

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology

Psychology, Department of

2004

Why Is She so Mean? Review of Marion K. Underwood, *Social Aggression among Girls*. New York: Guilford Press, 2003

Susan M. Swearer Napolitano

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, sswearernapolitano1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub>



Part of the [Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#)

Swearer Napolitano, Susan M., "Why Is She so Mean? Review of Marion K. Underwood, *Social Aggression among Girls*. New York: Guilford Press, 2003" (2004). *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*. 572.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/572>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Book Review

Why Is She so Mean? Review of Marion K. Underwood, *Social Aggression among Girls*. New York: Guilford Press, 2003, 300 pp. \$44.00, ISBN: 1572308664 (cloth). \$24.00, ISBN: 1-57230-865-6 (paper)

Given the influx of books on girls' aggression—*Please Stop Laughing at Me* (Blanco, 2003), *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (Wiseman, 2002), and *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002), to name a few—it is refreshing to read a scholarly examination of this topic. In *Social Aggression among Girls*, Marion Underwood propels our understanding of the complex manifestations of female aggressive behavior by articulating a theory-driven, developmentally based, empirical analysis of aggression among girls.

Girls' aggression has been variously described as relational, indirect, and social. *Relational aggression* includes "behaviors that are intended to significantly damage another child's friendships or feelings of inclusion by the peer group" (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 711). *Indirect aggression* is defined as "social manipulation, attacking the target in circuitous ways" (Osterman et al., 1998, p. 1). *Social aggression* consists of behaviors that are directed toward causing harm to another person's self-esteem and/or social status (Underwood, 2003). Despite subtle differences, all three conceptualizations address behaviors such as spreading rumors, excluding peers from one's social group, and withdrawing friendship or acceptance. The focus is on social behaviors that damage the victim's relationships without the use of physical aggression.

Underwood defines social aggression as "behavior directed toward harming another's friendships, social status, or self-esteem, [which] may take direct forms such as social rejection and negative facial expressions or body movements, or indirect forms such as slanderous rumors, friendship manipulation, or social exclusion" (p. 5). She clearly delineates the parameters of social aggression and expertly examines previous theory and research on peer relations, aggression, and development in order to put forth a comprehensive analysis of what research has unearthed in terms of social aggression and how research can guide our understanding of the influence of aggression on girls' and boys' developmental trajectories.

Why examine aggression based on gender lines? There is a long academic history of studying women's development separate from men's development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Analogously, with the work of Nicki Crick and colleagues, researchers have examined girls' development separate from boys' development in aggression. However, whereas girls are often cited as more relationally aggressive (e.g., threatening to withdraw from a relationship) than boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), some researchers find no differences (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). In fact, although Underwood's book is titled "Social Aggression among Girls," she clearly questions whether or not the gender distinction in aggression research is veridical. Whereas much of the research on aggression has assumed a "gender dichotomy" (Espelage, Mebane, & Swearer, 2004), Underwood challenges researchers to examine the meaning and the developmental outcomes of all forms of aggression for both boys and girls.

Fortunately, researchers have begun to question whether males as a group are more aggressive than females and whether females as a group engage in more social aggression than males. Unfortunately, many studies on aggression have excluded girls from the sample (Crick & Rose, 2001), making comparisons between males and females impossible. Furthermore, many studies have defined aggression as physical and overt aggression. If the definition of aggression included relational and covert (i.e., social aggression) behaviors, the gender distinction in aggression would be less clear (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). *Social Aggression among Girls* recognizes that although boys may engage in physical aggression to a greater degree than girls, there are other forms of aggression that are worthy of study. Thus, the present volume is reflective of the movement in the theoretical and empirical literature that challenges researchers to move beyond examining aggression with gender as the comparative marker (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). Scholars are developing and/or testing developmental theories that might explain the meaning of gender differences in aggression research (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Pellegrini, 2002).

Social Aggression among Girls identifies definitional and theoretical issues in aggression throughout the volume. Part I is aptly called "Setting the Stage" and examines the quagmire of terminological issues in aggression research. Chapter 1 provides the definitional foundation for social aggression and puts forth the guiding research questions for the book. Chapter 2 tackles the important task of defining the various forms of aggressive behavior, grapples with the topography of social aggression, and sets the stage for examining why girls engage in social aggression to a greater degree than boys. Chapter 3 examines the two cultures theory of children's play (Maccoby, 1998), which proposes that boys and girls experience different roles, expectations, and social rules via same-gendered play experiences and that the cultures of boys' and girls' peer groups are different. These differences are the foundation for differences in the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of aggression in males and females. Underwood links two cultures theory with research on peer relations and concludes Part I of the book with several research questions based on this theoretical viewpoint and a challenge to recognize that research is conducted through gendered lenses.

Part II of *Social Aggression among Girls* guides the reader through research on aggression in girls from infancy to adolescence. Chapter 4 on "Girls' Anger in Infancy" is short (8 pages) and appears to shortchange the influence of temperament on the development of aggression (Carey & McDevitt, 1995). Additionally, there has been recent attention to the influence of day care on the development of aggressive behavior in children. How might temperament and out-of-home care interact in the development of aggressive behaviors? This chapter falls short of examining some of these intriguing precursors to the development of aggressive behavior in youth. Subsequent chapters clearly support the finding that as girls age, they become less physically aggressive and rely more on social aggression. A strength of the volume is that each chapter ends with questions for future research that are based on a thoughtful analysis of existing research.

As Underwood navigates the difficult terrain of the development of girls' aggression, she tackles the important problem of methodology. Different methodological approaches may yield discrepant findings in research on social aggression. In fact, researchers have argued that discrepant findings in terms of gender differences in aggression may be due to measurement issues (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Measurement techniques for studying social aggression have included self-report questionnaires, semistructured interviews, parent and teacher reports, peer ratings, peer nominations, and observations. Underwood examines the research that utilizes these different methodological approaches and challeng-

es researchers to use more diverse methodologies to examine social aggression in youth, regardless of gender. Diverse methodologies and longitudinal studies will illuminate the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of social aggression in youth.

Social Aggression among Girls examines the influence of social cognition, peer relationships, parental relationships, gender stereotypes, moral development, emotion regulation, temperament, and socialization practices across childhood and into adolescence. This social-ecological framework nicely encompasses the research on the development of social aggression and again guides the reader through the plethora of research on developmental processes in aggression.

Importantly, the second half of *Social Aggression among Girls* focuses on intervention. Part III, "Clinical Implications," comprises three chapters that focus on the consequences of girls' aggression, implications for prevention and intervention, and new models for understanding social aggression. Underwood also examines the research that suggests that social aggression may not always be linked to negative developmental outcomes (i.e. social aggression in childhood predicted higher grade point averages in college). There is an emerging finding that engaging in negative behaviors such as social aggression or bullying may in fact be indicative of a child's positive social status (i.e., being popular) (Rodkin, 2004). Thus, social aggression may not be related to negative outcomes. In fact, Underwood writes, "true to Sullivan's theory and a developmental psychopathology approach, it will also be important to investigate whether social aggression is developmentally normative at some points in the lifespan and whether it might serve some adaptive functions" (Underwood, 2003, p. 247). Clearly, the influence that social aggression has on adaptive or maladaptive development is one area for further investigation.

Social Aggression among Girls suggests practical strategies for prevention and intervention efforts. One chapter is entirely dedicated to describing these strategies. The strategies map onto the various subsections of the book and address individual, family, peer group, and school settings as fertile ground for prevention and intervention efforts. This chapter effectively translates the research reviewed in the book and guides the reader to empirically based strategies. One common thread throughout the book is the framework of theory guiding research questions. As such, the book ends with 10 areas for future research on social aggression. Perhaps the most salient take-home message is that individuals working with children should move beyond gender stereotypes and strive to understand the ubiquitous phenomenon of social aggression in humans.

References

- Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberger, N.R., & Tarule, J.M. (1986). *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Blanco, J. (2003). *Please Stop Laughing at Me: One Woman's Inspirational Story*. Avon, Mass.: Adams Media.
- Carey, W.B., & McDevitt, S.C. (1995). *Coping with Children's Temperament: A Guide for Professionals*. New York: Basic Books.
- Crick, N.R., & Grotpeter, J.K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social psychological adjustment. *Child Development* 66: 710-722.
- Crick, N.R., & Rose, A.J. (2001). Toward a gender-balanced approach to the study of social-emotional development: A look at relational aggression. In: P.H. Miller, & E.K. Scholnick (Eds.), *Toward a Feminist Developmental Psychology* (pp. 153-168). New York: Routledge.
- Espelage, D.L., Holt, M.K., & Henkel, R.R. (2003). Examination of peer group contextual effects on aggression during early adolescence. *Child Development* 74: 205-220.

- Espelage, D.L., Mebane, S.E., & Swearer, S.M. (2004). Gender differences in bullying: moving beyond mean level differences. In: D.L. Espelage, & S.M. Swearer (Eds.), *Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention* (pp. 15-35). Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Espelage, D.L., & Swearer, S.M. (2003). Research on school bullying and victimization: what have we learned and where do we go from here? *School Psychology Review* 32: 365-383.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). In *a Difference Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Maccoby, E.E. (1998). *The Two Sexes: Growing up Apart, Coming Together*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Osterman, K., Bjorkqvist, K., Lagerspetz, K.M.J., Kaukiainen, A., Landau, S.F., Fraczek, A., & Caprara, G. (1998). Cross-cultural evidence of female indirect aggression. *Aggressive Behavior* 24: 1-8.
- Pellegrini, A.D. (2002). Bullying and victimization in middle school: a dominance relations perspective. *Educational Psychologist* 37: 151-163.
- Prinstein, M.J., Boergers, J., & Vernberg, E.M. (2001). Overt and relational aggression in adolescents: social-psychological adjustment of aggressors and victims. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology* 30: 479-491.
- Rodkin, P.C. (2004). Peer ecologies of aggression and bullying. In: D.L. Espelage, & S.M. Swearer (Eds.), *Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention* (pp. 87-106). Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. New York: Harcourt.
- Underwood, M.K., Galen, B.R., & Paquette, J.A. (2001). Top ten challenges for understanding gender and aggression in children: why can't we all just get along? *Social Development* 10: 248-266.
- Wiseman, R. (2002). *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boy-friends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*. New York: Crown.

Susan M. Swearer, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA; sswearernapolitano1@unl.edu