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Who's who in the pecking order?: Aggression and 'normal violence' in the lives of girls and boys

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WHO'S WHO IN THE PECKING ORDER? AGGRESSION AND 'NORMAL VIOLENCE' IN THE LIVES OF GIRLS AND BOYS

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Abstract

Recent research has focused on the aggression and violence experienced by young people in local schools and neighbourhoods. Self-report bullying, victimisation and offending studies have documented the pervasive nature of this violence in the lives of young people and the legitimacy that it has. This paper explores some emergent themes in this research which spans different disciplines, also drawing heavily on the findings from a small, exploratory study of girls' violence. The discussion centres on the social context of aggression and violence, the functionality of such behaviour, and its normalisation in adolescent life. The paper concludes by examining the implications of this body of work for theory, policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

During the last two decades, research conducted within different disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology and criminology, has examined the extent and nature of aggressive and violent behaviour among children and adolescents. From the literatures on peer aggression, school bullying, and within victimology and criminology, drawing on findings from victimisation and self-report offending surveys of young people, it has become evident that both boys and girls are frequently involved in incidents which would fit the definition of violent criminal offences (see for example Cairns et al. 1988; Whitney and Smith 1993; Aye Maung 1995; Graham and Bowling 1995; Kershaw et al. 2000). The hitherto neglected area of girls' violence is also now receiving research attention (see Campbell 1984, 1986; Phillips 1994; Archer 1998; Davies 1999; Batchelor, Burman and Brown 2001).

The aim of this paper is to make connections between these somewhat disparate literatures by drawing out three themes which have emerged. The first concerns the relatively high prevalence rates of violence in schools and local neighbourhoods for both boys and girls. The second theme focuses on the functions that violence serves for both girls and boys. The third considers the 'normalisation' of aspects of abuse, harassment and violence in the lives of young people. In addition to reviewing the research literature, this paper will draw heavily on a small, exploratory study of girls' aggression and violence conducted in the early 1990s. It will conclude with a consideration of the implications of this body of work for theory, policy and practice.

Aggression and violence in young people's lives

Patterns of school bullying

The large-scale pioneering research which first attempted to quantify the extent of school bullying was carried out by Scandinavian researchers using anonymous self-report questionnaires and much of the British and Irish research has followed in this tradition. Whilst this research has provided an invaluable source of information about bullying and violence in schools, comparisons across studies are rather difficult. Studies have used different methodologies, different definitions of bullying, and different recall periods. For these reasons, the prevalence rates vary greatly, although the general trend is for higher victimisation rates in primary schools than secondary schools.

One of the largest UK studies (n=6758) conducted in Sheffield, found over a quarter of junior/middle school pupils had been bullied 'sometimes' or more often in the current school term (Whitney and Smith 1993). Similarly, individual interviews with primary school children (n=2377) in Hertfordshire and North London revealed a victimisation rate of around 30 per cent of pupils who said they were victimised frequently (four or more times) in the last six months (Wolke et al. 2001). In the Sheffield secondary schools, 10 per cent of pupils experienced bullying, which included physical, verbal and exclusionary forms of bullying. In the Sheffield schools the perpetration of bullying involved half the number of victims standing at 12 per cent in primary schools and 6 per cent in secondary schools (Whitney and Smith 1993). In contrast, Glover et al.'s (2000) research

with 4700 pupils in 25 secondary schools, found that physical bullying had affected around three-quarters of pupils in the past school year, as victims and bullies.

Where there is more consensus in research findings is in the frequency with which bullying takes place in schools. Frequent and chronic bullying tends to affect a far smaller proportion of children, with rates ranging from 3 per cent to 12.5 per cent, although Wolke et al. (2001) found a quarter of primary school pupils were victimised every week or very frequently. The Sheffield study reported the repeated victimisation (bullied 'once a week' or more) of 10 per cent of pupils in junior and middle schools, dropping to 5 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls among secondary school pupils (Whitney and Smith 1993). Similarly, despite Glover et al.'s (2000) finding that the majority of secondary school pupils in their study had experienced physical bullying, this was reduced to 5% of pupils who had experienced more than seven physical bullying incidents.

The studies in Scandinavia, Britain, and Ireland have generally reported higher rates of school bullying among boys in primary and middle schools (Olweus, 1990; Chazan 1989; Stephenson and Smith 1989; O'Moore and Hillery 1989; Boulton and Underwood 1992) and in secondary schools (Siann et al. 1994; Dale 1992). However, in the Sheffield study undertaken by Whitney and Smith (1993), gender differences were not apparent in levels of victimisation, but boys were more likely than girls to be bullies. Moreover, boys were more subjected to direct bullying or open attacks, while girls were more susceptible to social isolation and exclusion from the peer group, a finding replicated in many, but not all, studies of bullying (see for example Siann et al. 1994; Stephenson and Smith

1989 cf. Boulton and Underwood 1992; Arora and Thompson 1987; Keise 1992). Glover et al. (2000), found, for example, little difference in the proportion of boys and girls who physically bullied other pupils, but they found that fewer girls than boys retaliated when they were victimised.

Victimisation and self-report offending research

Further academic and policy interest in the victimisation of young people by peers (and adults) is evidenced by the administration of large-scale surveys in the 1990s. These studies have documented a high level of harassment and assaults in public places when compared with victimisation in the adult population. Anderson et al. (1994) surveyed young people (n=892) from four areas of Scotland and found that one half of boys in the sample reported being a victim of an assault, compared with 23 per cent of girls, and almost half said that they had been 'very' or 'quite frightened' by the incident. The vast majority of assaults were committed by other young people (90 per cent of perpetrators assaulting boys and 83 per cent of those assaulting girls were aged 20 years or younger).

The Scottish survey also revealed a relatively high violent offending rate with 23 per cent of boys and 7 per cent of girls having committed a serious violent offence (mainly assaults causing injury or street fights), frequently against someone of approximately the same age. Forty-three per cent of the sample had fought in the street, compared with 7 per cent of boys and 3 per cent of girls who admitted to fighting in a national study of 14 to 25 year-olds (Graham and Bowling 1995). A more recent study by Sutherland and Shepherd (2002), of 13,970 pupils at 47 secondary schools in England, reported 14% had been in a fight in the previous year, with significantly more boys (17 per

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cent) involved in incidents than girls (12 per cent).

The first national study of victimisation among young people in England and Wales was carried out by the Home Office in 1992 as part of the fourth sweep of the British Crime Survey. Forty per cent of boys and 23% of girls reported being assaulted in the previous six to eight months, and most of the incidents involved same-age and same-sex perpetrators. Repeated victimisation was also reported amongst a majority of victims. Comparison with adults surveyed by the BCS showed higher victimisation risks for 12-15 year olds compared with older adults aged 20-59 years, with similar risks for those aged 16-19 years (Aye Maung, 1995). In 2000, the BCS reported that 3.5 per cent of the sample (aged 16 years and over) had been the victim of a common assault or wounding with, as in previous sweeps, the risks highest for men aged 16-24 years (Kershaw et al. 2000).

In a study of neighbourhood bullying in two urban localities in the East Midlands, Percy-Smith and Matthews (2001) report the victimisation of 46% of young people (aged 10-15 years) in the inner area and 27% in the suburban area where the perpetrators were other young people. The bullying involved 'barging in' (disrupting younger children's games), 'extortion', intimidation for entertainment, and name-calling.

Girls' violence

Until recently, Anne Campbell's research conducted in the UK and the US in the 1980s has been the only work which focused exclusively on aggression and violence among girls and young women, including those not officially defined as violent. In one study, for example, schoolgirls in five areas were asked to self-report their involvement in fights. Eighty-nine percent of the sample had ever been involved in a fight, most often with a female opponent (Campbell 1986).

Campbell's work on female aggression and violence has been supplemented in the 1990s. Davies' (1999) historical analysis of gang violence in late Victorian Manchester and Salford, for example, used press information and court records to demonstrate that street fights among rival gangs were far from being a male-only preserve in working-class communities. Employed working-class women who were involved in street violence were referred to in the press and by magistrates as morally deficient 'viragoes', 'vixens' and 'Amazons'. A more recent multi-method study in Scotland by Batchelor, Burman and Brown (2001) sought to explore the everyday experiences of violence in a sample of around 800 teenage girls from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. In their quantitative self-report survey, 30% of girls said that they had hit, punched or kicked someone, while 41 per cent had been victimised in this way. However, only one in ten girls were physically violent on a regular basis.

Taken together, this research shows that aggression and violence are not rare occurrences in the lives of young people, although such behaviour appears to be entrenched amongst only a small minority. Of note too is the finding that while girls appear to be less involved as victims and perpetrators of

aggression and violence, their involvement in physically aggressive behaviour seems to be rather more common than previous research would suggest. The early ethnographic research, for example, tended to focus on the violent behaviour of young men to the exclusion of young women, especially when examining physical fighting (see Patrick 1973; Corrigan 1976; Marsh, Rosser and Harré 1978; Robins and Cohen 1978).

The social context of girls' aggression and violence: an exploratory study

Informed by Campbell's work, the current study focused on examining the extent to which the use of physical aggression was a common occurrence in the lives of girls and young women, and as such was regarded as 'normal' and acceptable behaviour[1]. This is clearly of relevance for understanding more about the nature of aggression and violence within educational settings from the perspective of young people themselves, but it also provides an insight into the way girls reflect on normative gendered behaviour.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 31 young women attending a further education college in South London in the early 1990s[2]. The sample broadly reflected the racial and social class origins of the college population. The sample was predominantly white (n=27), but included two students of African-Caribbean origin, one of African origin, and one student of Bangladeshi origin.

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[1] The young women were asked about their experiences of physical, sexual and racial victimisation in the home. Under-reporting may have explained why very few respondents reported they had been victimised in these ways.

[2] Two of the interviews were conducted at a further education college in an inner London borough in East London.

The age range of the students was 16 to 22 years. The young women were predominantly lower middle-class and working-class. Because of the large catchment area of the college, some of the interviewees lived in affluent suburban areas, while others came from a neighbouring inner London borough. The young women had attended both mixed and single-sex state schools. At the time of interview, the young women were studying a wide range of academic and vocational courses.

The young women were asked to recall their secondary school and college experiences as victims, witnesses and perpetrators of aggressive and violent behaviour[3]. This self-report method is necessarily dependent on respondents' honesty and willingness to divulge sensitive and negative information about themselves and in this case, their involvement in, what might be considered to be, 'gender-inappropriate' rather than traditionally feminine behaviour [4]. As extracts from the interviews of the young women will reveal, however, engaging in physically aggressive behaviour in school was not regarded as necessarily anti-social, thus suggesting that respondents were not especially susceptible to providing socially desirable responses. Indeed, Burman, Batchelor and Brown's (2001) methodological account of researching girls' violence and abuse in Scotland, pointed to the girls challenging the researchers' preconceptions about girls' violence and aggression.

The 'pecking order'

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[3] A methodological weakness of the study was its reliance on voluntary participation. A small self-selected sample was unlikely to be representative of girls at college generally, and may have interested only those who had had a significant aggressive experience as victim or perpetrator. Further, locating the study in a further education college excluded those who had not continued their education (see also Phillips 1994).

[4] The study findings were also limited by the capacity of interviewees to remember - and avoid distorting - their recollections of violent incidents which may have occurred some years previously. However, there is some evidence to suggest that there is relative stability of recall in retrospective reports of school bullying among gay and bisexual men and women (Rivers 2001), and this may be true of heterosexual young women too.

The young women interviewed reported that school, for the most part, had been a reasonably trouble-free, and for some, an enjoyable experience. All of the young women had friends on whom they depended for social support. The majority of the young women could be said to have a 'pro-school' attitude and many aspired to professional careers. Notwithstanding the positive experiences of the young women, the interviews revealed a backdrop of aggressive behaviour in the lives of the girls at school, evidenced by the reporting of a social order of girls in school, diamond in shape with the majority of pupils falling between the two extremes. At the top of the hierarchy was the 'in-group'.

The in-group was defined as a group of girls identified as leaders with a reputation for being 'hard' (powerful, tough and aggressive) people. For the most part, the in-group established and maintained their powerful position by verbally and physically bullying other girls, by using intimidation and picking fights with girls in the lower echelons of the hierarchy[5]. A very precise definition of the hierarchy of the social order, termed a 'pecking order' was provided by one student (Darrannelle)[6]. She described how Girl A was seen as the Top Cat or Top Dog; the main 'henpecker' or leader. She could hit Girl B, C or D, but they could not 'peck' the Top Cat/Dog. Girl A had reached her position by winning more fights than girls B, C and D. Campbell's (1981) research with Borstal girls also noted a pecking order among girls in school, established by physical fighting, and Glover et al's

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[5] Even at college in-groups were in existence, although verbal aggression and intimidation were used more often than physical aggression to show who was the 'boss' of the college (see McDougall 1999 for a study of bullying at a further education college). The students also mentioned gangs outside school. These were usually mixed-sex gangs who 'ruled' local areas; effectively out-of-school 'in-groups'. The girls would usually just be involved in 'mouthing' to the girls in the other gang, criticising their territory (area), for example.

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interviews with secondary school pupils referred to 'gangs' of both 'hard' boys and girls, and pecking orders have been observed in residential settings (see for example Campbell 1986; Cawson et al. 2002).

The pecking order in school was maintained through the use of physical aggression and violence whereby physical strength and dominance were regarded as desirable qualities by many girls. Seemingly, many of the girls aspired to power, status, and reputation within social hierarchies in the same way that it has been suggested that boys, particularly working-class, boys do (Robins and Cohen 1978; Marsh, Rosser and Harré 1978; B. Campbell 1993; see also Messerschmidt 2000; Anderson et al. 1993; Canaan 1996). Indeed, one GCSE respondent actually described the in-group at her single-sex school as the 'lads of the school'.

However, it must be noted that there was not a consensus about the popularity of the girls who formed the in-group. For some respondents who were part of, or on the margins of the in-group, the in-group members were remembered as the popular and admired members of school. For others who were usually less prominent in school, the 'middlewomen' and the lowest echelon of the diamond, the in-group would be avoided wherever possible because they were viewed as trouble-makers, but they were also regarded as being somewhat pathetic and cowardly since their position relied on acting as a member of a powerful group rather than as an individual. This fits well with the findings from studies of bullying, which reveal average or above average popularity ratings of bullies by peers, teachers, and in terms of bullies' own perceptions of self-worth (Johnson and Lewis 1999;

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[6] Pseudonyms have been used to preserve anonymity.

Boulton and Smith 1994). The concept of the in-group or pecking order thus captures notions of violence and danger for outsiders, but also safety for the in-group or its supporters, as the in-group might also act as a source of protection to fend off attack.

Particularly significant, however, for conceptualising aggression amongst girls, was the finding that the use of aggression in school was not limited to the actions of the in-group, but instead tended to be rather more pervasive. The tactics used by the in-group were not their exclusive domain and they were also often used by other girls ranked in the middle of the pecking order to abuse and intimidate similarly-ranked girls or occasionally those at the bottom of the hierarchy. In the main, however, girls in the middle echelon were more likely to use aggressive behaviour in the context of disputes resulting from failed friendships.

Research on the gendered nature of school bullying has noted the way in which girls suffer when friendships break down (for example Besag 1989; Keise 1992) explained by the fact that friendship groups between girls are more close-knit and relations more intense than among boys (Meyenn 1980; Nilan 1991). Both Griffiths' (1995) and Hey's (1997) recent ethnographies of girls' friendship in school provide detailed insights into the methods that girls use to negotiate the difficult territory of social relations with other girls, and notes the fear and pain associated with upsetting friends. These close but fragile relationships may increase the potential for conflict leading to prolonged patterns of bullying and aggression (Maccoby 1986; Savin-Williams 1980; Campbell 1993; see also Burman et al. 2002).

Those on the lowest rung of the pecking order in schools were vulnerable to victimisation, particularly from the in-group. The configuration of the pecking order appeared to be similar in the schools that the interviewees attended, but differences were apparent in the basis for occupying different positions within the hierarchy. Mention was made of the pecking order being constructed along social class lines where 'posh' pupils were ranked at the bottom in one interviewee's account. In other accounts it appeared that those girls considered to be physically and emotionally immature found themselves in the lower echelons of the social order, whereas those who were more "streetwise and sophisticated", and often presenting behavioural problems for teachers, were able to occupy a higher position within the in-group. Moreover, although there was some fluidity in individual rankings within the pecking order with some renegotiation, there was a strong sense in which the girls knew their place within it.

Verbal aggression and intimidation

The young women's accounts revealed that the abuse and harassment of other pupils frequently involved the use of verbal aggression and intimidation, confirming the pattern identified in previous research on sex differences in aggression and school bullying (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974; Hyde 1984 and see earlier discussion on school bullying). Interviewees believed girls to be more 'bitchy' than boys, and that this behaviour was far more oppressive and hurtful than one-off incidents of physical violence. As one respondent, Helen, said "[a]lthough you get the physical pain when they hit you, it soon heals up and you don't get scarred. But emotional scars from bitchy fights lasts a lot longer." Bitchiness' is an all-encompassing term used to define a wide spectrum of behaviour such as name-

calling, spreading rumours and talking about people behind their backs, giving 'dirty looks' (staring aggressively), and acting to secretly exclude others from common activities. Verbal abuse, ostracism and exclusionary tactics were used as 'weapons' in several disputes between friends, involving those in the in-group and those in the middle rank of the pecking order. Batchelor, Burman and Brown's (2001) research with Scottish girls similarly emphasised the regularity and significant effects of such abuse (see also Owens, Slee and Shute 2000).

The effects of being bullied by friends or other girls in school were frequently damaging. As would be expected, fear was common as the perpetrators were often regarded as powerful individuals within school. The girls sought to avoid victimisation where possible, and this often left them no option but to miss school, sometimes at a crucial stage in their educational careers. Previous research has pointed to other harmful effects of being bullied such as low self-esteem, school absenteeism and truancy, physical illness, nervousness, impaired concentration and possible self-harm (Olweus, 1990; Sharp, 1995).

Physical aggression and violence

Eight of the 31 interviewees admitted bullying other pupils at school, and one described herself as both a victim and a bully. The methods used by these girls tended to include both verbal and physical aggression. The two extracts presented below are representative of the types of incidents involving physical force:

… it was our area, you know, we were always there, everyone would expect to see us there. Anyway, one day we were there and these girls came along and said 'Fuck off this is our area, we don't want you here', I mean we refused to move... and it just started from there, they would come round and throw things at us...and you know if they were near enough, if they could walk past us and shove us without looking really obvious they would do it… ... I suppose they felt, I don't know, they had power, they could see two people squirming at what they were doing, so that's why they did it. (Angela)

Another student, part of the in-group in her school, recalled how she and a group of friends had been responsible for bullying a girl whom they felt was too 'mouthy':

... we just surrounded her and were pushing her around... There was a few Bengali boys who backed us and just stood there so nobody else could sort of interfere or muck in and try and stop it. We weren't actually hurting her, we were pushing her around and taking her shoe, throwing it from place to place and throwing it over the road and that. We did it until we actually got her into tears and then we left her. (Rehana)

Whilst the majority of the young women interviewed, three-quarters, had witnessed fights between girls, fewer of them (just under one half) had been directly involved in a physical fight whilst at secondary school. As found in much previous research on girls' violence, it was rare for girls to use

physical violence on a regular basis, although verbal aggression and intimidation was much more commonplace in local neighbourhoods. The accounts showed that fights varied according to the level of consent and initiation involved, but they were most commonly started following derogatory comments being made about a girl, following the same pattern observed for boys and young men (see for example Polk 1994). Some fights were initiated by the respondents or engaged in enthusiastically following a challenge:

It was silly really, cos she, I wasn't in the class, but I left my bag in the classroom, she's come, like people told me that is what she done. She come in the classroom and my bag was in her way, and she said 'Who's bag is this?' and no-one answered her, so she just got it, bashed it on the side and things fell out and so she just got it picked it up and emptied it all out...I came back inside and everything was on the floor...no-one would say who it was...everyone was saying 'I'm not a grass'... the next morning everyone come up to me and said 'Don't say nothing, don't say that I said, but it was Juliet...so I just went up to her and beat her up... I punched her in the face...she hit me back and then I like punched her and she hit me and I hit her back...she was dragging me down onto the floor...People were saying that I won because when she left, like around the corner, she started crying (Karleen).

In the following account, Nicole witnessed a fight between two girls which had racial overtones:

> There was just dirty looks going around the classroom, and then Lisa started on her and called her a Big Mama and that's why they had this fight lunchtime. ...She punched her on the face, got up and just like kicked her and then walked off. She had a few like bruises, cuts on her lip, but nothing else...

Other fights were consented to reluctantly where another girl had initiated the fight. Where this occurred, the young women reported being in a quandary: not fighting would lead them to lose their credibility or even if they did not have a reputation they would come to be seen as a 'wimp'; thus they felt forced into accepting the challenge even when they knew that their opponent was 'harder' than them. Reluctant fighting to protect a reputation has been referred to in the literature on boys and young men (see for example Robins and Cohen 1978; Marsh, Rosser and Harré 1978; Messerschmidt 2000). Similar views emerged in the study of Scottish girls, where 'sticking up for yourself' was of central importance in everyday life (Batchelor, Burman and Brown 2001). As is evident in the following account given by Angela, we should not underestimate the impact of peer pressure on girls to engage in violence (see also Campbell 1990):

... we decided we were going to fight after school and then we had to walk through this alley to get home and I met her there and we had a fight. It was cold and clinical and I upset everyone because I punched her in the nose and I wasn't supposed to do that... there was a lot of blood and a lot of screaming, she was pulling my head down, I punched upwards as she was hurting my head. I remember when I was having a bath my head felt like lead, it was horrible. These Fifth Formers split us up and said 'You're not supposed to do that, you're only First Years'…I wasn't fighting for anything…I was fighting because I said I was going to (Angela).

Fighting may also result when girls judge and police the sexual behaviour of other girls, as illustrated in a fight observed by Darrannelle:

... she was in the Fourth or Fifth Year Common Room and there was a whole crowd of kids...her and another girl just grabbed hold of this girl and they started beating her up, punching her in the face...they said she went under the garages with some boys...because of that they called her a slag and started hitting her and punching her.

The functions of aggression and violence

In interpreting the narratives of the young women, the use of aggression and violence by girls can be seen to serve a function in their social worlds. Abusing other girls allowed the perpetrator to feel good, to show off how 'hard' they were, with the aim of enhancing their reputation and strengthening their position within the social hierarchy of the school. The interviews revealed too that fighting provided a means for defending or enhancing status by assuaging threats to personal integrity and image. The same finding has emerged in studies of gang violence involving young men and women, (see for example Fagan 1996; Campbell 1984; Joe Laidler and Hunt 2001), in accounts of hegemonic masculinities (for example Epstein et al. 2001; Canaan 1996), and in research on girls' and boys' violence (Campbell 1986; Anderson et al. 1994; Boulton 1993; Baskin and Sommers 1998). Batchelor, Burman and Brown (2001), for example, interviewed a minority of girls who perceived fighting to be a fundamental aspect of their self-identity with a 'hard' reputation being something to be proud of. Even for the majority who do not use physical violence with any regularity, it does seem evident that young people use physical, verbal, and psychological aggression in the process of negotiating and asserting their public identity in school and other local spaces.

Fighting appeared to serve a further purpose: it helped to release tension and frustration, a finding consistent with the early psychological research which emphasised the rational nature of aggressive behaviour as a response to a frustrating stimulus (Dollard et al. 1944). Fights were frequently considered as preferable to verbal confrontations and disputes which might brew for long periods of time. The devastating impact of verbal aggression and intimidation on the lives of girls previously referred to helps explain this finding.

Violent encounters between girls also provided entertainment both for willing participants and observers; they were perceived of as 'just a laugh', providing excitement, a 'buzz'. Fights would often pull a large crowd of spectators who would cheer and encourage the fight to continue. This was enabled by the fact that most fights were organised to take place at a time and location where detection by adults was less likely[7]. The entertainment value of violence has been noted in previous research (Fox, 1977; Campbell, 1981). The interviewees reported that boys might be particularly entertained by girls' fights and they would often 'egg on' the participants. There was even some suggestion that boys might be attracted to the tough girls who could 'handle' themselves in a fight. Notwithstanding this, more traditional views about the use of physical aggression by girls were also apparent. Some of the respondents noted that some boys and teachers found the sight of girls fighting disgusting, shocking, 'unladylike', and outrageous.

The young women's accounts also revealed the ritualistic nature of fights among girls. Ethologists such as Lorenz (1966) and Tinbergen (1964) have long since observed the ritualism of aggressive behaviour amongst animals, where pecking orders exist to contain inter- and intra-species violence. This is achieved by the use of minor fighting and submission gestures that guarantee minimal harm is incurred when there is motivation to attack. In the current research it was certainly the case that the way in which fights were organized did mean that the violence was limited. The fights were rule-governed: they were only perceived to be fair when they were one-on-one encounters, and where the

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[7] Little of girls' violence appears to come to the attention of the police. In 2000, of those offenders found guilty at court or cautioned for violence against the person offences, 14,600 (26 per cent of the total) were aged 10-17 years, and of these, only 20 per cent (n=2900) were girls (Home Office 2001).

girls used the same method of hair-pulling, scratching, kicking (a 'catfight') and/or punching, or using a weapon ('a real fight'). About one-half of the fights that the girls had were 'catfights', the remainder consisted of the girls throwing punches as well, but the use of weapons was only noted in fights that were observed, rather than directly participated in. The young women recalled that although fights might well lead to superficial injuries, such as bruised eyes or 'busted' lips, they were typically contained by bystanders, in that they would never be allowed to continue until 'serious' physical injuries occurred (see also Levine et al. 2002).

Consequently, the majority of the fights continued only until one or more of the spectators present - usually friends or family members - chose to stop the fight when they believed that the fight was becoming too violent. Two fights were also brought to an abrupt end by the intervention of teachers and the police. A further indication of the ritualistic nature of fighting was the relationships between the two girls following the fight. Many of the girls' fights were characterised by the temporary nature of the hostility. Shortly after the fight, the dispute could be forgotten and ignored in future friendships. This suggests that the use of physical aggression by girls may be viewed simply as a means for girls to confront status-threatening behaviour by others. Once this is achieved through acceptable channels, a semblance of normal social relations can be resumed.

The 'normalisation' of aggression and violence

The current research paints a picture of aggressive encounters between girls which often included physical violence set against the backdrop of a pecking order of girls. The use of physical aggression by girls was considered to be commonplace in schools and local neighbourhoods, albeit that it was rarely of a very serious nature. Perhaps more significantly, the young women's accounts, which drew on personal, direct and vicarious experiences, revealed that fighting by girls (and boys) was a regular occurrence in school, and as such, constituted 'normal' behaviour. For the most part (and I will return to this point later in the paper), the girls themselves did not appear to have been influenced by any external pressures to act in a gender-appropriate way by avoiding the use of physical aggression. There was not a widespread perception that using physical aggression was deviant; indeed, the respondents suggested that the girls who fought were admired by some girls, even idolised. Nor did it appear to be the case that those who observed fights attached any negative significance to the appropriateness of the use of physical aggression by girls.

The idea that violent behaviour has legitimacy for certain individuals is not a new one. Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967), for example, argued that a system of norms, values and attitudes was present in some lower-class subcultures which supported and advocated violence, although empirical support for the subculture of violence has been lacking (Siann 1985). A more empirically embedded account of 'everyday violence' in the lives of women and men has been presented in Betsy Stanko's work, where she argues that violence is an ordinary part of life, and as such, it is routinely managed by individuals, particularly through the use of safety precautions taken to enhance personal safety (see for example Stanko 1990; Stanko and Hobdell 1993).

Young people's conceptualisation of this 'normal violence' is a common thread running through the literatures on school bullying and victimisation. Glover et al's (2000) study of 25 secondary schools suggested that pupils absorb a culture which exists among peers; with fewer older than younger pupils indicating that they believed that there were rarely or never good reasons for fighting in school. In a similar vein, Aye Maung (1995) reported that aggressive and violent incidents involving young people aged under 16 years were typically regarded as "just something that happens, or to a lesser extent, "wrong but not a crime". Similar findings were reported in the two Scottish studies with Anderson et al. (1994: 90) noting that "[I]t is by no means an exaggeration to say that violence is an accepted part of life, for girls as well as boys.". Cullingford and Morrison's (1995) interviews with young offenders also refers to the pervasiveness of bullying and fighting in school. The general ethos of aggression was accepted as a normal aspect of school life. This perception was echoed in neighbourhood contexts in Batchelor, Burman and Brown's study, among both those who were observers of violence and those who more regularly engaged in physical violence. Similarly, the 'tyrannical spaces' inhabited by young people in two urban neighbourhoods in the East Midlands were ones in which 'acts of bullying, whether as perpetrator or victim, are not necessarily remarkable or unusual, but form an everyday part of some people's lives' (Percy-Smith and Matthews 2001: 53).

While the findings from the current research and previous studies would suggest that both boys *and* girls have normalised and routinised the use of aggression and violence, Painter (1993) draws our attention to the relatively minor nature of much violence in young people's lives. She too found that violence was an everyday phenomenon for the young people she interviewed on two housing estates in the West Midlands, but she noted that little of the violence was regarded as serious.

Moreover, in the current research it was clear from the reflections of the young women, once at college, that such aggressive behaviour, particularly bullying could be legitimised (and effectively neutralised) precisely because it was located in an earlier time period; bullying was 'a school-time thing'. However, for the young women, having to recall these incidents in the interview meant that they were forced to re-evaluate their actions. The majority now saw their victimisation of others in school as wrong and harmful. At the time they were not aware of the full impact of their own behaviour on the other person, and they were only able to define the events as for their own social benefit; that is part of 'having a laugh' or in building a 'hard' reputation in school.

Desistance and femininity

A common consensus was that fighting tended to stop in the mid- to late teenage years or on leaving school. Of the fifteen students who had been involved in a physical fight, none had fought in the previous six months whilst attending further education college. Thirteen of the respondents claimed that they had grown out of fighting, or that fighting was no longer necessary as it did not achieve a solution to a problem – a finding similarly reported in the Scottish study of girls' violence (Burman, Brown, Tisdall and Batchelor 2002). 'I think you do that sort of thing when you're fifteen', fighting

'wouldn't look good', 'it's childish', or 'it's immature' were among the comments of the interviewees. Thus, both school bullying and physical fighting were regarded as activities unworthy of more mature young women. The incongruence of maturity and perpetrating violence has been similarly noted by pupils in explaining why bullying is less prevalent among older pupils (see Thompson and Arora 1991).

This new way of thinking about the use of physical aggression may well have been related to a reduction in the impact that pressure from peers had. It can also be speculated that the young women were being socialised out of using aggression - particularly that involving physical force - as a means of solving disputes with other young people. This was articulated as being about maturing, and it is certainly likely that petty disputes or attacks on personal status or integrity would be less common as they grew older. It may also have indicated an end to adolescent risk-taking behaviour aimed at challenging authority.

It is equally possible that the young women were becoming more aware of societal pressures on them to become more passive and feminine, or alternatively to be assertive through verbal means, but without resorting to physical violence. This 'swapping' of aggression for femininity was indeed suggested by some of the respondents. It was noted, for example, that as girls got older they wanted to look attractive for boys, and it is the importance of obtaining a boyfriend which prevents them from using physical aggression. One student, for example, suggested that:

[girls] are more sensible I think. They want to keep their faces... you don't look very pretty when you are going round with a black eye, do you?... I think it is unattractive to actually be in a fight because it looks tomboyish, it probably looks a bit boyish, a bit sort of manly and ... in front of blokes girls like to be seen as, sort of like, nice pretty young ladies... (Jan)

Another student, Rehana, noted that her boyfriend had told her that he wanted to 'go out with a lady, not a bloody lunatic, hooligan, gangster'. Tentative support is found for a process, whereby approaching young adulthood, girls refrain from engaging in physical aggressive acts, as they learn that it is no longer socially acceptable for them to do this. However, it was not always easy for the young women to articulate this subtle, ongoing process of checking their own behaviour against what is seen to be 'normal', adult - that is, feminine behaviour. For the majority, this process was still ongoing at the time of the interview.

This process of 'doing gender' stands in direct contrast to our knowledge about violence by girls in US street gangs. Messerschmidt (1997), for example, argues that girls engaged in gang violence are not simply 'doing masculinity'. Rather, they are doing 'bad girl femininity' which involves nurturing a reputation for violence, street fighting, and defending the 'hood' (atypical gender practices), alongside pride in physical appearance, child care and the ability to attract male gang members (typical gender practices). Likewise, Archer (1998) draws on press and police information in discussing African Caribbean girl gangs in London, arguing that their feminine dress style and

appearance are central to their identity as female gang members. This is also evident in the work of Joe Laidler and Hunt (2001) which draws out the links between femininity, violence, and respectability in their research on ethnic gangs in San Francisco. This work highlights the negotiation of a position within gang structures which is itself constrained by patriarchal environments and structural positions in society.

In the current research, the swapping of aggression for femininity among the young women also needs to be considered alongside our understanding of desistance which comes from bullying and self-report offending research. Glover et al. (2000) report, for example, that there is a fall in reported physical bullying among girls and boys after Year 9 when pupils are aged 13-14 years, a finding which has been replicated in most studies of bullying (see Smith, Madsen and Moody 1999 for a fuller discussion of the age decline in being bullied). However, Glover et al. found that the fall in school-based bullying was associated with an increase in out-of-school incidents. Self-report studies have shown that desistance from offending may occur abruptly and consciously for young women following life events such as leaving school, home, forming stable partnerships and having children (Graham and Bowling 1995). It is conceivable that as they grew older, the young women in the current study, gained self-esteem and worth from other sources, such as personal relationships and a career, making the less constructive route of perpetrating violence unnecessary.

Implications for theory, policy and practice

Much of the masculinities literature has concerned itself with the central role of violence in the development of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell 2002 for a recent review). The body of work reviewed in this paper makes clear the need to acknowledge that violence may well serve a function in the world of young women too, and not just those officially defined as violent (Messerschmidt 1997; Joe Laidler and Hunt 2001). As Davies (1999: 87) observed in exploring gang violence involving young women in late Victorian times, they 'also featured as both perpetrators and victims in sufficient numbers to suggest at least some blurring of the association of toughness and fighting prowess with masculinity'. This chimes with one of the central tenets of this paper, evidence for which is presented from an extensive literature conducted across disciplines and tentative findings from a small-scale exploratory study. These sources have in common the finding that there is a normalised, routinised, legitimised conception and experience of violence in the lives of young people – girls and boys.

While the notion of 'normal violence' is useful for conceptualising the bullying and fighting engaged in by girls, the task of explaining the girls' 'atypical' behaviour remains. From a feminist perspective, the use of aggression by girls is more difficult to interpret (Burbank 1994). Instead, feminist scholars and practitioners have tended to conceptualise girls' and women's aggression and violence as occurring in response to their own violent and sexual victimisation (Campbell 1984, 1981; Chesney-Lind 1987; Fitzroy 2001; Baskin and Sommers 1998), avoiding discussion of women's anger and

aggression (Flax 1987; Fitzroy 2001). Criminologists too have failed to theorise women's occasional violence (Shaw 1995; Messerschmidt 1997). As Allen (1998) notes, this 'rendering them harmless' has the effect of denying women agency, prioritising pathological explanations for individual violent behaviour, and leaving unexplained and under-theorised the complexities of female violence (see also Miller 2001 in relation to girl gangs).

The findings from the current research cannot easily be conceptualised within the victim or individual pathology dichotomy. The data did not support the girls' use of aggression in response to their own victimisation. Furthermore, the commonality of aggression and violence in the girls' lives indicated more than pathological behaviour among a few, particularly since such behaviour at school was not considered socially unacceptable. This raises some important questions for a feminist analysis of girls' aggression and violence. For example, are we witnessing in the behaviour of girls at school, a transformation of traditional gender-appropriate behaviour? Campbell (1981) has suggested that social attitudes towards the behaviour of girls and women have changed in the post-war period, allowing them the freedom to behave in overtly aggressive ways. This change in attitudes has occurred because women are experiencing greater economic and social independence from men, and they are engaging with adolescent boys at a younger age where they may learn lessons on how to be aggressive. A study of Finnish girls certainly shows some support for an 'emancipation' from traditional gender roles for girls. Viemerö (1992) found that girls' attitudes towards the use of aggression changed in the 1990s to being seen in a more positive light than in

the 1980s; as in the current study, aggressive behaviour among girls was associated with being popular, dominant, and having a positive self-image.

An equally thorny issue for feminists is that much aggressive behaviour by girls serves to oppress other girls as a result of their intense competition - frequently over boys or men (see also Burbank 1987; Lees 1986, 1993). This oppression of girls by other girls is at its starkest when we consider the way in which girls censure other girls' sexual behaviour, according to sexist notions of appropriate behaviour.

However, before we embrace the notion of an emancipation from some aspects of gender-appropriate behaviour for girls and women, it is important to recognise that the research findings also indicate that girls' use of physical aggression during adolescence is a transitory experience, perhaps before social pressures to conform to traditional norms of gender-appropriate behaviour kick in. In addition, there is little statistical evidence to support a substantial increase in the involvement of women in violent crime, a probable corollary of their release from having to behave in gender-appropriate ways (Home Office 2001; Smart 1979; Carlen 1988).

The challenge for future feminist and criminological research, as Chesney-Lind (1987) observes, will be to formulate a coherent analysis of female aggression and violence which takes account of sex differences in personality, structural position, victimisation and socialisation. To this should be added an exploration of the social control and conformity of girls within school and community

settings, paying particular attention to social class and ethnicity. A comparison with those girls who

do not 'mature out' of using physical aggression and who may become enmeshed in the welfare and

criminal justice systems, as well as the timing of desistance and its relationship to maturational

processes, would contribute significantly to our understanding of the relationship between

femininity, aggression and violence. This should also enable theorising about aggression and

violence by girls without an over-reliance on explanations proposed to explain male behaviour

(White and Kowalski 1994; Fitzroy 2001; Burman, Batchelor, and Brown 2001), or on individualistic

explanations that define such behaviour as pathological (Carlen 1988; Campbell 1993), but which

can recognise the similarities and differences in male and female behaviour (Miller 2001).

Bearing in mind the rates of officially recorded violence by girls and women, and the apparent

transience of adolescent violence (at least among girls), it is clearly inappropriate to advocate or

recommend policy change based on these research findings. Indeed, vigilance is required in

documenting and challenging the increasingly oppressive policing and criminalisation of girls who

are officially defined as violent (see Worrall 2001). Nonetheless, there may be lessons for

practitioners such as teachers. The school bullying literature has drawn attention to the deleterious

effects of verbal, indirect and physical bullying on academic performance, health and well-being, and

noted the link between bullying and adult criminality. Thus, attempts to reduce school bullying must

acknowledge the ways in which girls physically and psychologically intimidate, bully and exclude

each other. Consideration will need to be given to providing support where the trigger is a

breakdown in friendship relations, as well as to increasing the resources available to girls (and boys)

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in the lowest echelon of the school pecking order, to assist them in resisting and countering

intimidation and bullying. That aggressive behaviour may be part of the maturation process and the

development of a constructive self-identity, and has a ritualistic nature which limits the harm

incurred, should not obscure the finding that aggression and violence has a taken-for-granted nature.

This must surely be a cause for concern, so that challenging the apparent legitimacy that aggression

and violence has for young people should be an overarching objective in any intervention.

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