person who couldn’t take a joke” (Kristen) if that code was broken. The girls expressed considerable uncertainty regarding adult roles and related levels of authority within the school setting, and typically were unsure who they were supposed to report to or what the specific procedures were for reporting. A fear of the adults’ responses to reporting was verbalized, as many of the girls believed adults may dismiss or minimize their experience, or intervene in a way that prompted the bully to seek retaliation on the victim. Furthermore, many of the girls admitted that they did not even realize the interactions they were facing could be labeled as bullying until long after the incidents occurred.



### **Action/Interactional Strategies**

Two forms of action/interactional strategies investigated in this study were intervention and prevention. The students and faculty members presented the most discrepant responses from one another in regards to this component of the theory.

While the students and half of the educators identified traditional forms of punishment, such as suspension, as an ineffective intervention method, half of the educators believed traditional forms of punishment were effective in stopping relationally aggressive behaviors. The students indicated that group communication involving the victim, perpetrators, and an educator was typically ineffective, as well, because it caused the victim embarrassment and shame. Yet, all of the faculty members believed this was an effective intervention and strove to improve communication between all involved parties. All of the educators accurately identified ignoring or minimizing the problem as ineffective. While half the educators felt that nontraditional forms of consequences, such as writing a paper on bullying or discussing it with a counselor, were ineffective, the other half of the educators and all of the students believed nontraditional consequences were the most effective method of intervention, because they promoted empathy and understanding, as opposed to reactive punishment. The students indicated that confidentiality and anonymity were also vital aspects of a successful intervention, which were not identified by any of the school authority figures.

In regards to common beliefs about intervention, all of the participants acknowledged that personal coping strategies such as a strong faith or creative outlets, and a strong support system, were important. It was agreed that in-depth education and



training for students and educators was necessary, as well as the collective development of a school culture that rejected all forms of bullying. Effective components of intervention noted by the participants included faculty members taking the initiative to verbalize recognition of the problem to the victims and express concern, emphasis on student victims' input and options, encouragement in the development of new relationships for victims, and an increase in empathic understanding within all students.

The consensus regarding effective prevention strategies included enhanced awareness of relational aggression through education and training, construction of an atmosphere supporting equality and respect for differences, and the development of empathy in perpetrators. The students also expressed their desire for victims to develop assertiveness skills in the forms of conflict-resolution and problem-solving, in order to build a sense of confidence and competence.

### **Consequences**

Both adolescent and adult participants recognized potentially severe negative effects on victims of relational aggression, especially when effective intervention strategies were not employed because the victim went unrecognized by school authority figures. Negative emotional consequences were deemed common, including clinically significant mental health diagnoses such as depression. Physical health problems ranging from stomachaches and headaches to chest pains and nausea were identified by the students, but not the faculty members. Internalized negative beliefs of self were expected as a result of bullying by all of the participants, including feelings of worthlessness and poor self-esteem. A decline in academic performance was also identified, as the victims



were reported to have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork due to a preoccupation with the bullying incidents. In addition, the students reported that changes in the victim's appearance and hygiene often resulted from bullying, as well as changes in behavior or avoidance tactics, even to the point of taking longer routes in the hallways to avoid perpetrators or frequent absences from school. The most severe effects noted were self-harming behaviors, such as cutting and suicide. It is interesting to note that the participants' perceptions regarding the effects of bullying paralleled the signs of victimization to be recognized by school authority figures; a discussion of this parallel is described later in the chapter.

### **Summary of the Grounded Theory**

The Relational Aggression Prevention and Intervention Theory illustrates the phenomenon of relational aggression among female students in the middle school setting. The theory contains triggers of relational aggression under general contextual factors, a description of the phenomenon itself, factors involved in recognition of victims and their decision to report the incidents to a school authority figures, effective and ineffective aspects of intervention and prevention strategies, and the negative consequences of victimization.

### **Discussion**

Much of the prior research on bullying among adolescents was focused on physical means of aggression among males; only more recently has the research focus shifted to social and emotional means of aggression among students of both genders. The problem of relational aggression is not new, yet recognition of its potentially severe



negative consequences is only beginning to be understood. While many of the participants believed bullying was simply a rite of passage in natural childhood development, the senselessness of such cruelty is drawing new attention due to media coverage of tragic consequences over the past decade (Blanco, 2008).

### **Causal Contributions**

**Intentionality of manipulation.** Numerous participants in this study believed that the majority of relationally aggressive perpetrators did not recognize the harm they were causing to the victims, which was consistent with findings of Varjas et al. (2008). The belief in simply “having some fun” was noted as a common theme, in which teens were supposedly engaging in joking with a peer and the recipient perceived the interaction as harmful. However, it was also observed by students and educators in this study that bullies knew “when” to bully; students were reportedly aware of times when adult supervision was lacking, and chose to engage in relationally aggressive interactions at that time. If the perpetrators consciously made the decision to aggress against a peer when the individual who could provide a consequence for such behavior was distracted or not present, that would suggest that the perpetrator recognized her behavior was unacceptable in some way. This indicates that the perpetrators of bullying are aware, in some capacity, that they are causing harm or acting inappropriately. Therefore, the argument that students often do not mean to cause harm and are unaware of how their actions are being received by the intended victim is undermined.

**Cultural factors determining differences.** The participants in this study identified numerous reasons for the occurrence of bullying, a significant portion of which



were related to differences among individuals. It seemed that any deviation from the cultural norm within a particular school was means for being negatively targeted by peers; however, the definitive characteristics of a deviation varied from school to school based on cultural expectations of the surrounding environment. For example, in this study, teens that lived in areas of higher socioeconomic status were targeted if their parents earned a lower income, while those who lived in areas of lower socioeconomic status were targeted if their family had a greater income. Research by Varjas et al. (2008) found that victimized students differed from the norm in one or more of the following five categories, regardless of the cultural expectations of a particular institution: gender, race, personality, physical appearance, and wardrobe. However, such an unpredictable system places a great deal of pressure upon adolescents to figure out what is or is not socially acceptable in a particular setting; in adapting to such changes, the identity development of each child may be affected.

**One-dimensional labels.** Additionally, it seemed that youth viewed one another one-dimensionally and based their interpretation of an individual's identity upon one particular characteristic, as opposed to recognizing the complex and multi-faceted nature of human beings' personalities. Oftentimes, the characteristic targeted was a quality which would be perceived as positive in adulthood, but, for some reason, was viewed as an object of ridicule in adolescence. For instance, Charlotte, one of the student participants, indicated that she was teased for being intellectually gifted for a number of years, and she was afraid to share her grades with peers for fear of being mocked. This corresponded with issues of jealousy and competition for resources in gaining social



status as described by the participants. In Charlotte's perception, she believed that was the only label she was given, and the other students noted similar concerns about being labeled based on a single facet of their identity; in many cases, it seemed that this single facet may not even be accurate, such as in Kyla's case, when peers labeled her as a lesbian, even though she is heterosexual.

A common theme among the educators was hesitance in identifying or labeling their students in this way, for fear of describing students in a one-dimensional or stereotypical manner. This seemed to be a shift from childhood, in which peers viewed one another in the simplest terms, while adults strove to perceive a child holistically, recognizing all of his or her personality traits. However, when encouraged to do so, the adults were able to identify particular characteristics that were likely to make a child a target of bullying, such as wearing thick glasses or being clumsy in physical education classes. Therefore, it seems that if educators are going to develop the ability to accurately recognize victims of relational aggression, it will be important for them to set aside their politically correct "adult perspective" to some extent. While viewing students from a one-dimensional perspective may feel inappropriate to an educator, the intentionality behind such a measure would be positive, as it serves a preventative use in bullying situations.

**Blame.** Personality traits and behaviors that were perceived negatively by peers and educators seemed to place the victim at a disadvantage all-around. Perceived atypical behaviors in peers were viewed by students and educators as precipitants of relational aggression. It seemed that, whether individuals believed the victim was acting



in an intentional or unintentional manner, the blame appeared to be placed upon the victim much of the time. If behaviors were not typically accepted within the culture of the environment, many of the participants believed the individual should simply change whatever she was doing that was drawing negative attention; if she did not choose to change, it was often assumed that she wanted to be mistreated by peers in a misguided attempt for attention of any kind. Blanco (2008) suggested that negative attention seeking was a form of self-sabotage, in which students became so accustomed to being victimized by peers that they provoked the aggression in order to maintain recognition of their own existence, as opposed to feeling ignored or invisible. Many of the girls asked the question of what was wrong with them that they “deserved” to be bullied, which suggested their own desire to blame themselves in order to make sense of the situation. Only one participant in this study, Kristen, a student, expressed that unwillingness to change may be a sign of pride and confidence in one’s identity, as opposed to a negative trait.

However, in attempting to blame the victim for her own victimization by attributing it to something “wrong” with her, the greater question of what was “wrong” with the perpetrators was ignored. According to Kaczor, Ryckman, Thornton, and Kuehnel (1991), this appeared to reflect our societal expectation of control over one’s fate, and the desire to blame a victim for their circumstances in order to provide the general population with a sense of control in avoiding their own incidents of victimization, however inaccurate such a sense control may be. For example, in many instances of rape, blame is unfairly placed upon the victim for dressing provocatively



with the notion that “she was asking for it,” so that other women may believe that if they choose to dress a certain way, they can avoid being raped (Kaczor et al., 1991). Our society promotes fairness and the belief in receiving what one deserves, and therefore the idea of unpredictable victimization is unsettling, resulting in blame being placed upon the victim to alleviate our discomfort with the truth.

### **Shifting Definitions of the Phenomenon**

The traditional definition of bullying denotes three common criteria: intentional harm-doing, repeated acts over time, and an imbalance of power between the aggressor and victim. However, these criteria were initially built upon the premise of physical bullying, and based on the findings of this study, were not necessarily inclusive of relationally aggressive forms of bullying. Underwood et al. (2001) warned of the risk in borrowing the framework from research on physical aggression to comprehend relational aggression, because relational bullying places a greater emphasis on relationships within groups which require distinct concepts and criteria.

While acting in a purposely harmful manner was applicable to the behaviors noted by the participants in this study, the issue of reported acts over time was questionable, as it seemed to imply that one individual or group of perpetrators continued to engage in the aggression repeatedly. However, relational aggression appeared to require the participation of numerous individuals in order to accomplish its’ goal, which was typically social and emotional harm through various forms of public humiliation; the student participants indicated that, oftentimes, multiple individuals or groups of perpetrators who were unaffiliated with one another tormented the victim. The students



indicated that the perpetrators may use the same material or approach to bullying the victim, or different material or approaches. Even in instances of one recognizable perpetrator, such as the student who posts a mean comment online or calls the victim a name, the harm was not directly incurred because of that interaction – it was because of the others' who would read the mean comment or hear the victim called a name that harm was inflicted. It seemed that relational aggression could not be perpetrated by a single individual; while the traditional definition of bullying allows that perpetration may occur through an individual or group, relational aggression is unique in that it necessitates group perpetration.

The imbalance of power noted in traditional bullying criteria inferred that the levels of strength, whether physical, psychological, or social, remained relatively stable over time. However, the participants of this study recognized that the roles of victims and perpetrators continually fluctuated in relationally aggressive interactions, which was consistent with Sullivan et al.'s (2004) "chaos theory of bullying," which posited that bullying is random and can happen to anyone at any time. It seemed that the unpredictable nature of who would be in which role at what time distinguished relational aggression from other forms of bullying, as most adolescent girls reported being in one role or the other at any given time. It seemed that this was due in part to the fact that many perpetrators were prior, present, or preferred future friends of the victim, and the concept of revenge was highly indicated once an individual reached the desired level of social acceptance, resulting in a constant underlying conflict. Furthermore, relational aggression was perceived as a way of maintaining or improving one's social status,



depending upon the social standing of the targeted victim (Bosworth et al., 1999; Gilligan, 1982). Therefore, an imbalance of power served multiple purposes in relationally aggressive interactions: It was a reason for perpetration, the goal of perpetration, and/or the result of perpetration. This suggests the need for a shift in the traditional definition of bullying when it comes to the distinct characteristics of relational aggression.

### **Barriers to Adult Recognition**

While the covert nature of relational aggression was an obvious obstacle in educators' abilities to recognize relationally aggressive situations and the potential victims of such interactions (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Craig et al., 2000), two far more significant obstacles were identified by the participants.

First, the concept of educators as human beings was described. Because school authority figures are fallible persons with their own personalities and problems, it was recognized that they may not always have the capacity to identify victims due to being distracted or poorly invested in their students' personal issues. In part, this appeared to be due to some educators' natural tendencies to divide students into personal and academic realms of functioning, instead of perceiving each student as a holistic individual. The students indicated some teachers' beliefs that personal issues could be left outside of the classroom setting was unrealistic and improbable, as well as hurtful. While none of the adult participants in this study prescribed to such a division of self, some of them had reportedly witnessed this frame of mind in colleagues.



Second, the natural fatigue associated with being an educator was viewed as a common hindrance in recognizing significant issues among students. The act of being with adolescents for the better part of the day, five days a week, was recognized as having emotional consequences on educators; becoming too invested in the students' personal needs had a direct effect on the educator meeting his or her own needs, both personally and professionally, and the needs of other students. This seemed to result in an individual protecting him or herself by disengaging from students and teaching, whether consciously arriving at this decision or not; such disengagement was reported to be a way of going through the motions of teaching without actually being present with the students or recognizing signs of potential problems. This phenomenon was labeled "Educator Fatigue" in this study, and has been researched in other studies under the category of "Teacher Burnout" (Chang, 2009; Van Horn, Schaufeli, Enzmann, 1999).

**Parallels between recognition and effects.** One of the most striking findings was the comparable aspect of two components of the theory. The signs observed in recognizing a victim were analogous to the effects of victimization. Signals such as a decline in academic performance and changes in mood and behavior were reported by all of the participants as methods of recognizing when a student had been victimized; however, this meant that such signs were only recognized after the damage had been inflicted upon the victim, which seemed counterintuitive to the concept of effective intervention. Furthermore, the adolescent participants described multiple seemingly legitimate reasons for not reporting their victimization, which coincided with research that identified seven obstacles in adolescent reporting of bullying: secrecy,



powerlessness, victim blaming self, retaliation, child vulnerabilities, fear of losing the relationship if the bully is a friend, and expectations regarding the effectiveness of adult interventions (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). Therefore, it seemed that adult recognition was all the more important and the only truly effective intervention method was prevention, if the ultimate goal is to avoid harmful effects upon the victim.

### **Intervention Concepts**

The most distinct differences between the responses of the adolescents and school faculty participants were beliefs about effective interventions. While some of the educators believed that consistent traditional methods of punishment, such as detention and suspension, were the most effective ways of handling bullying situations, the students and half of the faculty members disagreed. Traditional forms of punishment were perceived as ineffective by these participants because they did not produce a change in the bully's behavior. Much of the previous research on the subject has discovered that children who are generally angrier tend to engage in perpetration, and punishment only served to exacerbate their anger, which resulted in victims being utilized as a continual outlet for that anger because they were perceived as safe, non-threatening targets (Blanco, 2008). In fact, punishment reinforced the concept of "getting even" as an acceptable form of problem-solving; it was simply a reactionary measure taken against perpetrators that did nothing to promote a lasting change in the bully's actions or beliefs, similar to the "Kid Justice System" identified by this research. Punishment also reinforced the significance of a hierarchical structure similar to that of the social status which compelled incidents of relational aggression in the first place, which sent mixed messages to



students. As Pellegrini (2002) indicated, “aggression elicits aggression and cooperation elicits cooperation” (p. 155).

Nontraditional forms of consequence that promoted the development of empathy were deemed more effective in decreasing further instances of aggression against the original victim and potential future victims. The participants suggested having the bully write a paper on the effects of victimization to learn more about the issue could be beneficial. Blanco (2008) described creative consequences such as asking the perpetrators to perform unexpected acts of kindness for various individuals over a period of time, recording the acts, the recipients’ responses, and how the interaction made the bully feel in a journal. Blanco also suggested that bullies be encouraged to volunteer, such as “requiring the girl who teases an overweight classmate to volunteer as a candy stripper in the pediatric eating disorders unit of a local hospital” (p. 323) or inviting “materialistic students who continually taunt their less fortunate classmates [to] organize a meal for the homeless” (p. 324).

### **Prevention Concepts**

The participants believed strongly in the importance of effective prevention consisting of three key components: awareness, development of empathy, and development of assertiveness. Awareness through education and training for all members of the school was emphasized. Because the misperception of bullying as a normal part of growing up was so widespread, the need for greater awareness of the definition of bullying behaviors and the ensuing effects were of utmost importance. The misguided belief that bullying is a natural part of development dismisses the importance of this



serious issue, and hinders progress toward change; a growth in understanding that all forms of bullying are unnecessary and preventable needs to be reinforced within the school systems and our society as a whole.

All of the adult educators who participated in this study verbally minimized any bullying they engaged in as children, chalking it up to being unaware of its effect or simply joking around. However, their guarded natures in discussing this issue as adults indicated a certain level of discomfort in self-reflecting about their own possible perpetration as youth. An effective prevention program would promote that feeling of discomfort as a preventative measure, as opposed to a self-reflective hindsight. Blanco's (2008) examples of methods of strengthening empathy were described earlier in this section as intervention strategies, but could easily be utilized as preventative tasks. The development of empathy among all students needs to be repeatedly promoted, role modeled, and reinforced.

The student participants identified a category labeled the "Kid Justice System," in which students often felt the desire to get revenge on a bully themselves, as opposed to involving adults in the matter to handle it the "right" way. Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) noted that many victims realized that retaliation was an inappropriate response, but witnessed it producing positive changes in the bully's behavior and therefore justified its use. While revenge was not necessarily a positive step in the right direction, the initiative implied in such a desire could be guided in a positive direction; this desire to be autonomous and appear capable of resolving conflict without the assistance of an adult was identified as an aspect of adolescent development (Unnever & Cornell, 2004).



Effective prevention strategies should empower youth to take the initiative in solving their own problems and nurture this desire to take the reins; proper training on assertiveness and problem-solving methods to resolve peer conflicts independently of adult advice should be offered. The students in this study voiced that their only true needs from adults in regards to intervention were genuine concern and empathic listening to validate their feelings about the situation; there seemed to be an underlying desire to be empowered to solve the conflict independently, as opposed to having an adult “fix” the problem for the victim.

### **Implications**

This research provided middle school educators and student victims with an opportunity to share their perceptions on the topic of relational aggression. Many of the participants indicated that the experience led to self-reflection and subsequent self-realization that enhanced their insight into past experiences and present interactions and functioning. The students shared painful stories involving their own victimization experiences, as did one of the educators; all of the individuals reported that sharing these experiences instilled an internal sense of liberation and healing. The school faculty members who had not personally experienced peer victimization acknowledged that this may have led to limitations in their abilities to recognize victims of relationally aggressive situations.

### **Implications for Schools**

The results of this study were indicative of the need for a substantial shift in the anti-bullying intervention and prevention methods currently utilized in most U.S. schools.



**Approaching the victim.** The concept of group communication, in which the victims and perpetrators were identified and approached by an educator together, was viewed as ineffective and humiliating for the victim. The students indicated that they preferred to have an educator recognize their struggles and initiate contact with them by concretely describing the behaviors he or she was witnessing and expressing concern.

Blanco's (2008) anti-bullying program "It's NOT Just Joking Around!" (INJJA) offered these suggestions for intervention. First, adults should not tell victims to ignore the bullying because it sends a general message of ignoring problems as a coping strategy, and sets a precedent for avoidance of conflict-resolution throughout a person's life. Second, she encouraged educators to focus on the present needs and feelings of the victim; she indicated that telling the victim she will be more successful than her perpetrators a decade from now dismisses current pain, and attempting to connect with the victim by sharing one's own experiences as a youth moved the focus off of the victim and onto the educator. Blanco provided the example, "You say to the student, 'I don't know how you feel, I can't imagine what you're going through, it must be awful.' Then you sit back and listen." (p. 315). Third, Blanco (2008) and Trim (2009) emphasized the need for educators to enlist the victim's input in how the situation should be handled and find out what specific help she needs, which was supported by the findings of this study. It seemed that in many cases, all the victim needed was someone to listen, not someone to fix the problem (Trim, 2009); the adolescents in this investigation reported a desire for their input to be solicited and valued by the educator in determining the course of action to be pursued with the bullies. By treating the victim as an important individual with



unique experiences, emotions, and needs, the student was more likely to feel heard, validated, and empowered to solve the conflict.

**Confidential/anonymous reporting methods.** In instances where adults did not recognize the signs of victimization, the student victims identified the need for anonymous and confidential methods of reporting bullying to school authority figures. Kristen suggested an anonymous method utilized at her school called “Text-a-Tip,” in which students could send a text message to a phone line dedicated to preventing violence in that particular school, which was monitored by the school’s administrators. Blanco (2008) suggested additional methods that would honor the students’ privacy, including the ability to send an anonymous e-mail to the school through their website or in-school e-mail system, or creating a locked drop box in a non-populated area of the school, similar to a suggestion box, where students could voice concerns through anonymous written means of communication. The Safe2Tell program utilizes similar methods to produce safe and anonymous ways of reporting safety concerns within Colorado schools ([safe2tell.org](http://safe2tell.org)).

**Nontraditional consequences.** The traditional methods of punishment employed as reactionary measures were perceived as inadvertent exacerbations of the problem, and nontraditional consequences were supported by most of the participants. Homework assignments on bullying or spending lunches with teachers or counselors discussing the effects of victimization were identified as potentially creative forms of consequence that would not result in aggravation of the issue. Blanco (2008) reiterated the concept of nontraditional forms of punishment for the perpetrators which promoted the development



of empathy, such as having perpetrators volunteer their time with populations who shared similar characteristics to their chosen victims, or having the bullies perform random acts of kindness for peers and journal about the interactions so they could be discussed at a later time.

**Preventative measures.** More importantly, a significant increase in pre-emptive measures needed to be employed, utilizing education and various forms of skill training as a cornerstone of prevention. Possible methods of developing empathic skills were previously described in this chapter, and the second foundational skill identified by the participants was assertiveness. Teaching all students, especially those who seemed more likely to be targeted due to atypical behaviors, appearance, or background, how to engage in confident conflict-resolution and problem-solving was identified as essential (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Kenny et al., 2005; Pellegrini, 2002). Blanco's (2008) INJJA program encourages victims to look their perpetrator in the eye with a neutral expression that doesn't display emotion or fear, and use a strong voice to tell the perpetrator to stop their behavior, while continuing to stare him or her down to convey the seriousness of their request. Bystanders could also be taught assertiveness skills, whether they directly intervened and stood up for the victim or learned ways of distracting the bully from the situation in order to allow the victim to exit safely (Reid et al., 2004; Smith, 2004).

A preventative anti-bullying program such as this, which promotes awareness through education and skills training in empathy and assertiveness, would likely require a great deal of resources, including finances and time. It may encounter initial resistance from various members of the school; however, it would significantly reduce the problem



of bullying in the long-run, which would save tremendous amounts of time and energy that could be re-focused on academics.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study launched a qualitative investigation of relational aggression within academic institutions. Participation was voluntary and involved specific criteria. First, the students who participated were females who self-identified as victims of relational aggression perpetrated by female peers. Therefore, the results of the study did not include the input of both genders, students who were not aware of being victimized, or students who were victimized through relational aggression by male perpetrators. Such students may have described different perceptions. Additionally, the students who volunteered to participate in this study were nearing the end of the middle school or junior high careers; therefore, unintentionally, the perspectives of sixth and seventh grade students were not represented.

Secondly, educators who chose to volunteer for the study likely had an interest in the topic being researched and felt compelled to learn more about the issue in order to effectively assist their students. This limited the findings to adult individuals who were already likely to be more aware of issues surrounding adolescent bullying, and who therefore may have been better able to identify signs of relational aggression and victimization (Yoon, 2004; Yoon et al., 2004). Educators who were less invested in their students' personal issues, or those who dismissed or minimized the significance of relational aggression, would likely have provided different perspectives.



A significant limitation in comparing the perspectives of students and educators in this study was the fact that none of the adolescent participants attended the schools where the faculty participants taught. While the findings of the study were fairly generalizable across middle school and junior high settings, a specific comparison between students and educators at the same school would have provided greater depth of information for comparison.

The results were also restricted to each participant's capacity for self-awareness and ability to verbalize their thoughts and ideas regarding the research topic. Because the participant population consisted of a minimally diverse group of individuals from a particular region of the country, the results may not be applicable to all student victims and educators in various grade levels. However, it is the decision of each reader to verify whether or not the results are applicable to their particular situation (Merriam, 1998).

### **Future Directions for Research**

Much of the previous research on the topic of bullying focused on physical forms of aggression, especially among males, and the reasons the perpetrators engaged in such interactions. This study focused specifically on relational aggression among adolescent females, with an emphasis on the victim's perception of the situation. This was the first study to explicitly compare the perspectives of the victims and school educators in regards to relational aggression, and the findings were indicative of numerous avenues for future research, described as follows.



**Research on the Effectiveness of  
Prevention and Intervention  
Strategies**

The theory developed from the findings of this study cited several key aspects of effective prevention and intervention strategies. Prevention strategies were reported to include education to increase awareness of the problem, empathy development, and assertiveness training. The particular aspects of these components were described previously in the chapter, and were supported by Blanco (2008), a national expert on school bullying who experienced severe peer victimization firsthand as a youth. In particular, educator training on how to recognize facial expressions, body language, and nonverbal cues in relationally aggressive situations were considered central aspects of training (Craig et al., 2000).

Effective intervention strategies that could be employed by educators were reported to include confidentiality or anonymity for the reporter, education and training on bullying for students and faculty, strong student-teacher relationships, educator initiative in recognizing the problem, the opportunity for victim input, and nontraditional forms of consequence for the bullies. These concepts were also supported by Blanco (2008) and reflected aspects of her INJJA program. Research on the implementation of these elements within a school setting with the goal of preventing and intervening in bullying situations is needed, as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of such measures in all academic grade levels.



### **Research on “Educator Fatigue”**

The students and adults in this study recognized that educators were human beings, with their own sets of personal problems and character flaws. One such flaw was identified as a form of fatigue that occurred in educators; it was considered a form of self-protection from being so invested in the students’ needs that the educator eventually became burnt out on teaching. While some research has been conducted on teacher burnout, further research is needed to investigate this phenomenon and the ways in which it specifically impacts educators in regards to bullying interventions . Furthermore, the unintended effect of this fatigue upon students should be explored within the academic arena. Ways of preventing and recognizing this type of fatigue should be studied to ensure the continued health and efficacy of the educators in our society.

### **Research on Relational Aggression among Males**

The majority of bullying research on males is focused on physical forms of aggression, and a significant portion of studies dedicated to relational aggression emphasize female involvement. However, several of the participants in this study indicated that relational aggression occurred among male students and between male and female students. This suggests a strong need for research on relationally aggressive behaviors focused on the male gender. Areas of investigation should include precipitants of the behavior, the context under which it occurs, and potential obstacles in recognizing male victims or reporting victimization. Furthermore, the negative effects of relational aggression on males should be explored. A study by Unnever and Cornell (2004) found



that girls were more willing to seek help than boys in bullying situations, which would suggest that the societal stigma of emotional and relational forms of harm in males is a considerable hindrance in seeking adult assistance. This stigma opens the door for a new set of research on the effects of relational aggression among the male gender.

### **Research on Long-Term Effects**

This study explored the effects of relational aggression among females who were still immersed in their academic careers; the perspectives of the educators involved in this study were vague in regards to the potential consequences that may follow a victim into adulthood. However, the participants in this study alluded to the potential permanency of low self-esteem and negative self-beliefs due to victimization that could lead to complications in future interpersonal relationships and overall functioning. According to Grills and Ollendick (2002), the supposed female tendency to internalize negative peer feedback was due to the greater emotional investment females place on their peer relationships. Blanco (2008), an adult survivor of bullying who was eventually diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in adulthood due to being victimized as a teen, shared the permanent struggle she faces due to her experiences as a youth. She stated,

We work, we dream, we marry, have kids and grow old, and rarely does anyone ever suspect the truth. Our classmates put a hole in us, and our self-esteem keeps falling out...We could be your doctor or lawyer, your favorite actor. Or the homeless guy on the street. No matter what we've become since graduation day, we still see ourselves as outcasts, freaks, misfits, rejects, those labels having been burnt into our being...we can still hear your voices at the edge of our subconscious, calling us names, putting us down. Everyone needs to feel that they belong. When you denied us that, you stole something that we have spent



our entire lives trying to get back...The bully never remembers. The outcast never forgets (p. 41-42).

Research exploring the long-term effects of relational aggression on students of both genders into adulthood and beyond is needed to provide even greater evidence of the cruel and unnecessary nature of bullying and the need for its' prevention in our society from a young age.

### **Research on Parental Involvement**

This study focused on student victims and school authority figures; however, the other noteworthy individuals involved in bullying situations are the perpetrators and parents of the victims. Much of the research thus far has focused on the perpetrators of bullying. The findings of this research briefly touched on the potential assets and troubles a parent could bring to such circumstances depending upon their reaction to and subsequent involvement in the situation. The effective and ineffective methods utilized by parents in bullying situations should be researched, as well as the similarities and contradictions of such methods when exercised in collaboration with their child's school system.

### **Conclusion**

The problem of relational aggression and other forms of bullying is longstanding and far-reaching. It will take a dramatic shift in the beliefs of many individuals to affect significant and lasting changes in the form of effective preventative measures; and yet, a united conviction to put an end to victimization through bullying seems to be on the



horizon within our school systems and society as a whole. As Nora, a victim of relational aggression, summarized,

It's just not right for people to be hurt this way. It's so senseless and not at all necessary. Why can't people just get along with each other, help each other, support each other, be there for each other? We'd all be so much better off if we could just treat each other with kindness and respect, and know what it truly means for a person to be hurt by someone else's careless words and actions.



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## APPENDIX A

### SCHOOL FACULTY PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT HANDOUT



**Opportunity for Teachers & Administrators to Participate in a Research Study  
about Adolescent Female Bullying in the Middle School Setting**

*Presented by Chaitra Wirta-Leiker, M.A.*

***What is "Female Bullying?"***

- ❖ In females, bullying often takes the form of "relational aggression," which involves indirect verbal, social, and emotional means of perpetration

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ✓ Verbal threats                        | ✓ Social isolation & ignoring someone                                       |
| ✓ Spreading rumors & gossiping          | ✓ Manipulating friendships (ex. "You can't come to my party unless you...") |
| ✓ Name-calling                          | ✓ Alliance seeking (ex. "I'll hang out with you if...")                     |
| ✓ Mocking                               | ✓ Stealing friends or significant others                                    |
| ✓ Intimidating staring or glares        | ✓ Terminating friendships   |
| ✓ Sending threatening notes/emails/TM's | ✓ Withholding emotional support (ex. "I'm not going to call you unless...") |
| ✓ Excluding someone from the group      |   |

***Statistics & Information***

- ❖ 72% of school-aged females reported being bullied at some point during their academic career
- Approximately 1 out of 4 females is being bullied in schools at any given time
- ❖ Research has shown that relational aggression is at its peak during the middle school years, when girls are attempting to assert independence from caregivers and peer relationships become more central and influential – because adolescent females tend to place greater importance on friendships & social intimacy than male peers, it makes sense that they would use bullying strategies that target social relationships

***The Negative Effects of Bullying***

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| ✓ Declining academic performance     | ✓ Feelings of helplessness                              |
| ✓ Difficulty concentrating in school | ✓ Eating disorders                                      |
| ✓ Absenteeism & truancy              | ✓ Self-destructive behaviors (cutting, substance abuse) |
| ✓ Depression                         | ✓ Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches)          |
| ✓ Anxiety                            |   |
| ✓ Low self-esteem                    |   |

***Why Don't Female Students Report the Bullying?***

- ❖ Bullying remains one of the most underreported safety problems in schools
- ❖ Teachers/administrators are likely to identify physical forms of bullying, but the secretive nature of relational aggression makes it difficult to detect
- ❖ Research suggests that student and teacher perceptions of bullying are very different – while approximately half of students believe that teachers ignore the situation or make it worse when they intervene, the majority of teachers believe that they are intervening effectively in most bullying situations



### *About the Study*

This study is a dissertation required for a doctoral degree in counseling psychology at the University of Northern Colorado.

- ❖ The purpose of this study is to explore and compare the perceptions of female student victims and school authority figures in regards to adolescent female bullying in middle schools in 4 areas:
  1. The experiences of the victims
  2. The effects upon the victims (i.e. academic performance, physical and psychological health, etc.)
  3. The circumstances surrounding victims' decisions to report the bullying to school authorities
  4. Prevention and intervention strategies within the school setting
- ❖ The goals of this study are to:
  1. Develop a theory that combines the perspectives of student victims and school authority figures
  2. Help all participants and participating schools better understand the phenomenon of adolescent female bullying and relational aggression
  3. Help school authorities recognize victims and intervene in female bullying situations more effectively
  4. Provide victims and bystanders with a more effective system for reporting bullying
  5. Attempt to create a safer school environment in general, and happier, healthier, and more successful students overall!

### *What Does My Participation Involve?*

- ❖ You will be asked to complete 1-3 individual interviews with the researcher, each about 30-90 minutes in length. These interviews will be outside of classroom instructional hours, at the researcher's office.
- ❖ Win a \$25 Target gift card!! A raffle will be held for participants – 2 students and 2 teachers/administrators will win!
- ❖ Following the completion of this study, a brief summary of the results will be provided to participants and participating schools. An in-person feedback session with the researcher will be available upon request by the participating schools.

### *What Should I Do if I Want to Participate?*

- ❖ Contact Chaitra by phone (970) 689-2117 or email [c\\_wirtaleiker@yahoo.com](mailto:c_wirtaleiker@yahoo.com) if you are interested in participating in this research. You'll complete a brief phone interview to ensure that you qualify for the study, and at this time we'll go over the purpose of the study and the requirements of your participation in more detail. If it still feels like a good fit for you, we'll schedule the first interview, at which time the consent and/or assent forms will be discussed in detail.

*Thank you for your commitment to your students' academic, physical, & psychological wellbeing!*



APPENDIX B

STUDENT PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER



## A Study about Female Bullying in Middle School

Presented by Chaitra Wirta-Leiker, M.A.

### *Did You Know...*

3 out of 4  
girls are  
bullied  
during their  
school  
years!

1 out of 4  
girls is  
being  
bullied  
right  
now!

*Bullying is only reported to  
teachers half the time!*

It can be hard for teachers to see  
Relational Aggression because  
it's so secretive!

### What is

### "Relational Aggression?"

Spreading rumors GOSSIPING

Mocking Manipulating friendships

THREATENING STARES & GLARING

Ignoring someone Name-calling

Keeping someone out of the group

Stealing friends/boyfriends/girlfriends

POSTING MEAN THINGS ON MYSPACE/FACEBOOK

### Effects of Bullying

Trouble concentrating at school Depression Anxiety Being absent from class

Low self-esteem Poor grades Cutting STOMACHACHES & HEADACHES

Eating disorders Drinking & drug use Feeling helpless

### My Research Study

Explore & compare the views of student victims  
& teachers/administrators about female bullying –  
I want to combine your views to come up with a  
way to end female bullying at your school!

I'll look at:

*What you've  
been through  
as a victim*

How the  
bullying is  
affecting  
you

Why you choose to  
report or not report  
bullying

Prevention & intervention in your school

### *How can I participate?*

Talk with your parents about it first -  
they had a presentation about the study too. If  
it's okay with them, contact Chaitra at  
(970) 689-2117 or c\_wirtaleiker@yahoo.com  
to learn more about the study. If it seems like a  
good fit for you and your parents, we'll set up the  
first interview. You'll do 1-3 interviews with me.

*Two students who  
participate will have the  
chance to win a \$25  
Target gift card!*



APPENDIX C  
EDUCATOR CONSENT FORM





### CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: A Qualitative Comparison of the Perceptions of Victims and School Authorities in Early Adolescent Female Bullying

Researcher: Chaitra Wirta-Leiker, M.A., Doctoral Counseling Psychology Student,  
School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education

Phone: (###) ###-#### Email: c\_wirtaleiker@yahoo.com

Research Advisor: Dr. Mary Sean O'Halloran, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist

Phone: (970) 351-1640 Email: mary.ohalloran@unco.edu

### CONSENT FOR TEACHER/ADMINISTRATOR PARTICIPANTS

#### Purpose and Description:

The primary purpose of this study is to explore and compare the perceptions victims and school authority figures in regards to adolescent female-on-female bullying in the middle school setting. Research indicates that the majority of students have been bullied by peers at some point during their academic career, and it is at its peak during the middle school years. Often, female-perpetrated bullying takes on the form of relational aggression, as opposed to physical aggression. Relational aggression includes actions such as gossiping, spreading rumors, teasing, isolating victims from the group, and manipulating or terminating friendships. Research suggests that student victims and school personnel perceive relational aggression very differently in relation to the experiences and mental and emotional consequences for the victims. In fact, it is estimated that approximately half of the time, student victims choose not to report being bullied to school authorities. In addition, much of the research indicates that students often feel school personnel either ignore the bullying situation, or intervene in a way that makes the situation worse for the victim. However, school authorities' intentions appear to be positive, and the hidden nature of relational bullying can make it difficult to detect. This study will allow both student victims and school authority figures to share their views on the topic of female bullying. The researcher's goal is to come up with ideas for more effective ways of recognizing such victims and intervening in relational bullying situations in the school setting.



### Participants' Roles

Participation in this study will involve between one and three in-depth interviews regarding the topic of female bullying, ranging in length from 30-90 minutes each. Interviews will be conducted in an individual format. Interviews will occur in person at the participant's or researcher's school. Interview questions will address:

- How school personnel identify and describe female-perpetrated bullying behaviors
- The perceived mental, emotional, and physical effects of bullying
- The circumstances under which students choose to report or not report the bullying
- How school authorities recognize victims
- The perceived effectiveness of current bullying interventions at a particular school

In addition to interviews, participants may also choose to share related "artifacts" with the researcher, such as journal entries, notes, emails, or artwork.

Responses to the interview questions will be audio-recorded and transcribed (*definition*: typed into written form). All information will be kept confidential, and the researcher will use a pseudonym (*definition*: code name) for each of the participants. Real names will not be recorded on any of the research information, except for the signature on consent/assent forms, which will be locked in the research advisor's office on the UNC campus. Following the completion of this research project, all recordings will be destroyed.

### Risk and Benefits of Participation

The potential risks for participants are expected to be minimal. Possible risks include feelings of anxiety, discomfort, embarrassment, shame, frustration, anger, and sadness when participants' describe the bullying they witnessed or intervened in. Physical reactions related to sharing a distressing experience may also occur, such as shaking or sweating. However, it is likely that such adverse emotional and physical reactions will not exceed those experienced by participants' on a daily basis when confronted with bullying situations. Please be aware if you begin to exhibit any of the following symptoms during or following the interview process in excess of what you deem typical for yourself on a daily basis:

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| ▪ Increased depression/sadness  | ▪ Nightmares/flashbacks   |
| ▪ Increased anxiety/nervousness | ▪ Changes in sleep patterns (excess sleeping/difficulty sleeping) |
| ▪ Increased fear                | ▪ Changes in appetite (eating much more/less)                     |
| ▪ Increased anger               | ▪ Decreased ability to function in daily activities               |
| ▪ Continually feeling unsafe    | ▪ Thoughts of harming one's self or someone else                  |
| ▪ Continual crying              |   |
| ▪ Trembling/shaking             |   |
| ▪ Racing heartbeat              |   |
| ▪ Sweating                      |   |



If you feel that you are experiencing these or other atypical symptoms, please contact a mental health agency from the list provided and share your concerns.

North Range Behavioral Health  
1300 N. 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Greeley, CO 80631  
(970) 347-2120

UNC Psychological Services Clinic  
McKee Hall Room 247  
Greeley, CO 80639  
(970) 351-1645

Milestones Counseling Services  
832 W. Eisenhower Blvd.  
Loveland, CO 80537  
(970) 301-5833

Foundations Counseling  
130 N. 6<sup>th</sup> Street  
Windsor, CO 80550  
(970) 227-2770

Although your name will not be connected with this study, there are limits to the researcher's ability to keep information confidential. If the researcher suspects or a participant discloses that she/he is thinking about harming her/himself or someone else, necessary information will be shared with the appropriate agencies in an attempt to ensure of the safety of all involved parties.

There are also potential benefits to participating in this study. Participants will have the opportunity to share their experiences in a confidential and nonjudgmental environment. They may develop a greater understanding and awareness of their own role within bullying situations, and gain insight into how they can effectively and positively respond to and intervene in such incidents. In addition, victim participants may learn more about the potential negative effects of bullying and choose to seek help or support within the school setting (e.g. school counselor or teacher) or from an outside agency (e.g. mental health center). In addition, participation in this study has the potential to lead to positive changes in the school environment that could result in more effective prevention and intervention strategies in bullying situations.

#### Consent for Participation

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date



APPENDIX D  
PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM





## CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: A Qualitative Comparison of the Perceptions of Victims and School Authorities in Early Adolescent Female Bullying

Researcher: Chaitra Wirta-Leiker, M.A., Doctoral Counseling Psychology Student,  
School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education

Phone: (###) ###-#### Email: chaitra.wirtaleiker@unco.edu

Research Advisor: Dr. Mary Sean O'Halloran, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist

Phone: (970) 351-1640 Email: mary.ohalloran@unco.edu

### PARENTAL CONSENT FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

#### Purpose and Description:

The primary purpose of this study is to explore and compare the perceptions victims and school authority figures in regards to adolescent female-on-female bullying in the middle school setting. Research indicates that the majority of students have been bullied by peers at some point during their academic career, and it is at its peak during the middle school years. Often, female-perpetrated bullying takes on the form of relational aggression, as opposed to physical aggression. Relational aggression includes actions such as gossiping, spreading rumors, teasing, isolating victims from the group, and manipulating or terminating friendships. Research suggests that student victims and school personnel perceive relational aggression very differently in relation to the experiences and mental and emotional consequences for the victims. In fact, it is estimated that approximately half of the time, student victims choose not to report being bullied to school authorities. In addition, much of the research indicates that students often feel school personnel either ignore the bullying situation, or intervene in a way that makes the situation worse for the victim. However, school authorities' intentions appear to be positive, and the hidden nature of relational bullying can make it difficult to detect. This study will allow both student victims and school authority figures to share their views on the topic of female bullying. The researcher's goal is to come up with ideas for more effective ways of recognizing such victims and intervening in relational bullying situations in the school setting.



### Participants' Roles

Participation in this study will involve between one and three in-depth interviews regarding the topic of female bullying, ranging in length from 30-90 minutes each. Interviews will be conducted in an individual format. Interviews will occur at the researcher's office in Cheyenne. Interview questions will address:

- How victims and school personnel identify and describe female-perpetrated bullying behaviors
- The experiences of the victims
- The perceived mental, emotional, and physical effects of bullying
- The circumstances under which students choose to report or not report the bullying
- How school authorities recognize victims
- The perceived effectiveness of current bullying interventions at a particular school

In addition to interviews, participants may also choose to share related "artifacts" with the researcher, such as journal entries, notes, emails, or artwork.

Responses to the interview questions will be audio-recorded and transcribed (*definition*: typed into written form). All information will be kept confidential, and the researcher will use a pseudonym (*definition*: code name) for each of the participants. Real names will not be recorded on any of the research information, except for the signature on consent/assent forms, which will be locked in researcher's office. Following the completion of this research project, all recordings will be destroyed.

### Risk and Benefits of Participation

The potential risks for participants are expected to be minimal. Possible risks include feelings of anxiety, discomfort, embarrassment, shame, frustration, anger, and sadness when participants' describe the bullying they have experienced, witnessed, or intervened in. Physical reactions related to sharing a distressing experience may also occur, such as shaking or sweating. However, it is likely that such adverse emotional and physical reactions will not exceed those experienced by participants' on a daily basis when confronted with bullying situations. As the parent/guardian of a youth participant, please be aware if your child begins to exhibit any of the following symptoms during or following the interview process in excess of what you deem typical for your child on a daily basis:

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| ▪ Increased depression/sadness  | ▪ Nightmares/flashbacks   |
| ▪ Increased anxiety/nervousness | ▪ Changes in sleep patterns (excess sleeping/difficulty sleeping) |
| ▪ Increased fear                | ▪ Changes in appetite (eating much more/less)                     |
| ▪ Increased anger               | ▪ Decreased ability to function in daily activities               |
| ▪ Continually feeling unsafe    | ▪ Thoughts of harming one's self or someone else                  |
| ▪ Continual crying              |   |
| ▪ Trembling/shaking             |   |
| ▪ Racing heartbeat              |   |
| ▪ Sweating                      |   |



**If you feel that your child experiencing these or other atypical symptoms, please contact a mental health agency from the list provided, and share your concerns.**

Dr. Jerry Post & Associates  
1950 Bluegrass Circle  
Cheyenne, WY 82009  
(307) 634-9653

Peak Wellness Center  
2526 Seymour Avenue  
Cheyenne, WY 82003  
(307) 632-7771

Capitol Counseling & Development  
1720 Carey Avenue  
Cheyenne, WY 82001  
(307) 840-9969

Although your child's name will not be connected with this study, there are limits to the researcher's ability to keep information confidential. **If the researcher suspects or a participant discloses that she is thinking about harming herself or someone else, necessary information will be shared with the appropriate agencies in an attempt to ensure the safety of all involved parties.** However, all other information your child shares with the researcher will remain confidential and the researcher will be unable to share the interview material with you without your child's consent.

There are also potential benefits to participating in this study. Participants will have the opportunity to share their experiences in a confidential and nonjudgmental environment. They may develop a greater understanding and awareness of their own role within bullying situations, and gain insight into how they can effectively and positively respond to and intervene in such incidents. In addition, victim participants may learn more about the potential negative effects of bullying and choose to seek help or support within the school setting (e.g. school counselor or teacher) or from an outside agency (e.g. mental health center). In addition, participation in this study has the potential to lead to positive changes in the school environment that could result in more effective prevention and intervention strategies in bullying situations.

#### Consent for Participation

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to allow your child to participate in this study and if she begins participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you grant permission for your child to participate in this research and if your child indicates to us a willingness to participate. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.

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Print Child's Name

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Parent/Guardian's Signature

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Researcher's Signature

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Date

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Date



APPENDIX E  
STUDENT ASSENT FORM





## CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: A Qualitative Comparison of the Perceptions of Victims and School Authorities in Early Adolescent Female Bullying

Researcher: Chaitra Wirta-Leiker, M.A., Doctoral Counseling Psychology Student, School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education

Phone: (###) ###-#### Email: chaitra.wirtaleiker@unco.edu

Research Advisor: Dr. Mary Sean O'Halloran, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist

Phone: (970) 351-1640 Email: mary.ohalloran@unco.edu

### ASSENT FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

#### Purpose and Description:

The goal of this study is to learn more about bullying among middle school girls. A lot of the time, this kind of bullying involves spreading rumors, gossiping, mean staring, keeping someone out of the group, or trying to ruin someone's reputation at school – these things are forms of “relational bullying,” which is different than the usual bullying, like hitting or shoving someone.

Middle school is the time when “relational bullying” happens the most often. The problem is that this kind of bullying is secretive, so it is hard for adults, like teachers and principals, to see it and help the bullied person. Sometimes, teachers might think that they are helping to fix the problem, but the bullied person might think the teachers are ignoring the bullying or making the problem worse. This can make it hard for the bullied person to tell an adult about it.

I am going to be talking with girls who have been bullied and faculty members at middle schools to learn about the different ways that students and adults view “relational bullying.” My goal is to come up with better ways for teachers to help girls who are bullied in this way at school.

#### Participants' Roles

If you decide to be a part of this study, you will do one to three interviews about “relational bullying.” Each interview will be about 30-90 minutes. The interviews will be one-on-one (between you and me) at my office in Cheyenne. Interview questions will look at:

- How you describe bullying among girls
- Your experience of being bullied



- The negative effects of bullying
- The reasons you choose to report or not report the bullying to school faculty
- How you believe school faculty know when someone is being bullied
- What you think is helpful or not helpful about the programs your school uses to stop bullying

As a participant, you can also share journal entries, notes, emails, or artwork with me if you choose to do so and think it would be helpful.

Your responses to the interview questions will be audio-recorded and typed out. Everything you share with me, except for serious safety concerns, will be confidential, meaning that it will stay between you and me. I will use a code name for each participant and I will not use real names on any of my research information, except for your signature on this form, which will be locked in my office. After this research project is done, all of the audio-recordings will be erased.

#### Risk and Benefits of Participation

The possible risks for participants are likely to be small. Possible risks are feelings of nervousness, discomfort, embarrassment, shame, frustration, anger, and sadness when participants' talk about the bullying they have experienced. Participants might also have reactions such as shaking or sweating. However, these reactions are not likely to be worse than what participants face every day in bullying situations. Please notice if you start to feel any of the things listed below, either during or after the interviews, more so than what you think is normal for you on a daily basis:

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| ▪ Depression/sadness  | ▪ Sweating  |
| ▪ Anxiety/nervousness | ▪ Nightmares                                      |
| ▪ Fear/feeling unsafe | ▪ Sleeping a lot or very little                   |
| ▪ Anger               | ▪ Eating a lot or very little                     |
| ▪ A lot of crying     | ▪ Trouble with every day tasks                    |
| ▪ Trembling/shaking   | ▪ Thoughts about hurting yourself or someone else |
| ▪ Racing heartbeat    |   |

**If you start experiencing these or other unusual things, please talk to your parents or another trusted adult.**

Even though your real name will not be a part of this study, there are some things I cannot keep confidential. **If I think you might hurt yourself or someone else, or if you say that you are thinking about hurting yourself or someone else, I have to report this to your parents, or possibly the police or other professionals, in order to keep everyone safe.** The rest of the information you share with me will be confidential, meaning that even your teachers and parents will not know what you said or did during your interviews.

There are also some benefits to participating in this study. You will have the chance to share your experiences with a non-judgmental person. You may learn more about



bullying and good ways to respond to bullies. You may also learn more about the bad effects of bullying and decide ask an adult for help. Participation in this study might lead to good changes in your school that could result in less bullying.

Assent for Participation

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

---

Date



APPENDIX F  
SAMPLE STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



## Student Interview

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How would you describe what girl-on-girl bullying looks like? What types of behavior does it involve?
2. What type of education have you received about relational aggression specifically, or how have you learned about this type of bullying?
3. What has your experience of being bullied by other girls been like? (Descriptions of specific bullying incidents)
4. Why do you think bullying happens between girls?
5. How has the bullying affected you? (relationships, school performance, physical/mental health, sense of safety, beliefs about self, etc)
6. How do you cope with bullying (i.e. support systems, counseling, emotional outlets such as writing or sports, etc)?
7. How seriously do you think your friends/peers take bullying?
8. Do you think you've ever bullied someone through relational aggression?
9. Do you think your teachers/administrators recognize bullying when it happens? Do you feel like they care or try to help?
10. Do you think school faculty or any adults should intervene in this type of bullying?
11. What do your teachers and administrators do that is effective in preventing and/or stopping bullying among girls? What could they improve?
12. Have you ever reported the bullying to a teacher or school authority figure? What played a part in your decision to report or not? What would make it easier to report?
13. What are the anti-bullying policies in your school? Do you think they are effective for girl-on-girl bullying? What would make them more effective?



APPENDIX G  
SAMPLE FACULTY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



## Teacher/Administrator Interview

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_ Position Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How would you describe what female-perpetrated bullying looks like? What types of behavior does it involve?
2. What type of education have you received about relational aggression specifically, or how have you learned about this type of bullying?
3. How do you typically recognize a girl who is being victimized by peers? What are the barriers to recognizing victims of relational aggression?
4. What are the current anti-bullying policies in your school? Do you feel they are inclusive of relationally aggressive behaviors? How effective do you believe they are? What could be added or revised to make them more effective? In what way do they fit with your natural response style?
5. How do you respond to bullying situations with girls? What do you feel is most/least helpful or effective?
6. What factors do you believe play a role in whether victims choose to report or not report bullying to school authorities?
7. Do you believe that school authority figures or other adults should intervene in situations involving relational aggression?
8. How seriously do you believe your colleagues consider relational aggression to be?
9. Why do you believe bullying occurs among adolescent girls? What do you think it is like for girls to be bullied by peers?
10. What effects do you think bullying has on the victims?
11. Have you ever been bullied? If so, what was that experience like for you, how do you believe it affected you, and how do you believe it impacts how you respond to bullying situations as an adult? If not, how do you believe that might impact how you respond to bullying situations as an adult?
12. Do you believe that you have ever bullied someone using relational aggression?



APPENDIX H  
SAMPLE MEMO



1/8/11

In-person interview with Amy completed today. All but one student interview completed overall. Seem to have almost all info needed, very few gaps left to fill in, hopefully few unanswered questions left will be answered after last interview with Kristen and rest of clarification interviews.

\*\*\*\*One major realization has arisen for me today!!\*\*\*\*Important for Discussion Chptr\*\*\*\* It's becoming abundantly clear that the traditional definition of bullying does not completely fit relational aggression (RA) as it's been defined in this study – does this mean RA is not actually a form of bullying, but something completely separate? Or does the definition need to be altered to fit this specific type of bullying?

Differences identified:

#### IMBALANCE OF POWER CRITERIA

- Constant cycling between perpetrator and victim roles with girls – the power differential constantly shifts from one girl to the other in what seems like an unpredictable series, so the power imbalance is there (psychologically, social status-wise), but only present for a short period of time.
- RA seems to be a way of stripping status and power AND asserting/keeping status and power within social realms – use someone lower in status to maintain power and someone higher in status to gain power? Very calculating and seems complicated – do adolescents have the cognitive capacity to reason this out? Seems to be a pattern, so they must have the ability to recognize this phenomenon and understand social manipulation very well.

#### REPEATED ACTS

- When it comes to repeated acts over time – in RA this could be repeated acts by one girl or group, or repeated by multiple girls/groups – what type of effects occur with perpetration by same person repeatedly vs. different people repeatedly about same characteristics or issue or different ones? Brought up because of the chain reaction that seems to occur with girls hopping on the bandwagon to make fun of someone.

#### INTENTIONAL HARMDOING

- Intentional harm doing vs. “stupidity” or lacking awareness of impact – if it is not intentionally meant to harm, but still does so repeatedly, could it still be construed as bullying? Shouldn't the perception of the victim re: how the interaction is received play a significant role in determining the label of bullying?

#### OTHER THOUGHTS...

- Boys seem to engage in RA toward girls instead of physical bullying – is there something about females that invites RA as a form of harm? Related to social expectations and roles within our society? Stigma about boys “hitting a girl”?
- Focus on boys as a reason for jealousy – where do homosexual students fit in with this? Sexual orientation was an influential condition in bullying b/c homosexuality strayed from the norm. Do girls fight over romantic relationships with other girls just as often as other boys ratio-wise among hetero/homosexual students?



## APPENDIX I

### SAMPLE CHART OF DEVELOPING CATEGORIES/SUBCATEGORIES



## INFLUENTIAL CONDITIONS

<i>Categories/Subcategories</i> Identified by Students and Educators	<i>Categories/Subcategories</i> Identified by Students Only	<i>Categories/Subcategories</i> Identified by Educators Only
Social Status		
Acceptance		
Bonding over a common target		
Influence of friends		
Competition for relationships and resources		
Jealousy		
Deflection		
Differences	Differences	Differences
Appearance	Lower SES	New students
Behaviors	Intelligence	
Background		
Entertainment		
Bored		
Thrive on drama		
Natural part of growing up	Natural part of growing up	Natural part of growing up
Creating an identity	Willingness to experiment	Physical development
Newfound independence		Hormones
Growing apart and developing new relationships		Transitional time in life
		Testing limits
Home environment	Home environment	
Role modeling	Parenting styles	
	Filling voids >	< Fill voids effect only?



APPENDIX J  
DRAFT OF ARTICLE



### **Abstract**

A qualitative comparison of the perceptions of educators and self-identified victims was conducted in regards to early adolescent relational aggression among female middle school and junior high students. Six aspects of relational aggression were explored, including causal conditions; contextual factors; the phenomenon of relational aggression itself; intervening conditions, such as recognition of victims and reporting by victims; intervention and prevention strategies within the school setting; and the negative consequences of relational aggression upon the victims. The data were developed into a grounded theory with the purpose of identifying effective aspects of anti-bullying intervention and prevention in U.S. schools. Findings regarding prevention included awareness, education, and training students to effectively employ empathy and assertiveness. Findings related to intervention included appropriate ways for educators to approach and respond to victims and perpetrators in bullying situations, emphasizing victim empowerment through conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills.

*Keywords:* School bullying, Relational aggression, Anti-bullying programs

### **Introduction**

Adolescent female-on-female bullying is a disturbing and prevalent phenomenon. Hazler, Hoover, and Oliver (1992) found that 72% of school-aged females reported being bullied at some point during their academic career, and Hunter and Borg (2006) reported that approximately 23-27% of school-aged females are being bullied in schools at any given time. Numerous definitions of bullying exist, but most agree upon three primary factors: Intentional harm doing, repeated occurrences over time, and an imbalance of



power between the victim and the perpetrator (Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Varjas, Meyers, Bellmoff, Lopp, Birckbichler, & Marshall, 2008).

In females, bullying often takes the form of relational aggression, which involves indirect verbal, social, and emotional means of perpetration (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Dixon Rayle, Hartwig Moorhead, Green, Griffin, & Ozimek, 2007; Kenny, McEarchern, & Aluede, 2005). Such forms of aggression include verbal threats, spreading rumors and telling lies, name-calling, gossiping, mocking, sending threatening notes/emails, excluding or ostracizing from the group, social isolation, ignoring, manipulating friendships, alliance seeking, stealing friends or significant others, terminating friendships, and withholding emotional support (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Dixon Rayle et al., 2007; Kenny et al., 2005).

Research has shown that relational aggression is at its peak during the adolescent years, especially in middle school-aged females (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Kenny et al., 2005; Laser Haddow, 2006). Gilligan (1982) noted that the transition into middle school marks the developmental stage in which a child is beginning to individuate from her parents and assert independence, while the influence of peer relationships strengthens. During this time, peer conformity is highly valued (Laser Haddow, 2006), and adolescent females depend heavily upon peer feedback and approval in developing an identity, especially in relation to attractiveness, self-worth, and self-esteem. Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) and Gilligan (1982) proposed that, because adolescent females place greater emphasis upon friendships and social intimacy than adolescent males, they are most vulnerable in this area; therefore, it makes sense that they would utilize bullying



strategies that are intended to harm social relationships.

Olweus (1993) cited bullying as the most common type of school aggression contributing to mental health problems, and countless studies have noted the emotional consequences of bullying upon victims. Increased feelings of sadness, depression, rejection, anxiety, anger, low self-esteem, low self-worth, stress, helplessness, and self-pity are likely to occur (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Hazler et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2005; Varjas et al., 2008). Mental health problems that have been correlated with female bullying victimization include eating disorders, self-destructive behaviors (drinking, substance abuse, cutting), and suicidal ideation (Dixon Rayle et al., 2007). In addition, social consequences such as lost relationships and avoidance of social situations are likely (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2005). Bullying also leads to academic performance problems such as low grades, difficulty concentrating, and school absenteeism (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2005).

Despite the prevalence of female-perpetrated bullying among adolescent females, Kenny et al. (2005) cited bullying as one of the most underreported safety problems in schools. In fact, numerous studies cited discrepancies between students' and educators' perceptions in identifying and intervening in bullying situations. Hazler et al. (2001) found that teachers were likely to correctly identify physical forms of bullying, but struggled to recognize more covert forms of bullying, such as the verbal, social, and emotional aggression that often occurs in female bullying, making it difficult to effectively intervene. Bradshaw et al. (2007) and Crothers and Kolbert (2004) cited similar results, reporting that school faculty underestimated the number of students



involved in bullying situations, and were often unaware of the seriousness of peer victimization and the related impact upon the victim's life.

While students' responses to several studies suggested that educators ignored bullying situations or intervened in a way that led to situation being worse (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Olweus, 1993, 1994; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Varjas et al., 2008), teachers believed that they intervened effectively the majority of the time (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Hazler et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). A study by Pepler, Craig, Zeigler, and Charach (1994) found that, while 84% of teachers believed they intervened in bullying situations "always" or "often," only 35% of the students agreed. In addition, a study conducted by Williams and Cornell (2006) reported that only half of the students who were being bullied in school would seek help from school authorities, with approximately 50% of the students reporting that they did not believe teachers were genuinely concerned about them, and 30% stating that they did not believe they could turn to any of the adults at school for help. Other studies cited numerous reasons for students' failure to report victimization problems to school authorities, including feeling that school authorities would not be supportive or receptive, a belief that teachers were not interested in intervening, fear that a report would not be taken seriously, or a belief that the intervention utilized would not resolve the situation (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Varjas et al., 2008). A fear of retaliation from the bully or her friends and embarrassment over being unable to deal with the situation independently were also noted as reasons for choosing not to report the bullying (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Varjas et al., 2008). Such reasons may correlate with Unnever



and Cornell's (2004) assertion that bullying may often be viewed as a tolerated and accepted aspect of the school environment and culture.

In noting the severe psychological, emotional, and social consequences of female-perpetrated bullying on victims, the discrepancy in the perceptions of students and school authorities is a major cause for concern. The research indicated that female students viewed relational bullying as a common occurrence in their lives, yet school authorities had difficulty identifying female-on-female bullying situations, often did not understand the deeply negative impact upon the victims, and were typically unable to effectively intervene (Hazler et al., 2001). While it makes sense that the victims' failure to report bullying plays a role in school authority figures' lacking awareness of the nature and extent of the problem, thus making them less able to take appropriate action (Unnever & Cornell, 2004), it is important for school authorities to recognize their role in creating an accepted culture of bullying within the school environment, which makes it difficult for student victims to report such problems.

Previous research has focused on assessing the number of school-aged students who were bullied, as well as their perceptions regarding the characteristics of bullies and victims, reasons bullying occurred, reasons for choosing not to report bullying, and the perceived effectiveness of related interventions. This study was distinct, as it specifically focused on relational aggression among early adolescent females in middle school and junior high settings, and strove to combine the perceptions of student victims and school educators in an effort to create more effective and cohesive anti-bullying prevention and intervention strategies within the school system. The causal conditions of relational



aggression among females were investigated, as well as the contextual factors which led to the phenomenon. Definitions of relationally aggressive behaviors and the experiences of the victims were explored, and factors related to educator recognition of the victims and students' decisions to report bullying were examined. The current intervention and prevention strategies were evaluated, in addition to the consequences of peer victimization when interventions were not employed.

### **Methodology**

The participants included five adolescent female students (ages 14- to 15-years old; one African-American, one Hispanic, three Caucasian) who self-identified as victims of relational aggression perpetrated by female peers, and four middle school educators (ages 29- to 46-years old; one Caucasian female principal, three Caucasian male teachers). All of the participants were from the Rocky Mountain region except for one educator, who was from the Midwest.

The researcher contacted middle and junior high school principals in the Rocky Mountain Region by email to obtain approval to conduct recruitment presentation for students and staff members at the schools. One middle school principal gave the researcher permission to provide a recruitment presentation to the staff members and hang student recruitment flyers describing the study around the campus, and one principal presented the recruitment information to staff and students independent of the researcher. Educators and students also spread information about the study through personal email accounts and word of mouth. Volunteers interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher and engaged in brief phone interviews to assess for



inclusion criteria. For students, inclusion criteria included attendance at a middle or junior high school and self-identification as a victim of female perpetrated bullying. For educators, inclusion criteria included employment at a middle or junior high school for a period of at least one year.

Volunteers who met the aforementioned criteria were scheduled for one to two 45-90 minutes interviews in person with the researcher. Informed consent and assent documents were presented to each participant and her guardians, if applicable, and signed prior to the commencement of the first interview. Semi-structured interviews and follow-up clarification contacts through phone and email were transcribed by the researcher.

A traditional grounded theory methodology was used to collect and analyze data for this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), employing the traditional processes of open, axial, and selective coding. The participants' responses were organized into the six categories present within the grounded theory methodology: influential conditions, contextual factors, a description of the phenomenon, intervening conditions, action strategies, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To augment the trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study results, the researcher employed member checking, peer examination, triangulation, an audit trail, modal comparisons, and thick descriptions (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Schwandt, 2001).

### **Findings and Discussion**

The grounded theory developed through the data explained the phenomenon of relational aggression, influential conditions and context which contributed to relational aggression, related intervening conditions and action/interactional strategies, and the



consequences of relational aggression upon victims, as summarized in the following section.

### **Influential Conditions**

Several influential conditions were noted by the participants, with only minimal discrepancies between the student and educator perspectives. The desire for social status was deemed the most significant precipitant of relational aggression. As Greg, a middle school physical education teacher, explained, “To me, everything’s pure acceptance with middle school kids. Everyone wants to fit in, no one has the confidence to be an individual yet, and they use it against each other.” Charlotte, a ninth grade student, described a system of “social levels”:

I think a lot of it is you have to get the perfect boyfriend and you have to get the good friends, and that will bump you up...It’s all about the desire to want to be better...it’s all about levels, and you want to keep raising yourself up levels, and in order to get up you need to get more friends or more boyfriends, or you have to have a bigger house or nicer clothes. And it just keeps bumping you up.

Social status included vying for peer acceptance, bonding over a common victim, competition for social resources, and jealousy as reasons to engage in relational aggression; the students identified the deflection of one’s own negative qualities as an aspect of gaining social status, as well.

Differences in appearance and behavior were also considered motives, and the girls recognized differences in personality and lifestyle as additional precipitants of relational aggression. Nora, an eighth grade student, shared, “I think people just pick out anything that they don’t like about you.” Actions and behaviors that were perceived negatively by peers and educators seemed to place the victim at a disadvantage all-



around. Peers commonly targeted perceived atypical behaviors, and whether an educator believed the victim was acting in an intentional or unintentional manner, the blame appeared to be placed upon the victim much of the time. If behaviors were not typically accepted within the culture of the environment, many of the participants believed the victim should simply change whatever she was doing that was drawing negative attention; if she did not choose to change, it was often assumed that she wanted to be mistreated by peers in a misguided attempt for attention of any kind. Only one participant in this study, Kristen, a ninth grade student, expressed that unwillingness to change may be a sign of pride and confidence in one's identity, as opposed to a negative trait. However, in attempting to blame the victim for her own victimization by attributing it to something "wrong" with her, the greater question of what was "wrong" with the perpetrators was ignored.

Some bullying was viewed as a natural progression in identity development and growing apart from friends to develop new relationships. The adolescents believed a willingness to experiment in risky behaviors such as drug use played a significant role in natural progression, and the educators felt that relational aggression was a method of testing limits and a result of hormonal changes during a transitional period in life. The educators also identified a shift in adult expectations of youth behavior as a reason bullying occurred; while brutal honesty was considered endearing in younger children, societal expectations were placed upon youth as they grew older which demanded a certain level of tact.



## **Context**

Two significant factors were identified by all of the participants as the contextual conditions under which relational aggression occurred. A lack of adult supervision created the ideal setting for bullying, such as hallway passing periods and cafeteria mealtimes. Additionally, the anonymity of many social networking sites produced a prime venue for indirect verbal relationally aggressive behaviors through cyberbullying. Both of these contextual factors were strongly correlated with the covert nature of relational aggression and the bully's efforts to avoid being identified.

Numerous participants in this study believed that the majority of relationally aggressive perpetrators did not recognize the harm they were causing to the victims. The belief in simply "having some fun" was noted as a common theme, in which teens were supposedly engaging in joking with a peer and the recipient perceived the interaction as harmful. However, it was also observed by students and educators that students knew "when" to bully; students were reportedly aware of times when adult supervision was lacking, and chose to engage in relationally aggressive interactions at that time. If the perpetrators consciously made the decision to aggress against a peer when the individual who could provide a consequence for such behavior was distracted or not present, it would indicate that the perpetrators recognized their behavior as inappropriate or hurtful in some manner. Therefore, the argument that students often do not mean to cause harm and are unaware of how their actions are being received by the intended victim is undermined.



## Phenomenon

Two aspects of the phenomenon of relational aggression were addressed in this study: definitions of relationally aggressive behaviors and the experiential component of victimization. The student and faculty participants identified direct forms of bullying, including verbal types (name-calling, teasing) and written/electronic types (cyberbullying, text messages). The students recognized direct nonverbal means of perpetration (mean glaring, pointing), which the educators did not report. Both sets of participants reported indirect forms of relational aggression, including verbal means (spreading rumors) and social manipulation (stealing friends). A ninth grade student, Kyla, reasoned, “They like showing that they have the control to change how you act around other people.” A continuous cycling between the statuses of perpetrator and victim was identified as a key component of relational aggression among adolescent girls; the unpredictable nature of who would be in the role of perpetrator or victim at any given moment seemed to be a distinct aspect of this form of bullying. As Nora, an eighth grader, shared,

It just happens all the time. It seems like with all girls, there’s always somebody that’s being picked on, and people that you used to be friends with and suddenly are not, and you don’t know why. They stop sitting with you at lunch or stop calling you, and you don’t know why.

The imbalance of power noted in traditional bullying criteria inferred that the levels of strength, whether physically, psychologically, or socially, remained relatively stable over time. However, the participants of this study recognized that the roles of victims and perpetrators continually fluctuated in relationally aggressive interactions,



which was consistent with Sullivan, Cleary, and Sullivan (2004) “chaos theory of bullying,” which posited that bullying is random and can happen to anyone at any time. It seemed that the unpredictable nature of who would be in which role at which time distinguished relational aggression from other forms of bullying, as most adolescent girls reported being in one role or the other at any given time. It seemed that this was due in part to the fact that many perpetrators were prior, present, or preferred future friends of the victim, and the concept of revenge was highly indicated once an individual reached the desired level of social acceptance, resulting in a constant underlying conflict. Furthermore, relational aggression was perceived as a way of maintaining or improving one’s social status, depending upon the social standing of the targeted victim (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Gilligan, 1982). Therefore, an imbalance of power served multiple purposes in relationally aggressive interactions; it prompted perpetration, was a goal of perpetration, and/or was the result of perpetration. This points to the need for a shift in the traditional definition of bullying when it comes to the distinct type of relational aggression.

All of the participants indicated that the experience of being victimized by peers was likely to be traumatic and have a negative emotional impact upon the victim. Additionally, victimized students were often recognized as “collateral” in another peer’s search for identity and social status; victims were viewed as simply being a means to an end. Relational aggression among teenage girls was reported to occur over an extended period of time, lasting weeks or even years; Underwood, Galen, and Paquette (2001) attributed this significant length of time to the fact that relational aggression was typically



perpetrated outside the initial awareness of the victim. The students reported that a noteworthy aspect of their experience was related to feeling distressed by the significance of the bullying interaction, as they did not want to believe a peer's words or actions could be so meaningful to them.

### **Intervening Conditions**

Two potential intervening conditions were present in this study, which resulted in four possible courses of action. First, students could choose whether or not to report being bullied to an educator. Second, faculty members may or may not recognize the bullying situation and identify the victim. All of the participants recognized the burden of proving relational aggression had occurred as a barrier to reporting, as it was difficult to prove emotional or social harm had been perpetrated. Devon, a middle school physical education teacher, expressed the challenge of such ambiguous circumstances:

I get a lot of, 'Well, they're saying this about me!' and then I go talk to them, and they say, 'Oh no, we didn't do that!' It's just kind of a she-said, she-said thing, and trying to diagnose it and investigate to figure what really happened can be a hard process sometimes.

The distinct phenomenon of a "Kid Justice System" was noted, which seemed to be an unspoken rule among adolescents favoring retaliation instead of adult intervention. Kyla, a ninth grader, expressed,

That was my main fear – if I told the principal or something, they'll get suspended and when they got back, they would try and prove to me that they're bigger and better than I am. Try and go around the authority figure and handle it themselves.

In addition, the strength of the student-teacher relationship was emphasized as a significant factor in determining whether a student chose to report being victimized or



not; adolescents who felt closer to an educator had a sense of trust in the adult's ability to help them through the issue.

The adolescents identified several other obstacles in reporting, including an implicit code of silence among youth and the fear of being negatively labeled as a "tattletale" or "person who couldn't take a joke" if that code of silence was broken. The girls also expressed considerable uncertainty regarding adult roles and related levels of authority within the school setting, and typically were unsure of who they were supposed to report to or what the specific procedures were for reporting. A fear of the adults' responses to reporting was verbalized, as many of the girls believed adults may dismiss or minimize the problem, or intervene in a way that leads the bully to seek retaliation on the victim. Furthermore, many of the girls admitted that they did not even realize the interactions they were facing could be labeled as bullying until long after the incidents occurred.

All of the participants agreed upon the signs adults should look for when attempting to identify victims of relational aggression. These warnings included significant changes in the victim's mood or behavior, such as becoming isolated or disengaged from classes, declining academic performance, crying often or showing other signs of depression, or sudden changes in the atmosphere of the room when the victim enters. The participants identified that recognition could be difficult due to the covert nature of relational aggression, and often combined with the fact that educators are fallible human beings with potential problems of their own which may distract them from



recognizing signs of victimization. Greg described this phenomenon, which the researcher labeled “Educator Fatigue”:

It’s not an easy job, being a teacher with all these kids every day. And you can get tired and you can just try to get through it. And you can teach class and not look at many people in the eye all day, you know what I mean? It happens, we’re all human...I really need to put forth that every day, find a way to have effort in the day. Teaching is very tiring, anyone could tell you that, and it’s easy to just get through the day and you won’t see a lot of things. You just have to keep your eyes open. You have to pay attention.

The act of being with adolescents for the better part of the day, five days a week, was recognized as having its emotional consequences on educators; becoming too invested in the students’ personal needs had a direct effect on the educator meeting their own needs, both personally and professionally, and the needs of other students. This seemed to result in an individual protecting themselves by disengaging from students and teaching, whether consciously arriving at this decision or not; such disengagement was reported to be a way of going through the motions of teaching without actually seeing the students or signs of potential problems.

Once again, the student-teacher relationship was reported as essential in helping adults to recognize subtle or drastic changes in the victim; the teachers acknowledged the difficulty in recognizing signs of victimization in students they did not feel connected with in some way.

### **Action/Interactional Strategies**

Two forms of action/interactional strategies investigated in this study were intervention and prevention. The students and faculty members presented the most discrepant responses from one another in regards to this component of the theory.



While some of the educators believed that consistent traditional methods of punishment, such as detention and suspension, were the most effective way of handling bullying situations, the students and half of the faculty members disagreed wholeheartedly. Traditional forms of punishment were perceived as ineffective by these participants because they did not produce a change in the bully's behavior. In fact, punishment only reinforced the concept of "getting even" as an acceptable form of problem-solving; it was simply a reactionary measure taken against perpetrators that did nothing to promote a lasting change in the bully's actions or beliefs, similar to the "Kid Justice System" identified by this research. Punishment also negatively reinforced the significance of a hierarchical structure similar to that of the social status which compelled incidents of relational aggression in the first place, which sent mixed messages to students.

The students indicated that group communication involving the victim, perpetrators, and an educator was typically ineffective, as well, because it caused embarrassment and shame for the victim; yet all of the faculty members believed this was an effective intervention and strove to improve communication between all involved parties.

Half the educators felt that nontraditional forms of consequences, such as writing a paper on bullying or discussing it with a counselor, were ineffective, while the other half of the educators and all of the students believed nontraditional consequences were the most effective method of intervention, because they promoted empathy and understanding as opposed to reactive punishment. Blanco (2008) described creative



consequences such as asking the perpetrators to perform unexpected acts of kindness for various individuals over a period of time, and recording the acts, the recipients' responses, and how the interaction made the bully feel in a journal. Blanco also suggested that bullies be encouraged to volunteer their time with individuals share similar characteristics to the peers they victimize; for example, she noted that if a bully teases overweight students, he or she should be encouraged to spend time helping teens on an eating disorders unit at the local hospital, and if a bully torments students of a lower socioeconomic status, he or she should be encouraged to serve meals at a homeless shelter.

The students indicated that confidentiality and anonymity were also vital aspects of a successful intervention, which was not reported by any of the school authorities.

In regards to common beliefs about intervention, all of the participants acknowledged that personal coping strategies, such as a strong faith or creative outlets, and a strong support system were important. It was agreed that in-depth education and training for students and educators was necessary, as well as the collective development of cultural expectations within the school setting that rejected all forms of bullying. Effective components of intervention noted by the participants included strong student-teacher relationships, faculty members taking the initiative to verbalize recognition of the problem to the victims to show concern, emphasis on student victims' input and options, encouragement in the development of new relationships for victims, and an increase in empathic understanding within all students.



The consensus regarding effective prevention strategies included enhanced awareness of relational aggression through education and training, construction of an atmosphere supporting equality and respect for differences, and empathy skill development for perpetrators. All of the adult educators who participated in this study verbally minimized any bullying they engaged in as children, chalking it up to being unaware of its effect or simply joking around. However, their guarded natures in discussing this issue as adults indicated a certain level of discomfort in self-reflecting about their own possible perpetration as youth. An effective prevention program would promote that feeling of discomfort as a preventative measure, as opposed to a self-reflective hindsight. The development of empathy among all students needs to be repeatedly promoted, role modeled, and reinforced.

The students also expressed their desire to develop assertiveness training for victims in the form of conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills, in order to build a sense of confidence and competence in the victims as a key component of prevention.

Nora, an eighth grader, described,

I want to learn how to not be afraid to say something to them. 'Cause usually you just let it go, and I just let them make fun of me. I just need somebody to tell me there's not something wrong with me, and that I'm okay – maybe I'd be able to stand up for myself then. Or if other kids saw the bullying, because they know about it more than the teachers and they know how it feels, they should stand up for each other, because usually it's the same girls who are the popular ones who like make everyone feel [bad] about themselves.

The student participants identified a category labeled the “Kid Justice System,” in which students often felt the desire to get revenge on a bully themselves as opposed to involving adults in the matter to handle it the “right” way. Casey-Cannon et al. (2001) noted that



many victims realized that retaliation was an inappropriate response, but witnessed it producing positive changes in the bully's behavior and so therefore justified its use. While revenge was not necessarily a positive step in the right direction, the initiative implied in such a desire could be guided in a positive direction; this desire to be autonomous and appear capable of resolving conflict without the assistance of an adult was identified as an aspect of adolescent development (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Effective prevention strategies should empower youth to take the initiative in solving their own problems and nurture this desire to take the reins; proper training on assertiveness and problem-solving methods to resolve peer conflicts independently of adult advice should be offered. The students in this study voiced that their only true need from adults in regards to intervention was genuine concern and empathic listening to validate their feelings about the situation; there seemed to be an underlying desire to be empowered to solve the conflict independently, as opposed to having an adult "fix" the problem for the victim.

### **Consequences**

Both the adolescent and adult participants recognized potentially severe negative effects on victims of relational aggression, especially when effective intervention strategies were not employed because the victim went unrecognized by school authority figures. Negative emotional consequences were deemed common, including clinically significant mental health diagnoses such as depression. Physical health problems ranging from stomachaches and headaches to chest pains and nausea were identified by the students. Internalized negative beliefs of self were expected as a result of bullying by all



of the participants, including feeling of worthlessness and poor self-esteem. Kyla explained the “inner war” she had experienced since being severely bullied:

It's just like a war in your head kind of, so it just keeps getting worse. You're feeling sorry for yourself and by doing that, you start getting angry at yourself for feeling sorry for yourself, because part of you is agreeing with the rest of the people. The other part's trying to defend you and make yourself feel better, and then right after you do that, you take it back, you're like, 'Oh, you're just as worthless as they say, you're not worth anything!'

A decline in academic performance was also identified, as the victims were reported to have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork due to a preoccupation with the bullying incidents. In addition, the students reported that changes in the victim's appearance and hygiene often resulted from bullying, as well as changes in behavior or avoidance tactics, even to the point of taking longer routes in the hallways to avoid perpetrators or frequent absences from school. The most severe effects noted were self-harming behaviors, such as cutting and suicide.

One of the most striking findings was that the signs observed in recognizing a victim were analogous to the effects of victimization. Signals such as a decline in academic performance and changes in mood and behavior were reported by all of the participants as methods of recognizing when a student had been victimized; however, this meant that such signs were only recognized after the damage had already been inflicted upon a victim, which seemed counterintuitive to the concept of effective intervention.



### **Implications for Schools**

The results of this study were indicative of the need for a massive change in the anti-bullying intervention and prevention methods currently utilized in most U.S. schools.

#### **Approaching the Victim**

The concept of group communication, in which the victims and perpetrators were identified and approached by an educator together, was viewed as ineffective and humiliating for the victim. The students indicated that they preferred to have an educator recognize their struggles and initiate contact with them by concretely describing the behaviors he or she was witnessing and expressing concern.

Blanco's (2008) anti-bullying program "It's NOT Just Joking Around!" (INJJA) offered these suggestions for intervention. First, adults should not tell victims to ignore the bullying because it sends a general message of ignoring problems as a coping strategy, and sets a precedent for avoidance of conflict-resolution throughout a person's life. Second, she encouraged educators to focus on the present needs and feelings of the victim; she indicated that telling the victim she will be more successful than her perpetrators a decade from now dismisses current pain, and attempting to connect with the victim by sharing one's own experiences as a youth moved the focus off of the victim and onto the educator. Blanco provided the example, "You say to the student, 'I don't know how you feel, I can't imagine what you're going through, it must be awful.' Then you sit back and listen." (p. 315). Third, Blanco (2008) and Trim (2009) emphasized the need for educators to enlist the victim's input in how the situation should be handled and find out what specific help she needs, which was supported by the findings of this study.



It seemed that in many cases, all the victim needs is someone to listen, not someone to fix the problem (Trim, 2009); the adolescents in this investigation reported a desire for their input to be solicited and valued by the educator in determining the course of action to be pursued with the bullies. By treating the victim as an important individual with unique experiences, emotions, and needs, the student is likely to feel heard, validated, and empowered to solve the conflict.

### **Confidential/Anonymous Reporting Methods**

In instances where adults did not recognize the signs of victimization, the student victims identified the need for anonymous and confidential methods of reporting bullying to school authority figures. Kristen suggested an anonymous method utilized at her school called “Text-a-Tip,” in which students could simply send a text message to phone line dedicated to preventing violence in that particular school, which was monitored by the school’s administrators. Blanco (2008) suggested additional methods that would honor the students’ privacy, including the ability to send an anonymous e-mail to the school through their website or in-school e-mail system, or creating a locked drop box in a non-populated area of the school, similar to a suggestion box, where students could voice concerns through anonymous written means of communication. The Safe2Tell program utilizes similar methods to produce safe and anonymous ways of reporting safety concerns within Colorado schools ([safe2tell.org](http://safe2tell.org)).

### **Nontraditional Consequences**

The traditional methods of punishment employed as reactionary measures were perceived as inadvertent exacerbations of the problem, and nontraditional consequences



were supported by most of the participants. Homework assignments on bullying or spending lunches with teachers or counselors discussing the effects of victimization were identified as potentially creative forms of consequence that would not result in aggravation of the issue. Blanco (2008) reiterated the concept of nontraditional forms of punishment for the perpetrators which promoted the development of empathy, such as having perpetrators volunteer their time with populations who shared similar characteristics to their chosen victims, or having the bullies perform random acts of kindness for peers and journal about the interactions so they could be discussed at a later time.

### **Preventative Measures**

More importantly, a significant increase in pre-emptive measures needed to be employed, utilizing education and various forms of skill training as a cornerstone of prevention. Possible methods of developing empathic skills were previously described in this chapter, and the second skill identified by the participants as significant was assertiveness. Teaching all students, especially those who seemed more likely to be targeted due to atypical behaviors, appearance, or background, how to engage in confident conflict-resolution and problem-solving was identified as essential (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Kenny et al., 2005; Pellegrini, 2002). Skills such as teaching youth to employ eye contact to convey a message of strength was seemingly obvious, however, it is a skill that is rarely overtly taught to children. Blanco's (2008) INJJA program encourages victims to look their perpetrator in the eye with a neutral expression that doesn't display emotion or fear, and use a strong voice to tell the perpetrator to stop their



behavior, while continuing to stare him or her down to convey the seriousness of their request. Bystanders could also be taught to be assertive, whether they directly intervened and stood up for the victim or learned ways of distracting the situation in order to allow the victim to exit safely (Reid, Monsen, & Rivers, 2004; Smith, 2004).

A preventative anti-bullying program such as this, which promotes awareness through education, and skills training in empathy and assertiveness, would likely require a great deal of resources, including finances and time. It may encounter initial resistance from various members of the school; however, it would significantly reduce the problem of bullying in the long-run, which would save tremendous amounts of time and energy that could be re-focused on academics.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The scope of this study was limited to female-on-female relational aggression during early adolescence within the academic setting. The study did not explore the phenomenon of relational aggression among a wide range of ages, geographic locations, or among both genders. Additionally, because volunteers were recruited for participation, those involved were likely interested in the topic of adolescent bullying; therefore, the perspectives of students and educators who were disinterested or skeptical of relational aggression were not represented in this study.

The findings of this study were indicative of numerous avenues for future research, including the effectiveness of the prevention and intervention strategies proposed from the results, the phenomenon of educator fatigue, relational aggression



among males, long-term effects of relational aggression on victims into adulthood, and effective strategies related to parental involvement and collaboration with the schools.

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