

## THE COOP BOOKSHOP DIALOGICA AWARDS 2004

These awards, held across Australia and New Zealand, were aimed at encouraging excellence in scholarly writing for an educated lay audience. This paper, by Prof. Rosalyn Shute, won second prize.

### **GIRLS' RELATIONSHIPS: THE GOOD NEWS OR THE BAD?**

**“Girls beat boys with silent bully tactics.”**<sup>1</sup> Such headlines, appearing over the past decade, reflect an unprecedented public interest in girls' relationships – an interest sparked by psychological research focusing on the negative aspects of female relationships. Spreading rumours and even giving dirty looks are behaviours now classified as forms of aggression. Various known as indirect, relational, or social aggression, this type of behaviour is often covert and is aimed at damaging the victim's social relationships. It has been shown in numerous, though not all, studies, to be more typical of girls than boys.<sup>2 3 4</sup> This recent research trend contrasts with both a past assumption of the cooperative nature of female relationships and a long-standing emphasis upon male relationships as overtly competitive and aggressive in nature.

Models of female behaviour in child psychology are often derived from a two-cultures perspective, whereby boys and girls are seen as occupying different social spheres and expressing different concerns and behaviours.<sup>5</sup> Such male-female differences are seen by evolutionary psychologists as arising from the natural selection

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<sup>1</sup> Messina, A. (1995). Girls beat boys with silent bully tactics. *Melbourne Age*, 19<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Crick, N.R., & Bigbee, M.A. (1998). Relational and overt forms of peer victimization: A multiinformant approach. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66 337-347.

<sup>3</sup> Lagerspetz, K.M.J., Bjorkqvist, K., & Peltonen, T. (1988). Is indirect aggression typical of females? Gender differences in aggressiveness in 11- 12 year old children. *Aggressive Behavior*, 14, 403-414.

<sup>4</sup> Owens, L. (1996). Sticks and stones and sugar and spice: Girls' and boys' aggression in schools. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 6, 45-55.

<sup>5</sup> Maltz, D., & Borker, R. (1982). A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication. In J.J. Gumperz (ed.), *Language and social identity*, pp. 195-216. Cambridge: CUP.

of different reproductive strategies.<sup>6</sup> Cultural explanations are favoured by others, especially feminist scholars, some of whom take very strong issue with evolutionary interpretations of observed sex differences in behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Despite coming from such different theoretical viewpoints, many evolutionists and feminists previously agreed that female relationships are basically cooperative, in contrast to the competitive, hierarchical nature of male relationships. Many feminists, regardless of the supposed origin of this difference, see female care and cooperation as something to be valued. Those writing from an evolutionary perspective, however, often maintain that their concern is with scientific facts (what “is”), which should be considered independently from political considerations (what “ought to be”).<sup>8</sup>

Until relatively recently, then, from neither of these perspectives was there much impetus for psychologists to consider female aggression. Anthropological literature was similarly dismissive of female aggression as behaviour not worth theorising about.<sup>9</sup> Carol Gilligan’s well-known work on moral development<sup>10</sup> was especially influential in promoting the notion that females are basically care-oriented. This view becomes less tenable, though, when we study children’s actual behaviour rather than their moral reasoning ability.<sup>11</sup> Recent studies have forced consideration of the possibility that girls may be more aggressive and competitive, and thus more similar to boys, than was once assumed.

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<sup>6</sup> Geary, D.C., & Bjorklund, D.F. (2000). Evolutionary developmental psychology. *Child Development*, 71 (1), 57-65.

<sup>7</sup> Connell, S.E. (2003). Feminism and evolutionary psychology. Available at <http://orlando.women.it/cyberarchive/files/elliott.htm> 22/05/03

<sup>8</sup> Archer, J. (2001). Evolving theories of behaviour. *The Psychologist*, 14 (8), 414-419.

<sup>9</sup> Goodwin, M.H. (2002). Exclusion in girls’ peer groups: Ethnographic analysis of language practices on the playground. *Human Development*, 45, 392-415.

<sup>10</sup> Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women’s development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Goodwin, M.H. (2002). Exclusion in girls’ peer groups: Ethnographic analysis of language practices on the playground. *Human Development*, 45, 392-415.

Since reports of girls' aggressive behaviour styles first began to appear, the literature has mushroomed, and this new perspective is being incorporated into existing theoretical frameworks in various ways. In contrast to the traditional evolutionary perspective that young females develop cooperative networks in order to provide social support for later mothering activities, some evolutionary developmental psychologists have proposed that aggression between teenage girls may be characterised in terms of reproductive competition (seeking to undermine the supportive networks of other girls).<sup>12</sup> Reproductive competition (over "cute guys") has in fact been shown to be one trigger for indirect aggression between teenage girls.<sup>13</sup> A major criticism of such explanations is that the evolutionary story can always be changed post hoc to fit new findings<sup>14</sup> and is merely old stereotyping repackaged as new insights.<sup>15</sup> In countering this argument, evolutionary psychologists now cite "surprising" findings about sex differences in support of their approach.<sup>16</sup>

As well as obliging evolutionary psychologists to consider new perspectives, findings about female aggression present a problem for some feminists - those who value male-female differences (cultural or maximalist feminists) - although not for liberal (or minimalist) feminists, who maintain that boys and girls would behave the same given identical experiences and opportunities. Nor does girls' aggression necessarily pose a problem for those who see it as a sign of females' power, and thus a counter-force to a tendency to perceive women as innocent, acted-upon beings."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Geary, D.C., & Bjorklund, D.F. (2000). Evolutionary developmental psychology. *Child Development, 71* (1), 57-65.

<sup>13</sup> Owens, L., Shute, R., & Slee, P. (2001). "Guess what I just heard...": Indirect aggression among teenage girls in Australia. *Aggressive Behavior, 26*, 67-83.

<sup>14</sup> Connell, S.E. (2003). Feminism and evolutionary psychology. Available at <http://orlando.women.it/cyberarchive/files/elliott.htm> 22/05/03

<sup>15</sup> Segal, L. (2001). Main agendas and hidden agendas. *The Psychologist, 14* (8), 422-423.

<sup>16</sup> Ketelaar, T., & Ellis, B.J. (2000). Are evolutionary explanations unfalsifiable? Evolutionary psychology and the Lakatosian philosophy of science. *Psychological Inquiry 11* (1), 1-21.

<sup>17</sup> Goodwin, M.H. (2002). Exclusion in girls' peer groups: Ethnographic analysis of language

As these complex issues play out in the scholarly literature, it is interesting to consider how they are making their way into the public eye. A decade ago, Martyn Lewis, a BBC television news presenter, observed the existence of a “journalistic hunger for conflict.”<sup>18</sup> The media scene was set, therefore, for this hunger to be fed with emerging stories of girls’ conflict. Findings which suggest that girls are “as bad as boys” after all (as aggressive as boys, but doing it differently) or “as bad as we always knew they were” (gossiping and bitching about each other) are eagerly taken up by the media. For example, one psychologist’s finding that, in Australian high schools, teenage girls outstrip teenage boys in use of social aggression<sup>19</sup> spawned newspaper and television stories pronouncing girls as the “real” school bullies (although the researcher never used the word “bully” in his work, found boys at most ages to be the more physically and verbally aggressive, and found no gender differences in social aggression in primary school years). Triggered by the publication of a book on girls’ aggression,<sup>20</sup> two Oprah Winfrey shows have portrayed schoolgirls’ friendships as shallow, vicious and competitive. Another newly-released book is entitled *Catfight: Why women compete with each other*.<sup>21</sup> Suddenly, our care-oriented, cooperative females are being publicly portrayed as bitches from hell!

This reflects another observation by Martyn Lewis, that journalists have a gut instinct to present arguments in black and white terms, which distorts issues that are in reality shades of grey.<sup>22</sup> Many of us, as academics, have had the experience whereby the well-balanced story we presented to a journalist has become sensationalised and

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practices on the playground. *Human Development*, 45, 392-415.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, M. (1994). Good news, bad news. *The Psychologist*, April 1994, p. 157-159. p.158.

<sup>19</sup> Owens, L. (1996). Sticks and stones and sugar and spice: Girls’ and boys’ aggression in schools. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 6, 45-55.

<sup>20</sup> Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. New York: Harcourt.

<sup>21</sup> Tanenbaum, L. (2003). *Catfight: Why women compete with each other*. Finch.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, M. (1994). Good news, bad news. *The Psychologist*, April 1994, p. 157-159.

distorted in the interests of a “good story.” We can justly berate the media for this, but perhaps we should also consider whether there is a need for us to keep our own house in order. Some psychologists, for example (including the aptly-named Jeffrey Gray<sup>23</sup>) have criticised their own field for its love of dichotomies. In developmental psychology, theoretical argument has often centred upon black and white divisions such as nature vs nurture, continuity of development vs stages of development and so forth.<sup>24</sup> Such dichotomies are becoming fuzzier as theorising becomes more sophisticated and more reflective of the true complexity of development.<sup>25</sup> The possibility that girls’ and boys’ worlds may be less different than supposed, and that girls (and boys) are capable of *both* aggression and caring under certain circumstances exemplifies such complexity.

This raises the question of whether researchers have a duty to attempt to convey such complexity to the public. This is an aspect of an even broader issue as to whether, as researchers, we have *any* responsibility for how our research is portrayed. This has again been a matter of fierce debate between some feminists and evolutionary psychologists. While evolutionists may argue that their concern is with carefully-explained scientific facts, postmodern scholars believe that it is disingenuous to maintain that it is possible to present facts separately from their political ramifications, and that we have a duty to consider the likely impact of our research upon public perceptions. This issue has been hotly debated in the scientific literature in relation to physical aggression between male and female intimate partners.<sup>26 27 28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gray, J. A. (1985). A whole and its parts: Behaviour, the brain, cognition and emotion. *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society*, 38, 99-112.

<sup>24</sup> Scholnik, (2000). Scholnik, E.K. (2000). Engendering development: Metaphors of change. In: P.H. Miller and E.K. Scholnik (Eds), *Toward a feminist developmental psychology*. New York: Routledge, 29-42.

<sup>25</sup> Slee, P., & Shute, R. (2003). *Child development: Thinking about theories*. London: Arnold. p. 165-183

<sup>26</sup> Archer, J. (2000a). Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126 (5), 651-680.

<sup>27</sup> Archer, J. (2000b). Sex differences in physical aggression to partners: A reply to Frieze (2000), O’Leary (2000), and White, Smith, Koss & Figuerdo (2000).

To return to the specific question of the presentation and interpretation of research findings in dichotomous terms, we can understand that this might meet a public preference: cognitive psychology tells us that such simple conceptualisations of the world are easier to understand, remember and use to interpret our experiences, even if they are inaccurate.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, stories that focus solely on the conflictual aspects of relationships may be perceived as more saleable than those about cooperation or those that present a balanced picture. Nevertheless, the question can be raised as to whether researchers have any responsibility for at least attempting to not pander to these tendencies. We might want to consider whether presenting our research in terms that portray bitchy girls, without also mentioning, for example, that boys gossip too, or that girls are good at patching up quarrels, could contribute to gender stereotyping, prejudice and other such behaviours that psychologists have studied over the years, often motivated not just by scientific interest, but by a concern with social justice. The developmental psychologist Horowitz has proposed that we should not buy into the provision of simple answers to the person-in-the-street, and that “the social impact of *our* facts and their interpretation is something we *must* care about.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, a recent directive from the American Association for the Advancement of Science concerns the obligation of social scientists to consider the policy implications of their work and to strive to present findings in a way that maximises their chances of being correctly understood and applied.<sup>31</sup>

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*Psychological Bulletin*, 126 (5), 697-702.

<sup>28</sup> White, J.W., Smith, P.H., Koss, M.P., & Figuerdo, A.J. (2000). Intimate partner aggression – What have we learned?: Comment on Archer (2000). *Psychological Bulletin*, 126 (5), 690-696.

<sup>29</sup> Scholnik, E.K., & Miller, P.H. (2000). Engendering development: Developing feminism. In: P.H. Miller and E.K. Scholnik (Eds), *Toward a feminist developmental psychology*. New York: Routledge, 241-254.

<sup>30</sup> Horowitz, F.D. (2000). Child development and the PITS: Simple questions, complex answers, and developmental theory. *Child Development*, 71 (1), 1-10.

<sup>31</sup> White, J.W., Smith, P.H., Koss, M.P., & Figuerdo, A.J. (2000). Intimate partner aggression – What have we learned?: Comment on Archer (2000). *Psychological Bulletin*, 126 (5),

Let us return at this point to journalist Martyn Lewis' article, in which he argues that news stories should not only be commissioned on the basis of criteria such as violence, conflict and disaster, but on positive criteria. He does not mean by this that we should be exposed to an increase in trivial good news stories and sanitisation of negative events, but that there is a moral imperative for the media to give due weight to stories about achievements and successes which have shaped or changed the world (or have the potential to do so). An analogous argument has been made in recent years by the U.S. psychologist Martin Seligman. He has pointed out the partiality of psychology to focus upon problems and psychopathology rather than strengths and resilience, and has put a case for a counterbalancing "positive psychology."<sup>32</sup> Even if we accept the feminist argument that there is a positive side to the recognition of girls' aggression (in terms of destroying passive females stereotypes), we may still feel concern that girls' relationships are now receiving lop-sided, even misogynous, media coverage. This contrasts sharply with a lack of media comment on the fact that most of the violence they report is perpetrated by males.

If we accept that we do have some responsibility for how our research is portrayed, is there anything we can do about this? Perhaps we could ensure that in the newly-discovered rush to study girls' aggression we do not neglect positive aspects of girls' relationships, such as empathy, cooperation, provision of social support and conflict resolution. We could ensure that we study expressions of these behaviours in boys as well as girls. We might consider how far a "two-cultures" perspective is justified in studying boys' and girls' development. Do we sometimes overlook similarities - for example, boys as well as girls are very hurt by exclusionary practices<sup>33</sup> - because a

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690-696.

<sup>32</sup> Seligman, 1998 Seligman, M. (1998). Building human strength: Psychology's forgotten mission. *APA Monitor*, 29 (1), available 22/05/03 at <http://www.apa.org/monitor/jan98/pres.htm>

<sup>33</sup> Mynard, H., Joseph, S., & Alexander, J. (2000). Peer victimisation and posttraumatic stress in

“Mars vs Venus” story seems more saleable to journal editors and conference convenors as well as the public? Indeed, research findings of “no sex difference” seem sometimes to disappoint journal reviewers, as though we could have found a difference if we had only tried harder.

As researchers, we might consider these issues in the topics we select for study, the participants and variables we select, the titles we choose for our articles and the summaries we write. We could consider carefully what spin a journalist might try to put on our story and be ready to counteract it (a tough one, this, and an aspect in which we may often not succeed). As Martyn Lewis explained in his proposal that there should be more positive media stories, this approach does not mean sanitisation. It is vitally important, for example, that girls’ social aggression is better understood so that we can attempt to address its damaging ramifications such as loneliness and suicidality.<sup>34</sup> What we might suggest, though, is a definite striving to achieve a better balance overall.

So far the media do not seem to have adopted Lewis’ proposal, with the exception of a local newspaper he cited which *increased* its circulation after introducing more positive news coverage. Do you, like me, sometimes feel profoundly depressed after listening to the latest news bulletin, with its stories of terrorist threats, wars, murders, political wranglings and spectacularly destructive fires and wonder whether there is *anything* positive happening in the world? Is this biased coverage distorting our worldview? Can we do something about it? Can we, whether academics, journalists or consumers of the media, try to ensure that the good news is not neglected in the wake of our proper concern with the bad?

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adolescents. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 29, 815-821.

<sup>34</sup> Owens, L., Slee, P., & Shute, R. (2001). Victimization among teenage girls: What can be done about indirect harassment? In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (eds), pp. 215-241). *School-based peer harassment: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized*. New York: Guilford Press.

