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# ‘The power to squash people’: understanding girls’ relational aggression

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While researchers and concerned adults alike draw attention to relational aggression among girls, how this aggression is associated with girls’ agency remains a matter of debate. In this paper we explore relational aggression among girls designated by their peers as ‘popular’ in order to understand how social power constructs girls’ agency as aggression. We locate this power, hence girls’ agency, in contradictory messages about girlhood that, although ever-present ‘in girls heads,’ are typically absent in adult panic about girls’ aggression. Within peer culture, power comes from the ability to invoke the unspoken ‘rules’ that police the boundaries of acceptable femininity. We thus challenge the notion advanced by Pipher and others that girls’ empowerment entails (re)gaining an ‘authentic voice.’ In contrast, we suggest that such projects must be informed by an interrogation of how girls are positioned as speaking subjects.

## Introduction

Into the 1990s, feminist scholars tended to view girlhood as passage from childhood to womanhood, a transition that mandates passivity and compliance (see Pipher, 1994; Brumberg, 1997; Brown, 1998). Reflecting this view, the social aggression among girls that has captured recent attention remains an enigma. As a ‘dark underside of their social universe,’ Simmons (2002, p. 69) notes that day-to-day aggression among girls remains to be charted and explored. In the absence of understanding this aggression, a popularized sentiment has emerged that girls’ behaviour has now ‘caught up’ with boys, and that girls are now ‘favoured’ at the expense of boys[1] (see Griffin, 2000; Titus, 2004). We disagree with this interpretation.

In our view, the inability to understand girls’ aggression reflects a more general failure to understand girls’ agency. Concern for issues such as widespread eating

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disorders, girls' hatred of their female bodies, self-destructive behaviour and sexual exploitation has encouraged scholars to conflate girlhood with these social problems; in other words, there has been an unproblematic equation of socio-cultural issues with their embodied manifestation in the historical beings called 'girls' (de Ras & Lunenberg, 1993). While sharing concern for the kinds of problems documented by feminist research, our purpose is to move beyond an emerging dichotomy between the portrayal of girls as passive 'victims' in need of adult intervention, on the one hand, and the view that girls' aggression testifies to how they are 'empowered' beneficiaries of such interventions, on the other hand. What we want is a way to understand the complexity of how girls, as social agents, make themselves into 'women' (see Currie & Kelly, in press).

As part of that task, the purpose of this paper is to explore girls' agency in the context of growing concern over their 'antisocial' behaviour. We focus on behaviours recently named by psychologists as relational aggression that includes 'acts that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion' (Simmons, 2002, p. 21). In our work we also include indirect aggression, such as spreading a rumour, that allows the perpetrator to avoid confronting her target, and behaviour that wilfully intends to damage self-esteem or social status within a group through practices such as social exclusion. When we began we were not necessarily interested in peer-based aggression: our research explores the empowerment of adolescent girls through school culture. We initiated the fieldwork with qualitative interviews designed to sensitize us to the kinds of issues that are relevant to girls at school. We were at first surprised by stories testifying to the extent of interpersonal aggression among girls. Referred to by girls in our study as 'meanness,' we took up this category as a research problematic; that is, as an analytical puzzle that needs to be solved if we want to understand girls' lived experiences of girlhood. Our goal here is to understand 'the meaning of meanness' (Merten, 1997) for what it tells us about girls' agency and empowerment.

This paper is based on interviews with participants in a larger study, Girl Power. We thus begin with a brief description of the larger study where the socio-cultural dimensions of meanness became obvious in the case of popular girls. In this paper we explore this association of meanness with popularity in order to understand how social power constructs girls' agency as aggression. We locate this power, hence girls' agency, in contradictory messages about girlhood. Girlhood as a culturally constructed 'way of being' is regulated by conventions that girls must be pretty but not 'self absorbed' about their appearance; they must be attractive to boys but not seen to be too sexually 'forward'; they must be noticed and liked by the 'right people' but not a social climber; independent but not a 'loner'; and so on. Girls' agency therefore comes from a culturally mandated formation of girlhood that, although ever-present 'in girls heads,' is typically absent in adult panic about girls' aggression. Within peer culture, power comes from the ability to invoke the unspoken 'rules' that police the boundaries of acceptable middle-class femininity. Such a view of power thus challenges the notion advanced by Pipher (1994) and others who describe girls'

empowerment as (re)gaining an 'authentic voice.' In contrast, we suggest that such projects must be informed by an interrogation of how girls are positioned as speaking subjects.

## Girl Power: our study

The data for this paper come from a larger study, Girl Power, which investigates processes that empower (as well as disempower) girls at school. Those processes concern the kinds of developmental issues[2] that girls face during adolescence: Who am I? Who can I become? By empowerment, we refer to the ability for girls to reflect upon, as the first step in resisting, discourses that position them as subordinate gender subjects. Thus we are interested in how discourses[3]—specifically of social justice—enter into girls' lives. In this paper 'discourse' refers to both those culturally endorsed ways of talking and thinking that carry meaning beyond its immediate context and language-in-use as sustaining particularized, local meaning systems. Following Gee (2002) we do not view discourses as 'simply' systems of words, a view that can erase the social presence of human actors. Rather, we treat the discursive categories of everyday talk as embedded in social action, purpose, and meaning (Gee, 2002, p. 23). As well as being positioned in discourse, we use discourses to position ourselves and others (London Feminist Salon Collective, 2004). While beginning from girls' language-in-use we are interested in what girls' talk, hence actions, tell us about larger cultural systems of meaning.

Given our interest in girls' everyday language-in-use, semi-structured interviews were designed to encourage participants to talk about life at school 'as a girl' and about relationships among their peers. In a series of papers, we identify which discourses inform girls' expressions of self-hood and explore how these discourses orchestrate girls' everyday interactions. Because our goal is to understand how social hierarchies are reconstituted—but also resisted and subverted—we need a way of working that allows us to 'see' hierarchies in the process of being constituted. Here we found Bettie's notion of performance useful:

> As I came to understand these negotiations of class as cultural (not political) identities, it became useful to conceptualize class not only as material location, but also as performance. … To conceptualize class [and for us race and gender] in this way is not to ignore its materiality. … group categories at school require different class performances, and students engage in practices of exclusion based on authentic … performances. (2003, pp. 50–51)

For us, the notion of identities as performance (as well as expressions of social relations[4]) not only brings the body and its adornment into the analysis, it allows us to explore discursive processes as acts of self presence (that is, of accomplishing self-hood). Like Nelson (1999), however, we wanted to draw on insights from Butler (1990) in a way that does not neglect questions about agency. Nelson argues that even though our sense of self is socially constructed, this does not mean that people do not have the capacity for critical reflexivity. What we take from Butler's notion of performativity is recognition that identities are non-foundational and processual.

What we take from Nelson's critique of Butler is recognition that, however seemingly unconscious, social interaction is never unmediated by an actor's intentions.

The setting for our research is Vancouver and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. A total of 71 girls between the ages of 11 and 16 were recruited into the Girl Power project. Girls were recruited through referrals from friends and colleagues, community workers and other girls. Efforts were made to ensure a mix of participants along ethnic, racial and class lines. The schools attended by these girls also varied, although most were located in middle-class neighbourhoods. Reflecting the multi-cultural demographics of Vancouver and its surrounding environs, Caucasian students did not form the majority at all of these schools.

In this paper we draw upon a subset of 28 participants: 18 Caucasian girls, five Asian-Canadian girls and five girls of other racial or ethnic identities. Seven girls came from working-class families, while we classified 18 girls as coming from middle-class families and three from upper-middle-class families. Interviews with these girls focused on general issues such as whether or not they liked their school, their membership in peer groups, the activities which this membership endorses, what they enjoyed the most about school, and so on.[5] Most interviews were conducted with girlfriends, encouraging free-flowing dialogue.[6] During these interviews, the topic of meanness emerged spontaneously; following this lead, interviews then explored meanness in detail.

Similar to previous research, in our study meanness delineated networks and maintained boundaries among girls through discursive acts of ridicule, name-calling, backstabbing, gossip and 'the silent treatment.' We discuss these acts in detail elsewhere (see Currie & Kelly, 2006). By 'discursive' we refer to this behaviour as a process whereby the speaker(s) positions the targetted girl in a public discourse specifically designed to harm her social presence; as a discursive process, meanness has 'material' effects because it regulates membership in friendship cliques. But at the same time, meanness entails more than a regulatory practice because, as 15-year-old Emily[7] suggested, group membership at school is about 'who girls are.' In other words, the power of meanness comes from the fact that it is 'productive' as much as it is regulatory; within the school culture, the regulation of group membership 'produces' girls' social identities. The harm (and the power) of meanness as an attempt to regulate group membership comes by robbing the 'othered' of control over defining 'who she is' and 'what she is all about.'

The discursive nature of relational aggression is one reason why it is not readily visible to teachers and adults in the way that physical aggression might be.[8] It may also account for why many educators do not treat this behaviour as a 'serious' infraction (see Bright, 2005), and why a common reaction is to emphasize the need to 'resocialize' individual offenders. When girls in our study suggested that life at school is stressful, they were not referring (solely) to boys' attitudes and behaviours towards them in a way that some feminist literature might suggest (for example, Larkin, 1997). There is no reason to believe that relational aggression on the part of girls does not contribute to problems currently attributed to girls' lack of self-esteem

(see Pipher, 1994). However, this is not to claim that the problem is rooted in the behaviour of individual, aggressive girls. Rather, as sociologists we view the power of meanness as necessarily a social phenomenon.

The socio-cultural dimensions of meanness become obvious in the case of popular girls. As in previous research (see Merten, 1997; Simmons, 2002; Duncan, 2004), popularity was universally identified by the girls in our study as associated with meanness. Despite the fact that girls attended a variety of schools, popular girls were often envied as the girls 'with the power.' Somewhat paradoxically, they were also singled out as not well liked, primarily because they 'like to make fun of the unpopular people' (14-year-old Beverly). In 13-year-old Vikki's words:

> I don't like the way they lead you on. You know what I mean—like a boy does. Sometimes you think they like you, and then in the end they don't and stuff. So they lead you on in the friendship. You think they want to be your friends, but once you start getting close to them they turn away.

Given its association with meanness, rather than the nicety that accompanies being well-liked, we refer to the popularity of mean girls with capital P. Here we explore the association of meanness with Popularity in order to understand the social power of relational aggression.

Merten (1997) explores how Popular girls use covert forms of aggression to manipulate peer networks. His research (carried out in the USA) addresses the way meanness is an expression of competition:

> Both meanness and popularity had hierarchical aspects and implications. Popularity was an expression and a source of hierarchical position. Furthermore, popularity could be transformed into power, which was also hierarchical. Like popularity, meanness could also be transformed into power. Hence, power was a common denominator between popularity and meanness. (Merten, 1997, p. 188)

To Merten, meanness is 'about hierarchical position, popularity, and invulnerability' (1997, p. 188). When a desire for something highly valued (such as social power) cannot be openly expressed (due to the middle-class mandate of 'nice-ness'), alternative forms of expression are often invoked. Meanness provides a way for girls to covertly express and experience the feelings of personal power and invulnerability that make popularity so prized. In the end, he links the socio-cultural construction of meanness to a complex conjunction of fundamental, but often tacit, issues in mainstream American society (Merten, 1997, p. 189).

Merten's work encouraged us because it places girls' agency within the dynamics of school hierarchies that regulate adolescent statuses. Within this context Merten draws attention to the competitive nature of girls' behaviour. However, in his discussion Merten presupposes rather than analyses the nature of power that operates within peer cultures. In building on his work, we explore how meanness, as an exercise of power, regulates girls' social networks and how it is gendered through the heteronormative conventions of Popularity. In order to gain this understanding, data were analysed through 'symptomatic' reading of transcripts (Currie, 1999, pp. 110–111). Symptomatic reading is the result of treating data as texts: as 'texts', data are not seen

as reflections of a reality but rather as constitutive of an unstable reality, in our case about girlhood. Rather than smooth-over inconsistencies, contradictions or gaps in girls' stories in order to tell a coherent story, moments of rupture are read as symptoms of hidden process. In this paper they are read as symptoms of unspoken but ever present meanings of girlhood. We thus read moments of instability and disjuncture as signalling the contradictory nature of discourses addressing girls. In the following, we argue that evoking this unspoken but discourse is a source of power, especially for Popular girls. In conclusion, we consider the implications of such an understanding for the 'empowerment' of girls.

## Meanness and popularity

The designation of high-status peers as 'popular' is a consistent finding in adolescent research (see Merten, 1997; Simmons, 2002; White, 2002; Duncan, 2004; Milner, 2004). Girls in our study distinguished between popular kids who are well-liked—who in the words of Vikki are 'not not popular'—and 'the popular people who like go out, and they do stuff.'* Fourteen-year-old Erin called the latter kind of popularity 'the bad kind,' because it's 'like, "You don't like me" or "If you don't do this for me," then you know, "I will do this. I'm going to crush you like a bug."' In this paper Popularity refers to membership in a high-status group consisting of 'cool' kids who, in the words of Vikki, 'go out and do stuff.' According to 13-year-old GG, if you're not Popular, 'You're just one of those other people.' As already suggested by Erin, this membership does not necessarily signal being liked by peers:

> Kate: If you're popular there's so much gossiping and like backstabbing, whatever. You know, people don't like people, then those people who aren't liked don't even know it.
> Christine: It's not, sometimes like there's really nice people that are labelled popular. But like some people take it too far and like—
> Kate: They look at you.
> Christine: Yeah.
> Shauna: The popular people look at other people?
> Kate: Yeah. They look down on them as if they're not worthy of walking past them, or whatever. That's just like 'Eew.'* (15 and 16 years of age)

While Popular girls were typically described as the 'cool' kids in their school, 13-year-old Liv had a hard time telling us exactly what makes Popular girls cool:

> It's really hard to explain, but you have to be cool. And it's hard to say what cool is, but you have to like wear the right clothes and talk the right way. Popular girls have to keep up their reputations because it's like if you do even one little thing wrong, it gets talked about everywhere.* (14-year-old Vera)

This mandate could be restrictive because, according to Anna, 'You have to hang out with the right crowd every day, even though you want to hang out with somebody else' (14 years old). Even 15-year-old Brooke, a member of the Popular girls at her school, acknowledged that being labelled 'popular' was a misnomer:

> All the girls really like us. … from the outside we look like we're such [pause] like a perfect group of friends. Like so nice to everyone, and to each other. But they really don't know because they don't come out with us.

Although the girls in our study came from a broad range of schools, their descriptions of Popular girls were consistent. Popular girls had to look 'perfect': 'Like all the movie stars and stuff like that. You know, they're all like "Oh, I'm so fat" and they diet and stuff like that. And then they just get more skinny' (13-year-old Vanessa). Similarly, 15-year-old Mia maintained: 'They're tall, skinny. They tend to wear a lot of like low slung jeans, tank tops that bare their belly a lot. … Not all of them are blond but [they] all have long hair.' Thus, if a girl sought Popularity she would have to look and be a certain way. Importantly, she would have to gain boys' attention. Brooke argued that 'basically, the more guys you know, the more like popular you are.' When asked how to maintain Popularity, she replied 'Date a certain guy. Not date certain guys. Just hang out with the right people, basically.' Virtually all of the girls claimed that having attention from boys is a source of power:

> Lydia: The thing with girls, if you have a lot of guy friends, that gives you power. Like Carmel. … She's Barbie. She's ditzy blonde hair. Like she's got a really nice body.
>
> Jordan: The guys just fall for her because of her body.* (Both 14 years old)

However, despite the admitted importance of 'sex appeal,' gaining attention from boys 'the wrong way' could earn even Popular girls the label of 'slut.' The wrong way was often —but not always —through sexualized appearance rather than behaviour. Fourteen-year-old Amelia described a 'slut' at her school: 'She usually wears like these really, really short denim dresses with a denim tank top on and stuff like that, right? She wears lots of makeup and stuff. She tries to make herself pretty.' Shauna asked Amelia about trying to 'look pretty':

> I'll put like a little bit of eye shadow on and stuff like that. Like just a little bit, you can barely see. She puts on this really whole bunch of blue, and she'll put like this weird colour lipstick on, and lots of black mascara and stuff like that, right? She just looks like a slut by the way she dresses.

As suggested by Amelia, the distinction between ordinary practices of femininity and behaviour signalled by the label 'slut' appeared very arbitrary to us. While Liv described 'low cut tops as slutty,' she went on to exclaim: 'but I don't see anything wrong with showing your stomach. There's nothing revealing about it.' However imperceptible to adults, when the line between 'cool' and 'slutty' was crossed, girls could be very harsh in their judgement. Like many other girls, Amelia blamed girls rather than boys for the result:

> Amelia: She thinks she's pretty and stuff like that, right? And she'll walk past a couple of Grade 10 guys, and then she'll look back and I'll see them glancing at her and stuff like that. Or she'll stand there and she'll start talking to someone else. A whole bunch of guys will be just staring at her, right? It's disgusting.
>
> Shauna: Which part is disgusting?
>
> Amelia: Just her. The way she dresses.

As suggested here, the girl in question violated unspoken 'rules' about just how much agency girls can express in their pursuit of Popularity. It also shows how girls can use their sexuality to gain access to the Popular crowd, a tactic described by Brooke:

> Brooke: You know. Like if you're not popular, and if you're not like pretty or whatever, then uhm. Then you can find like respect in other ways. Like you can get with someone and become 'easy,' kind of. And then,
> Shauna: But is that how you get respect?
> Brooke: Uhm, I guess not. But it's a way you get, uhm, kind of known. It's a way, a back door into getting into certain groups of people. Because then, if you hang out with like a popular guy, then you'll hang out with all the guys' girlfriends.

However, getting 'in the back door' may not be as easy as it appears. Among other things, Popular girls were notorious snobs:

> Like the popular girls walking down the hall, they don't look at anyone. They don't smile at anyone. They don't say 'Hi' to anyone, for some stupid reason. … It makes other people feel like they're less of a good person, or whatever, which is just totally not true. And like, makes them feel small. … I see someone saying 'Hi' to a popular girl and they just kind of like 'Hi' and roll their eyes at them and walk away. That's mean. (14-year-old Riva)

Vikki, for example, implied that meanness is a requisite for membership in the Popular crowd: 'She [Popular girl] doesn't seem like a bully, but what I've heard, there are some things that she's done that are really nasty. So a lot of people are scared of her. So she's like on top of the Popular people.'* This behaviour made girls claim that Popular girls feel that they are better than other kids:

> You just feel sort of immoral [with the Popular kids]. Like [they feel] superior than you sometimes because they have that power. They feel that they can do whatever they want, and say whatever they want. So you kind of feel like you're sort of– like you want to be part of the conversation, but you don't want to let yourself out totally in case you do something stupid, or say something stupid. You know, embarrass yourself. (Vanessa)

Given so many negative descriptions of Popular girls, we were curious about how they maintained their high status. Part of the answer lies in the fact that they were not often challenged by other kids. Being associated with Popular kids has 'benefits' among peers. For example, although she 'didn't know why,' Riva explained that 'When like one of my popular friends or whatever is paying me a lot of attention in front of a lot of people, you feel important.' Given these types of benefits, many girls aspired to be among the Populars. Onyx and Grover (14 and 15 years old) referred to these girls as 'wannabes.' However, whether a 'wannabe' Popular or not, many girls simply did not want to become enemies of Popular girls because, in the words of Kate, Popular girls 'have power to squash people because they have support.' At the same time, some girls claimed that the kinds of behaviours described to us as 'meanness' increase girls' attractiveness to boys.[9] Thus it is understandable that some girls admitted 'going along' with the behaviour of Popular girls, even though they might disapprove of meanness.

In summary, we are not claiming that Popular girls are necessarily mean, or that meanness is a behaviour associated exclusively with Popular girls. Our goal is to

understand how meanness, as an individual behaviour, is gendered through the larger context of youth culture. Within this context, Popular girls, who have high status within school cultures, embody what Connell (1987) calls 'emphasized femininity.' As a result of their status, Popular girls are both envied and feared by other girls (but in some cases also despised; see Currie *et al.*, 2006). In this paper we have seen that their power comes from their ability to command large audiences, hence to influence how individual girls are positioned within the public discourse of school culture. This culture determines girls' social currency according to whether a girl is pretty, whether or not she is fat, and whether her sexualized self-presentations are 'slutty,' determinations that are in the hands of her peers. Even Popular girls who approximated ideal femininity could become the subject of labelling and gossip, testifying to the way in which power does not lie in the hands of individual girls themselves, despite appearances to the contrary. In the concluding section, we explore how girls' aggression is constituted through the norms of an idealized femininity and what this tells us about girls' agency and the potential for their empowerment.

## Understanding power as aggression

The purpose of this paper has been to explore girls' relational aggression within its context of everyday life at school. In doing so, we emphasize the social dynamics of what the girls in our study called 'meanness.' What we can see is that meanness operates within a context that valorizes what Connell (1987) calls an 'emphasized femininity.' As a culturally dominant way to 'do' girlhood, 'emphasized femininity' mandates that girls be pretty, it warns them of the dangers of being 'fat,' and encourages them to behave in ways that win male attention. In our study, girls who were designated as 'Popular' by their peers performed gender in this way.[10] As a metaphor, 'Popular' signals membership in the prized—and well-guarded—clique of an idealized femininity. As summarized by Liv:

> It's the clothes that they wear [Popular girls] and their personality [that makes them Popular]. [But] Like if they're not—if they don't go out with anybody or, if they don't want to go out with guys yet, then they're not considered 'cool.'

Based on the evaluation of others, accomplishing this femininity is neither automatic nor secure, no matter how pretty or sexually attractive a girl might be; girls' bodies and self-presentations are under constant assessment by peers (as well as adults). It should not be surprising that girls themselves engage in this surveillance in order to identify the latest trends, assess each other's weight and monitor the reactions of boys to their sexualized self-presentations. One problem is that this surveillance operates through a series of ever-present but silent double standards: as our research along with others shows, girlhood as a culturally constructed 'way of being' is regulated by conventions that girls must be pretty but not 'self absorbed' about their appearance; they must be attractive to boys but not seen to be too sexually 'forward'; they must be noticed and liked by the 'right people' but not a social climber; independent but not a 'loner'; and so on. Fine (1988) draws attention to this

kind of cultural duplicity as reflecting a 'missing discourse' in adult talk about girls' behaviour. She points out that while it may indeed be girls who police the boundaries of femininity through public gossip about girls' looks and sexual agency, they do so through a 'male gaze.' Boys do not need to be physically present to influence girls' behaviour; they simply need to be present 'in girls' heads' (Holland *et al*. 1991; Hey, 1997). Within this context, girls' meanness is symptomatic; that is, it tells us as much about dominant culture as it does about individual girls.

For the large part, girls themselves are consciously aware of the unspoken rules of proper femininity. However, although consciously critical of the mandate to look pretty and to be skinny, girls are well aware that 'good looks' are important for women (see Weitz, 2001). At the same time, however, even as female heterosexuality is social capital, girls' sexuality is publicly denied or problematized. Because male sexuality, on the other hand, is culturally defined as natural, urgent and difficult to control, women are given responsibility for the effect of their sexualized body on others (see Allen, 2004). Thus girls who wish to attract boys' attention but avoid the consequences of being labelled 'slut' must monitor boys' behaviour while denying their own sexual desire. This need for women to navigate between the positions of sexual object and sexual subject is an especially powerful influence for adolescent girls:

> … the cultural and legal sanctions on teenage girls' sexuality convey a simple message: good girls are not sexual; girls who are sexual are either (1) bad girls, if they have been active, desiring sexual agents or (2) good girls, who have been passively victimized by boys' raging hormones. (Tolman & Higgins 1996, p. 206)

Much of the cultural anxiety surrounding the threat of unregulated female sexuality manifests itself in the mandate for girls to manage their bodies in ways that bound sexuality to not simply gender, but also class and race.[11] For example, it has been shown that because idealized femininity is based on white middle-class ideals, working-class girls and girls of colour are particularly susceptible to sexually demeaning labels (Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Hurtado, 2003). As Harris (1999) notes, all girls are instructed to properly monitor their sexed bodies and the reproductive functioning of these bodies. They must take responsibility for not only what parts of their bodies can or cannot be seen, but for the effects of the sexual meaning of their bodies on others (Harris, 1999, p. 116). One problem, noted by the girls in Hudson's (1984, p. 31) study, is that 'Whatever we do it's always wrong.' Within this context, the disapproval of peers is a powerful sanction: the double standard of sexual behaviour does not regulate 'simply' girls relationships with boys, it can act to also regulate girls' relations with one another as girls are incited to define themselves against what they are not—the 'school slut' (see White, 2002).

Pipher (1994) claims that the kind of duplicity that accompanies these contradictory messages silences girls because they must:

> put their authentic selves aside in order to become what our culture values in women. Girls are trained to be what the culture wants of its young women, not what they themselves want to become. … Everywhere girls are encouraged to sacrifice their true selves. (p. 4)

Because Pipher thus equates girls' transition to womanhood with loss of self, her work has inspired a search for the 'lost' voice of girls, a search that endorses the notion that, through re-discovery of an authentic self-hood, girls themselves will reclaim a 'real' girlhood. Reflecting this view, many projects for girls' empowerment emphasize giving girls 'a voice.' As shown by our research, however, empowering individual girls to find their 'voice' may not be liberatory in the ways Pipher implies; in fact, personal empowerment as the response to girls' silencing can reinforce conventional gender scripts (see Agrell, 2005). What this approach neglects are the socio-cultural conditions under which girls become speaking subjects. Although we do not disagree that individual girls can benefit from projects that empower them to speak 'as girls,' our task as researchers is to understand how speaking 'as girls' is possible. Interpreting girls' aggressive behaviour as a failure to adopt the middle-class imperative of the 'good girl' can reinforce misogynist thinking about women's behaviour and limit our understanding of girls' agency. For us, the complexity of girls' agency, hence of projects for girls' empowerment, lies in the fact that girls' agency comes through a socially constructed girlhood whose formation is embedded in precisely what projects of empowerment must encourage girls to challenge: hidden standards—both class-based and heterosexist—that are constitutive of gendered self-hoods for girls. What girls learn as a consequence is that although female sexuality can be a source of personal power, 'good' girls do not gain power by acting as sexual agents. In fact, sexual agency can earn girls social censure: girls learn to 'look at' rather than experience themselves as sexual beings (Tolman, 1994; Allen, 2004). Within this context, power comes from an ability to invoke the unspoken 'rules' that police the boundaries of acceptable middle-class femininity.

In sum, girls' aggressive behaviour testifies to the ways in which youth culture, although an (semi)autonomous sphere of adolescent agency, is marked by a heterosexist gender hierarchy and the sexual competition of mainstream culture. As Bettis and Adams (2003) point out, lacking economic or political power in the school setting, the one kind of power adolescents do possess is the ability to create peer status groups. It is therefore 'not accidental that teenagers come to be obsessed with status systems' (Bettis & Adams, 2003, p. 129). However, as Merten (1997) notes, by sustaining a discourse of meritocracy school curriculum does not allow gendered hierarchies to be explicitly recognized because such an acknowledgment would contradict broader educational messages about 'equality.'[12] To be sure, recognizing how social hierarchies are implicated in girls' aggression complicates our understanding of girls' agency, hence our notions of 'empowerment.' We take up these challenges elsewhere. Here we suggest that because the role of aggression is constitutive, rather than maladaptive, of dominant culture, dealing with girls' relational aggression is more complex than many adults might like to admit.

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## Girls quoted

| | |
|---|---|
| Amelia: | 14 years old, White from working-class family; claims she belongs to the unpopular group at school. |
| Anna: | 14 years old, Filipina from working-class family; lives with mom, dad and brother. |
| Brooke: | 15 years old, White from an upper-middle-class family; lives with mom and dad; belongs to the Popular girls in her large, middle-class school. |
| Beverly: | 14 years old, Chinese-Canadian, came from Hong Kong when she was 10 years old; from a working-class family; lives with mom, dad and older brother. |
| Christine: | 16 years old; White from a middle-class family; into skateboarding, snowboarding, biking and surfing. |
| Emily: | 15 years old; White from middle-class family. |
| Erin: | 14 years old; White from a middle-class family but parents are going through a divorce. |
| GG: | otherwise called herself 'Ghetto Girl'; 13 years old; White from a middle-class family. |
| Grover: | 15 years old, Latina, from a middle-class family; attends a Catholic, co-ed school. |
| Jordan: | 14 years old; White from a middle-class family. |
| Kate: | 15 years old; White from a working-class family; lives with mom and step-dad. |
| Liv: | 13 years old; White from a working-class family but parents divorced; has been suspended from school for fighting. |
| Lydia: | 14 years old; White from a middle-class family. |
| Mia: | 15 years old; (half) Chinese-Canadian, from a middle-class family. |
| Onyx: | 14 years old, Chinese-Canadian, from a middle-class family; her friends call her 'the seducer.' |
| Riva: | 14 years old; Persian from upper-middle-class family. |
| Vanessa: | 13 years old; White from a working-class family; into computers; plays sports and likes pool. |
| Vera: | 14 years old, Chinese-Canadian from working-class family; lives with mom, dad, sister, brother and grandparents; into computers as 'anime freak.' |
| Vikki: | 13 years old; White from a middle-class family. |

## Notes

1. Some commentaries blame the Women's Movement because it has promoted the empowerment of girls. According to journalist Patricia Pearson, for example, thanks to feminism, in resisting sexism, girls have 'gotten hip' to their capacity for violence. Thus Pearson warns that women's equality comes at a price: 'We cannot insist on the strength and competence of women … yet continue to exonerate ourselves from the consequence of power by arguing that, where the course of it runs more darkly, we are actually powerless' (1997, p. 32; also see Agrell, 2005).

2. We do not subscribe to the view of inherent 'stages' of socio-psychological maturation; rather, we see what have become designated as 'developmental' tasks by psychologists as historically and culturally specific constructions of 'personhood.'
3. Our focus on discourse reflects our interest, as educators, in school curriculum as among the discourses that shape young people's sense of themselves and who they can become.
4. In other words, although 'race, class and gender' as theoretical constructs inform our thinking, we do not treat these categories as already in existence (see Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999).
5. In early stages of fieldwork we did not employ recruitment criteria, apart from willingness to talk to researchers and parental/guardian consent. As themes emerged that resonated with our interest in girls' agency, we targetted girls who participated in activities such as skateboarding, making web pages, role-playing on the Internet, and so on. The sample of 71 thus consists of about four samples clustered by activity interests.
6. Interviews conducted with pairs (and in rare cases trios) of friends are signalled with an asterisk (*). Shauna conducted most of the interviews for the Girl Power project.
7. In this paper we use pseudonyms chosen by the girls. While we recognize that their age, class and other 'identity categories' are sociologically important, because we do not employ them in the analysis presented here we include descriptions of the girls at the end of the text rather than put them in the main body of the text.
8. As Hey (1997) notes adults can be reluctant to interfere because girls' 'conflicts' are seen as belonging to the 'private' sphere of 'friendships.'
9. A number of Hollywood blockbusters have featured mean yet Popular girls who rule their schools and are highly desired by boys: *Mean Girls* (2004, based on the best-selling book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman) and *She's All That* (1999). An earlier generation of such movies includes *Clueless* (1995) and *Heathers* (1989).
10. These girls were not necessarily well-liked by their peers. Thus to be 'Popular' is a figure of speech, referring to the way that Popular girls always had a following of 'wannabes.'
11. Other researchers have found that sexual imagery among girls is racialized and classed (see Hey, 1997, p. 70; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001; Hurtado, 2003). Visible minority girls and working-class girls, for example, have been found to be frequent targets of sexually demeaning labels. These associations were not apparent in our study. What we did find is that 'Popular' girls were not always White or middle class; in other words, although the femininity that could earn girls high status in our study is racialized and classed, it was uncritically accepted by many (but not all) girls as an ideal.
12. Despite our argument that the school is a context within which inequalities are reconstituted, we acknowledge that schools are among the institutions committed to gender equality (see, for example, Tyack & Hansot, 1988, 1990). Nevertheless, a gap exists in the school setting (as elsewhere) between the rhetoric that girls, like boys, can do and be anything and the everyday reality that girls, much more so than boys, are judged based on their looks and vulnerable to attacks on their social worth through sexually demeaning labels. Exposing this gap might allow youth space to challenge the kinds of 'missing discourses' that shape young people's talk and to recognize the multiple discourses that shape their gendered identities. More specifically, teachers and other adults need to give young people a language to name the emphasized femininity that provides currency in the gendered economy where meanness plays out in order to criticize it (along with 'hegemonic masculinity'; Connell, 1995), and provide support for other ways of being girls and boys.

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