A Qualitative Study: Does Anger Elicit Gender Normative Aggressive Reactions?

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY: DOES ANGER ELICIT GENDER NORMATIVE AGGRESSIVE REACTIONS?

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Educational Specialist Emphasizing School Psychology

Austin Beer

University of Northern Iowa

July 2006
ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates that males primarily use physical aggression and females use relational aggression when angered. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether males are really primarily physically aggressive and if females are primarily relationally aggressive when angered, through qualitative methodology. One group of males and one group of females participated in an online chat room discussion. Groups and individuals discussed situations that angered them and how they responded to being angered. Dialogue was evaluated to answer the question: Do males and females tend to aggress in gender normative manners? Four themes emerged from discussion indicating that these males and females do not aggress in gender normative manners when angered. Reactions to being angered are presented.
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Austin Beer
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This Study by: Austin Beer

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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
Degree of Educational Specialist Emphasizing School Psychology

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of aggressive acts vary from study to study, but a consensus among studies indicates that approximately 160,000 students skip school each day in the United States to avoid being victims of aggressive acts (Coy, 2001; The National Education Association as cited in Trautman, 2003). A comprehensive study conducted including a stratified sample by age, race, gender, and region, has found that about 30% of all students report moderate or frequent involvement in aggressive acts (Nansel et al., 2001). National estimates indicate that aggression is not an infrequent event in our schools, and by the time students leave their schooling, 77% have been exposed to aggressive behaviors (National Center for Education as cited in Coy, 2001).

These numbers indicate that concern for students’ safety at school is not unfounded. Additionally, with school psychologists being involved with not only learning but behavioral and social and emotional needs of students, addressing student aggression is of utmost importance for school psychologists. This is because student aggression affects students not only physically and behaviorally, but also socially, emotionally and academically, over time (Crick, 1996; Crick, 1997; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Crick & Grotfester, 1995; Grotfester & Crick, 1996; and Nansel et al, 2001; Olweus, 1993 as mentioned in Crick, 1999).

States recognizing the prevalence of aggression-related problems are mandating that schools create anti-bullying and safe school programs for students (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). School psychologists, with their increased role as system change agents
within schools and expertise in behavior change will increasingly be called to apply their expertise within schools by creating programs to address student aggression. Thus, it is important to understand what is really occurring when students are involved in aggression. Key emerging features in student aggression are centering on the idea that all students do not aggress the same, and that some gender differences are evident. Thus, a review of previous research focusing on student aggression and gender differences will follow.

**Aggression: Definition**

The definition of aggression used in previous research does not entail positive aggression, where aggression is socially appropriate, such as in sports or in situations where being assertive is important. Situations where assertiveness is not aggression could be competing on a debate team, describing why someone is not the right candidate for student council, pushing someone down during football practice, stating your opinion to a counter argument another student has made, etc. Instead, the definition of aggression used in previous research refers to any behavior enacted by a student against another student, which is intended to harm another student who is trying to avoid harm. What is important in this definition is that intention and harm are both necessary components to aggressive behavior (Crick, 2003).

**Types of Aggression**

Three main categories of aggressive behavior described by Trautman (2003) are commonly enacted by high school students and have been investigated in a variety of previous research. These previously studied aggressive behaviors are physical
aggression, verbal aggression, and relational aggression (Coy, 2001; Crick, 2003; Roberts, Jr. & Walter, 2000; Trautman).

The first category of aggressive behavior is physical aggression (direct aggression; Crick, 2003). This category can be described as behaviors such as “taking or damaging another student’s property, hitting, kicking, making someone do something they do not wish to do” (Coy, 2001, p. 3), “pushing, scratching, shouldering, tripping, biting, pulling hair, unwanted touching, harming with an object, and gesturing” (Trautman, 2003, p. 2), and causing self-harm through: cutting, biting, burning, picking at skin and wounds, hair pulling, head banging, and striking one’s-self (Jaffe & Segal, 2004).

The second category of aggressive behavior is verbal aggression (direct aggression) and can be described as “name calling, negative comments, negative phone calls, negative emails, and negative instant messages” (Trautman, 2003 p. 2), “put downs, saying or writing inappropriate things about a student, and threatening bodily injury to another student” (Coy, 2001).

The third category of aggressive behavior is social/relational aggression (indirect aggression) and can be identified as “verbal or written gossip, making personal information public, setting someone up”, excluding another student from activities (Trautman, 2003, p. 2), not talking to another student, and “damaging peer’s interpersonal relationships” (Roberts, Jr. & Walter, 2000, p. 1097). The goal and distinguishing factor of relational aggression is that its purpose is to indirectly damage a
Physical and verbal aggressions are direct forms of aggression, whereas relational aggression is indirect in nature. Although this is not a completely exhaustive list of aggressive behaviors, it does exemplify that aggressive acts are not just contained to playground rough-and-tumble fights. All three categories of behaviors may be perpetrated at one time, or they may be perpetrated individually. These definitions of aggression were used to categorize and interpret student responses to being angered in the following studies. Behaviors which align to these aggression definitions were interpreted as being that particular type of aggression.

**Motivation for Aggression**

One of the most common motives for students to aggress involves anger (Crick, 2003). The causes of anger can be categorized by (a) an attack from another student (Crick, 2003), (b) a frustration; caused by the perceived or actually blocking of a goal by another student (Crick, 2003; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), (c) expectations of retaliation from another student for a student’s actions, beliefs, and abilities, and (d) competition between students (Crick, 2003), (e) an inability to express emotion, release internal tension, and feel in control (Lieberman, 2004).

**Previous Research**

Research investigating gender differences and aggression has indicated that trends emerge by the high school years. These trends indicate there may be gender differences in how males and females aggress (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Galen & Underwood,
In order to understand previous research investigating gender differences in aggressive styles, it is important to understand how aggression is defined and how previous research has been conducted.

**Previous Research Findings**

Research into gender differences and aggressive styles has produced gender normative trends. These trends indicate that males tend to aggress against others in physically aggressive manners, and females tend to aggress against others in relationally aggressive manners (Buntaine & Costenbader, 1997; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Crick, Casas & Ku, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Nansel et al., 2001). These studies have developed a premise that males are more likely to be physically aggressive (i.e. directly aggressive) and females are relationally aggressive (i.e. indirectly aggressive), and that this becomes more consistent in the high school years.

**Statement of Problem**

Different forms of aggression have been investigated by researchers to understand the complex interplay between gender and aggressive actions. The research, until recently, has focused on student aggression in males, and males appeared to be the highest population of students involved in aggression (i.e., physical aggression). But recent research has uncovered a more subtle type of aggression called “relational aggression” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression (RA) had also been referred to as indirect aggression, or social aggression. Relational aggression has been
generally overlooked in past aggression research, in both males and females (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

The following research is meant to examine these previous studies described above under high scrutiny. These previous studies utilized methodologies that did not use direct observations of behavior (Buntaine and Costenbader, 1997; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Crick, Casas, and Ku, 1999; Crick, Casas, and Mosher, 1997; Crick and Grotfeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997; and Nansel et al, 2001). Instead these studies utilized peer (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes; Crick, Casas, and Mosher; Crick and Grotfeter) and teacher (Crick, Casas, & Ku; Crick, Casas, and Mosher) reports of perceived aggressive styles, surveys (Nansel et al.), and vignettes (Galen & Underwood) to determine gender related aggressive styles. For example, students were asked how they believe they would react in particular situations which may cause anger (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes; Galen & Underwood). Few of these studies directly observed or required participants to describe actual aggressive responses/behaviors. Instead, students were often asked direct questions like; who in your class “hits, pushes others,” or “starts fights” or “tells friends they will stop liking them unless friends do what they say,” or when mad at a person, ignores them or stops talking to them” (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes; Crick & Grotfeter). Students were nominated as physically aggressive by their peers choosing descriptions from a list such as “hits, pushes others,” or “starts fights.” Students nominated as relationally aggressive were chosen by peers’ selection of descriptions such as “tells friends they will stop liking them unless friends do what they say,” or when mad at a person, ignores them or stops talking to them.”
These previous studies often failed to examine contextual variables that influenced students' aggressive responses (Crick, 1996; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Crick, Casas & Ku, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997). Instead students and teachers were many times simply asked, for example, who in your class pushes other students? The pushing situation was not investigated as a determinant of the aggressive behavior. The act of pushing was considered aggressive (physically) whether the act was part of a game or meant to lay another student flat on their face.

A study conducted by Buntaine and Costenbader (1997) did investigate variables that influenced how males and females aggressed. These variables were geographic region, gender, and situation. The situations variable was predetermined, and students were asked how they would react in certain situations. Their responses to their perceived reaction were then analyzed as to if they were aggressive and what type of aggression.

The following study is meant to investigate whether males and females do tend to aggress in manners previously described as gender normative. This study examined through dialog gender and aggression within the situations in which they occur. In contrast to previous research this study through the student lead development of dialog examined the variables, situations, and gender influencing aggressive responses. Previous studies have been based on static assessment that involved researcher to respondent questioning that was not modifiable or adjustable to subjects' responses. The current study used a focus group setting to create a fluid dialog between the researcher and the respondents that has in previous studies been lacking. Questioning was modified for clarification and further understanding. After the first meeting subjects responses
were examined to determine further direction of questioning and the researcher went back and clarified issues and dug into topics further that were discussed during previous meetings. Previously research has not examined relational and physical aggression in a discussion format. In the present study, an internet chat room format is used to determine whether males and females do aggress in gender normative manners. The intent of this study is to investigate gender normative aggression using this format.

**Importance of the Study**

It is important to understand the social/gender ecology that maintains and establishes aggressive behavior. It is also important to know if there are identifiable differences in how males and females aggress (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). This is because tailoring interventions to students' unique needs is the more effective manner of implementation (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

Because of the developmental tendency of males and females to be involved in gender normative manners of aggression by high school, the following qualitative study utilized students who are in high school. These students would presumably behave in gender normative manners, according to previous research.

Two groups of students participated in this research: one group was composed of 4 males and one group was composed of 2 females. These two groups did not interact together; instead these groups were independent and met at separate times to discuss situations that were angering to them, and how they reacted when angered. The students in each group were friends or were from the same social group at school. The purpose of having gender restricted groups was to isolate responses in the context of same-gender.
Each group met 2 times online in a chat-room for a little over an hour each time. The benefits of conducting this study online were as follows: students had more anonymity than an in-person interview or discussion group which facilitates openness (Barak & Wander-Schwartz, 2006), students were only identifiable by anonymous screen names, which gave added anonymity, students are very comfortable (Andersen & Samagh, 2003) and familiar with utilizing this medium of communication, students were able to discuss actual behaviors instead of perceived behaviors of others or their perceived behaviors in hypothetical situations, and because of the uniqueness of this qualitative medium a discussion of influencing variables on their behavior was also possible. Additionally, this qualitative online methodology allowed the researcher to adjust questioning and to keep discussion on track without compromising the integrity of the study.

Anonymity in online discussion is important according to data presented by Andersen and Samagh (2003). Anonymity according to this data appears to improve discussion because students are not as worried about projecting an image about themselves to other group members. Anonymity will reduce students' fears about appearing foolish and loosing the respect of other group members. The anonymity facilitated through this discussion format elicits students to be more open in their responses and free from constraints.

Comfort level in using this medium of communication is also important. If this was a new form of communication method responses may have been influenced in some way. Because this is an extremely popular form of communication, and because all
students said they are comfortable with and use this form of communication on almost a daily basis this method was useful in facilitating a constructive dialog. In creating a constructive dialog it was important that student feel comfortable.

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework used to conduct and understand the results from this study proposes that anger can cause aggression. Although males and females may aggress for a variety of reasons, including social and personal goals which do not involve anger, it is believed that this operationalization of aggressive motivation is a valid manner of investigating a significant portion of aggressive behavior. The results of this study will be limited to examining aggressive student responses to being angered.

Because previous research suggested that being angered is a common motivation to aggress, this motivation was used to investigate a common source of possible aggressive behavior. Research has found that anger is the strongest and best predictors of aggression, and this is true for both males and females (Bosworth as cited by Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Cornell, Peterson, and Richards, 1999). Student characteristics that are predictive of aggression have also been found to be impulsivity and anger (Understanding School Bullying, n.d.).

Anger being a foundational component of this framework is defined as the emotional aspect of aggression (Wikipedia, 2006). Anger is the subjective experience that students encounter that drives aggressive responses (Averill, 1982). Anger is an emotional state that varies in its intensity, from very mild irritation to extreme rage. Anger is caused by negative external as well as internal events (American Psychological
Association Online, 2006). Anger as defined in this research is the subjective emotion, belief, and feeling that is oriented towards a real or perceived grievance (Dictionary.com, 2006).

Aggression as defined in this study is categorized as direct aggression, which involves physical or verbal aggression as defined earlier, or indirect aggression, which involves relational aggression as defined earlier.
PARTICIPANTS FOR THIS STUDY WERE SELECTED THROUGH A CONVENIENCE SAMPLE PROVIDED BY THE PARTICIPATING SCHOOL/SCHOOL COUNSELOR. THE STUDENTS WHO WERE INFORMED THAT THE STUDY WAS TAKING PLACE BY THE COUNSELOR WERE CHOSEN BECAUSE THE COUNSELOR WAS FAMILIAR WITH THESE STUDENTS, THE STUDENTS WERE FRIENDS, AND THESE STUDENTS WERE PERCEIVED BY THE COUNSELOR TO BE RESPONSIBLE ENOUGH TO CONTINUE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY AFTER IT HAD BEGUN. STUDENTS BEING FRIENDS WAS CHOSEN TO PROMOTE OPEN DIALOG. THESE STUDENTS WERE NOT DETERMINED TO HAVE AN AGGRESSIVE HISTORY, NO BACKGROUND WAS PROVIDED PRIOR TO THE STUDY'S BEGINNING ON PARTICIPANT'S PRIOR AGGRESSIVE BACKGROUND.

STUDENTS WERE INFORMED BY THEIR SCHOOL COUNSELOR THAT A STUDY WAS BEING CONDUCTED AND THAT THEY WERE WELCOME TO PARTICIPATE. STUDENTS WHO WERE INTERESTED WERE BRIEFED ABOUT THE STUDY BY THE RESEARCHER AND THE STUDENTS THEN CONTACTED THE RESEARCHER IF THEY WERE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY. ONE MALE STUDENT DECLINED TO PARTICIPATE AND 1 MALE STUDENT ONLY PARTICIPATED FOR 1 DISCUSSION SESSION. THREE MALE STUDENTS PARTICIPATED THROUGHOUT BOTH ONLINE CHAT ROOM MEETINGS. ONE FEMALE STUDENT DECLINED TO PARTICIPATE, TWO NEVER ENTERED THE DISCUSSION ROOMS AFTER AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE AND DID NOT RESPOND TO FURTHER CONTACTS BY THE RESEARCHER, AND TWO FEMALE STUDENTS PARTICIPATED DURING ALL DISCUSSIONS.

TWO GROUPS OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN THIS RESEARCH: ONE GROUP WAS COMPOSED OF 4 MALES AND ONE GROUP WAS COMPOSED OF 2 FEMALES. THESE TWO GROUPS DID NOT INTERACT TOGETHER;
instead these groups were independent and met at separate times to discuss situations that were angering to them, and how they reacted when angered. The discussion format is provided in Appendix A. The students in each group were friends or were from the same social group at school. The purpose of having gender restricted groups was to isolate responses in the context of same-gender. The researcher did not get to know these students well prior to starting the study. Students only met with the researcher 1 time and this was prior to the start of the study for an initial explanation of the study. Because of this limited interaction information pertaining to specific student demographic and personal information is limited.

Dialogue/Discussion Development

Each group met 2 times online in a chat-room for a little over an hour each time. Students were able to interact with their friends and classmates directly through discussion, which was only facilitated by the researcher on limited occasions. The group was run as autonomously as possible through student discussion. Students were posed with questions by the researcher which directed students to discuss situations that recently angered them. Students discussed situations that angered them both amongst the other group members and one-on-one with the researcher. Angering situations involved the entire group and at times discussion only involved a single group member telling their story.

Students, after discussing angering situations, were then asked by the researcher how they responded to being angered. Again, students discussed their responses to being
angered amongst the group or with the researcher one-on-one. Discussion involved
group responses and independent student responses to being angered.

Data Analysis Technique

Student dialog upon completion of the discussion groups was evaluated by a
process adapted from a systematic data analysis technique called Grounded Theory
proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990; as cited in Barker, Jones, & Britton, n.d). Data
was analyzed in a three step approach to promote results with integrity.

Dialog from the chat discussion was transcribed and evaluated for purposes of
understanding behavioral reactions within specific contexts which elicited anger from
students. The coding portion of the data analysis examined chat dialog for keywords and
phrases. If particular aggressive keywords were used in describing a reaction to being
angered, which matched previously described aggressive types, the reaction was
aggressive. The coded responses to being angered were then grouped into categories
which ultimately helped to identify emerging themes. The exact process is described
below.

First, a coding sheet was developed (Appendix B) that identified every situation
that was discussed as angering students, and the students’ responses to being angered
were matched to the specific angering situation. This step was independent of the
theoretical framework and was used to acknowledge what situations were angering
students and how students respond when angered. This step selected anger provoking
situations from the transcripts and classified how students reacted to being angered from
the dialog. The initial codes established were constantly compared and contrasted
throughout this phase of the analysis. This data was entered into a spreadsheet which identified angering situations and behavioral reactions.

Secondly, the behavioral reactions to being angered were then grouped in the spreadsheet according to emerging main categories of behavior responses, such as “ignoring,” “relational aggression,” etc. Student reactions to being angered were categorized into groups by examining for key words and phrases that met definitions for physical, relational, and verbal aggression. For example, students who described hitting, kicking, or punching in reaction to being angered would be aggressing physically and thus the reaction would be coded as physical aggression. In addition students who described talking behind friends backs, making someone else’s personal information public, or excluding someone from a friend group in reaction to being angered would be aggressing relationally and thus the reaction would be coded as relational aggression. The same process was conducted for verbal aggression.

Reactions to being angered at this 2\textsuperscript{nd} stage of analysis did not all fall into relational, physical, or verbal aggression. Upon completion of coding reactions in these three manners there remained a large number of responses to being angered that did not fit into previously defined aggression categories. The remaining response data was examined for similarities and differences in student responding. Behavioral reactions that were similar were then grouped into a category. For example, keywords that emerged during discussion such as “ignoring” or phrases that indicated ignoring lead to the coding of reactions into subcategories called “no response,” “ignoring,” and “no behavioral reaction.” These subcategories compose the main theme of ignoring. In addition
reactions with keywords and phrases that indicated that students talked to individuals who angered them were coded in an initial main category of “talking.” Students’ responses to being angered were coded and categorized according to whether they fit specific descriptions of aggressive behavior or if the reactions were exact or similar in their keywords or phrasing.

Thirdly, to establish validity and credibility of the data encoding and categorization of responses, the data were re-evaluated to re-organize the data and establish that the data and coding technique were still examining the research question. The main purpose of this phase of data analysis was answering the question, “should how categories were coded be changed?” in response to the research question: Do males and females tend to aggress in gender normative manners when angered? The students’ reactions that were grouped into subcategories as “no response,” “ignoring,” and “no behavioral reaction” were determined to be the same reactions and these groups were consolidated into the main theme of “ignoring.”

The theme verbal aggression was determined to contain coded reactions that were not aggressive and a new theme was developed through the re-categorization of encoded discussion data called “verbal assertiveness.” Some reactions that were also considered to be in the “Confrontation Through Discussion” theme were also re-evaluated and determined to be verbal assertiveness at this stage of data analysis because they did not entail two-way communication, and only involved students stating their perspectives with no response from others. This final stage of data analysis established consistency and
validity in coding, and fortified that the themes that emerged from the coding process were also consistent, valid, and reliable.

The goal of this study is to determine whether males and females do truly aggress in gender normative manners once direct reports of actual behavior are involved and analyzed in the context of the situations in which the behaviors are performed. The results of the data analysis are now discussed in chapter 3.
Emerging Themes

During the analysis of student discussions, four themes emerged in student responses. These four themes are ignoring, confrontation through discussion, verbal aggression, and verbal assertiveness. These themes are considered important to this topic because they consistently emerged in discussion either in the male, female, or both gender groups. The themes that did emerge changed the focus of the study from evaluating whether males and females aggress in gender normative aggressive manners to how students tend to respond to being angered, whether that be aggression or a different behavior. The names of students and schools have been changed in the following discussions to protect the privacy of the students and schools.

Theme 1: Ignoring

The first theme that emerged during discussion involved students who did not respond outwardly to being angered. What is meant by this is that the students actively recognized being angered and instead of reacting, they chose to ignore what was angering them behaviorally. Males and females both did not respond to, or actively ignored, other students who caused them to become angered. This was the most commonly reported behavior of both males and females.
Males and Ignoring

The male group discussed situations where they did not respond to being angered. Below is a list of situations that the group discussed. The male group in this example is discussing how a girl in their class angers them through her persistence and annoyance. In this specific context a girl is requesting that one of the male student's dance with her repeatedly after he has in his mind been gracious enough to already dance with her. He had told her no but she kept persisting.

DAN: but I just tried to ignore her
BOB: it is really hard to be nice, or ignore her, I think about all the mean stuff I could say, I just ignore her most of the time
DAN: and then I just kind of laugh on the inside a little bit
DAN: and then I just ignore her
JACK: we just ignore her usually

This example demonstrates that these males, although angered by another student prefer to ignore the person rather than reacting negatively behaviorally.

A variety of viewpoints were expressed concerning the girl who angered the male group throughout their discussion, but for the most part, all of these students reported that they ignore this girl who angers them. One student reported that he laughs at this girl in his head, while another student reported that he says things to this girl in a jovial manner. Although these may be alternative behaviors to the same situation, all of the male group members did say that they do not react outwardly to the girl's behaviors reported by the male group to cause them anger. All of these male group members did not shy away from expressing how much they dislike this girl, and how they have thought about retaliating. Instead they chose to ignore what angers them (another student's behavior).
Additional situations described by the male group involved an administrator changing school rules after there were problems in the school. This angered these students, but one student reported that there was nothing that they could do to change the administrator’s policies.

BOB: so our school locks up all the doors after school
DAN: but it's gotten kind of ridiculous
BOB: there's a sex offender that's been spotted around our school area recently
JACK: that makes me mad
DAN: the administration is like cracking down on everything
BOB: I’m not on student council anymore, so I don’t really talk to the administration about it
JACK: we really can’t do anything about the crack downs

The males in this group reported their school had been repeatedly vandalized by a rival school. Because the specific culprits were not known, these students reported that they did not retaliate against other students of the rival school, or the rival school itself because it would be pointless.

VERN: the other week some people, most likely students from other schools came and vandalized, spray painted some signs above our school doors. Their was nothing to do except just live it off...what I am guessing
VERN: I hate vandalisms
VERN: so their was no way to respond

Much like in the female discussion group this is an important factor to consider in how students aggress. It appears that if males feel there is little point in reacting then they do not attempt a reaction, which makes perfect sense. Although one male student did report that he did confront the principal in a discussion as to why the rules were bothering him.

In this next example a few students are angered by the actions of a teammate leaving the team during the season. This teammate was valued but in this groups
perceptions left the team to pursue his own glory at the team's cost. These students did not respond behaviorally to the student who left the team and did nothing in response to the teammate's behavior.

DAN: well others haven't really said anything
DAN: I think most of us think it's shallow

The male group also discussed a situation that would presumably elicit a reaction by most students, but did not elicit a reaction by these male students. A student at school had a pocket knife that he was waving at students after a sports practice. The student describing the situation was questioned as to what situations he experienced recently that brought about anger. This student reported that a student with the knife taunted one of the group members saying "yeah keep walking." The students reported that they did nothing because they did not take this student seriously.

VERN: there was this student from our school, and after my tennis practice, he was playing with his knife in the lobby of our school, and I just walked away, and let it go. He said "yeah, keep walking" so I did, didn't even say anything to him. Our school just doesn't let that fly. If he thought about anything, I could have had him expelled so fast. I think it was just his way of feeling "cool."

The males also described a situation where another student had started a negative rumor about a girl at their school. This angered the group of male students. These students, although angered, did not respond to the student who started the rumor. Why they did not respond may have been because the student who started the rumor was seen as popular and looked up to at their school, as discussed by the group.

VERN: and almost all of the other senior guys make fun of her so they [other students] won't do anything to him
VERN: he is a senior
VERN: and he is sort of a big shot
RESEARCHER: so although this made you guys mad you really did not respond to him at all?
VERN: nope
JACK: well I really never see him ever
VERN: I never talk to him
JACK: but no I guess I didn’t

Although these students report the reason they did not say anything to this student is because they never see him, they did discuss that they do talk to this student because they discussed the rumor with him, and they discussed regret about helping to promote the rumor unknowingly.

An additional situation that was discussed by the males involved a situation that is common. A student described how his sister did not take responsibility for her actions and how his sister often shifted blame to him for things she did. This student’s sister angered him through her actions. After a debate with his sister this student stated that he would ignore his sister until his parents arrived home to solve the problem.

VERN: then we vow not to talk
VERN: and then we wait for parents to come home and solve it.

And also stated that he usually just ignores her

VERN: well, I mostly blow her off.

The situation illustrated a variety of behavioral responses and shed light on how behavioral responses are complex and involve many factors besides gender. When this student is in a good mood and having a good day he reported that he is more likely to just ignore his sister. But if he is having a poor day and/or if he is in a bad mood he is more likely to argue with his sister and have a verbal confrontation. This confrontation results in this student listing how he is better than his sister and waiting for his parents to get
home and sort things out. Also this student reported that he often vents to a friend about how “stupid” his sister is.

**Females and Ignoring**

An example discussed by the female group is as follows (verbatim):

JENNY: Mine was during soccer, when the girls just act stupid/mean/selfish or talk about doing stupid things. It just makes me mad that they treat people badly or do stupid things that could ruin their life without thinking about the impact on others or their own lives. I dunno...I wish I could just outright say to them that which I just typed. But I kind of just try not to hang out with them too much...while also trying to not distance myself too much, cuz we are a team.

JENNY: Oh...I guess I just let it go and keep practicing.

JENNY: I mean, there’s not much I can do about what they’ve done.

As indicated in this conversation, this girl was angered by the actions of others. Instead of reacting, she ignored the other girls’ behavior. An influencing factor appeared to be the ability to impact others actions through one’s action. This girl believed that her actions would have little affect on those who were angering her, and thus she chose to save her energy and ignored those who anger her.

Additional situations described by the female group involved situations where no action was taken, but the girls did not expressively state through discussion that they chose to ignore being angered. For example, one girl described how her mother angered her by nagging to do things around the house. She stated that she just did what her mother asked her to do, and thus she did not respond behaviorally to being angered.

LEANN: Umm...my mom has been making me angry.

LEANN: Just because...she’s my mom...and she’s been nagging on me about everything.
LEANN: sometimes I just do what she asks...but sometimes I just say...ok mom I'll get to it...just give me some space.
LEANN: and she usually respects that.
LEANN: yea because I learned if I yell at her, it just makes it all worse.

This same student also described a situation where another family member makes her mad by questioning her beliefs and her mother's beliefs.

LEANN: well...my grandma is completely against the fact that my mom and I believe in God and go to church and she just always tries to start something.
LEANN: and it makes me mad.
LEANN: I used to get really upset about it...and just kind of became really secluded, but now I just kind of learn to brush it off and try to change the subject.

Another situation described involved a student who felt like the "third wheel" when going out with her friend who was dating. She felt ignored and this angered her. But this student stated that instead of talking to her friend about feeling ignored and being a "third wheel" she just minded her own business.

LEANN: when I'm the third wheel.
LEANN: like when I'm with a couple...and I'm just there....
LEANN: you know.
LEANN: so I just kind of lag behind and just kind of mind my own business.

An additional situation described involved a student feeling like she was the "back up friend" which made her mad.

JENNY: well...I have this one "friend" who likes to hang around me, I think, but only when she's alone
JENNY: and then when someone else comes along, like someone "better or more popular or something" she just ditches me
JENNY: like I'm just a back-up friend or something
JENNY: and I hate that
LEANN: I know how that goes.
LEANN: I'm usually most peoples' "back up" friend.
JENNY: I guess I just let her do whatever, and do what I need
RESEARCHER: so you never really react?
JENNY: nope
**Theme 2: Confrontation Through Discussion**

The second behavioral theme that emerged involved students talking to those individuals who had angered them. What is meant by this is that angered students confronted other students who were angering them in a discussion format. This confrontation was not verbally aggressive or slanderous, but instead involved students explaining their perspective of wrong-doings against them, and attempting to work out rifts in relationships or social situations through negotiation, or expression of opinion/perspective.

**Confrontation Through Discussion: Males**

An example of this type of response is taken verbatim from the males’ discussion log and presented here:

JACK: well...just recently, as in today...our #2 tennis player discussed possibly going out for soccer when it's crunch time at the end of our tennis season and we really need him...he said he was going to do both
JACK: but it just pisses me off that he all of a sudden just kind of ditches out on us.
JACK: I mean he isn't ditching out %100, but I know, definitely from John, that if someone did that from his football or soccer team, he'd be pretty upset too. Am I right John?
DAN: I know when that happened in soccer, I just talked about it to see how everyone else felt
DAN: everyone just kind of talked to each other as a team
DAN: to feel out how everyone felt
DAN: but we didn’t like beat him up or anything
DAN: we told him how we felt
DAN: but that's about it

The male group described a variety of situations they encountered and how they responded through discussion. But not all males reacted in the same manner to the same
situation. Some males simply ignored the student who angered them by leaving the team, while others actively confronted this student through a discussion.

An additional example presented by the males exemplifies how diverse student reactions are to angering situations. The males in the group reported that they are often angered when rumors are started which involve them personally. They reported that when rumors are started which involve them, they talk to fellow classmates to find out who started the rumor, and they follow up by talking to the person who started the rumor.

JACK: I hate rumors
VERN: that gets me going
JACK: really makes me mad
JACK: like up there to the top of the list
JACK: but the whole rumors things gets me really mad
JACK: I usually ask the person where they got their information
JACK: when they are about me I ask them where they got their info
VERN: if it is about me I do what ever I can to talk to the person who started it
JACK: and if it is a really harsh thing I tend to go after the person who started it
JACK: and by go after I mean just going and talking to them and asking them why they did it

These males reported that a variety of factors influence how they react to rumors, but for the most part they directly confront the individual who is angering them in a discussion format.

The males described situations where they did confront someone in a discussion format who had angered them. These were a diverse set of situations with a variety of influencing factors. Some situations involved school administrators,

BOB: we basically voice our opinions
DAN: we let the principal know
DAN: "hey, we can't even get back in the school to get our stuff"
BOB: we just tell them

siblings,
VERN: sometimes it depends, on how my day is going
VERN: mostly we end up digging times up in the past that I did something and
she paid for it
VERN: if a bad day
VERN: we end up getting into a debate

and fellow classmates.

JACK: yeah...hypocrites piss the hell out of me
JACK: I just say it to their face
JACK: I'm just like "hey.. don't you drink?"
JACK: I just go up to them
JACK: and be like "hey, don't you do that stuff too?"
JACK: I'm not really scared to do it...but I just let them know

Although situations differed in terms of who was angering these students, often times the
behavioral reaction to being angered was the same (direct confrontation through
discussion).

Confrontation Through Discussion: Females

Interestingly, it appears to be fairly unique to these males to confront someone
who angered them in a discussion format. The female group did describe one significant
instance when they too confronted those individuals who angered them in a discussion
format. In this instance, someone had accused one of the female participants of cheating.
The accused girl then confronted her accuser. The two girls subsequently worked their
problem out in a discussion, as indicated verbatim from discussion below:

[While playing Jeopardy] JENNY: I looked in my notes to see what the
answer was, and someone said I was cheating, when it wasn't even my
turn and whatever, and then she didn't talk to me and like she called me a
cheater and dishonest and stuff
JENNY: and I just was really hurt, 'cuz I try to uphold good morals and
stuff, and then it just got out of hand and like we didn't talk for a day,
which is a lot at WSH, and then I dunno
JENNY: we just confronted each other and agreed it just got out of hand
and it wasn't serious or anything

The girl who accused this student was mentioned as a friend and this is most likely a factor influencing how this student reacted to being angered.

Although these girls did not describe many situations themselves where they confronted individuals who were angering them in discussion format, they did say this is one of the better ways to deal with other students who are angering them.

JENNY: and then the girl being talked about just talks about whoever was talking about her to her friends
JENNY: and then it's a whole vicious cycle
JENNY: yeah, it's quite stupid actually
LEAN: I agree.
JENNY: they should just confront each other—peacefully

Because the female group did not describe more than one instance of discussion when angered this is not an immerging theme for the female group. This discussion does present some evidence for the presence of female relational aggression.

**Theme 3: Verbal Aggression**

The third theme which developed during this research was verbal aggression. Verbal aggression involves any direct negative vocal action that is not meant to indirectly damage a relationship, but instead is meant to harm someone. This negative vocal behavior is meant to attack another student or cause some form of direct harm to that student. This form of aggression is direct and meant to harm the recipient of verbal aggression (e.g. swearing, mocking, making fun of someone, threatening to harm someone physically, etc; Crick and Grøtpet, 1995). Verbal aggression was seen in both the male's and female's dialog.
Male Verbal Aggression

A situation that these students described which led to verbal aggression escalated almost to the point of a physical altercation. The situation is described below.

BOB: and just today two guys were going to fight over 3 dollars
BOB: well one guy took money out of the other guys bag
BOB: and even though it was money he was owed by the other guy, he was upset that the money was taken
BOB: basically it was because it was the only money he had and he wanted to get something to drink
BOB: but the one guy who was out $3 said if the other guy didn't give back one dollar that "punches would be thrown" and that "he was going to be taken down"

In the situation described above, although it seems like it may have escalated to physical aggression had it gone further, only verbal aggression was utilized. The more significant aspect of this discussion falls on the presentation that these students do not see or are not involved in physical altercations of aggression.

There were situations that have been discussed previously in the first two themes that involved verbal aggression. In one situation described above when students have rumors spread about them they may aggress verbally.

VERN: well I make fun of them
VERN: like we have all been together for so long that there is no one I don’t know something about
VERN: most of the time it involves me telling them it is not true and then make fun of them for something

Although the male students stated that they make fun of people who spread rumors to that person’s face, and that they are only joking, they are still verbally aggressing against another student who has angered them. On a continuum of verbal aggression making fun of someone could be considered to be weak verbal aggression, but this student indicated that he knows sensitive information about students that he would
bring to light in a verbal attack. The male group as a whole discussed that they do make fun of people who start rumors, but depending on who the person is these students may or may not be verbally aggressive.

VERN: in fact that’s all that really matters VERN: it kind of depends who too

A male in the discussion group also discussed how he tells his sister how he is better than her when he is angry at her. This situation was discussed above, and again this student’s response was dependent on a variety of factors, and in this situation, the factors influencing his verbal reaction was a bad mood and how he was feeling that day.

VERN: sometimes it depends VERN: on how my day is going VERN: if a bad day VERN: that ends with my listing all the ways I am better than her

Female Verbal Aggression

The female discussion group did describe a situation that angered them in which they responded through verbal aggression. Verbal aggression by females was described as damaging friendships in the female group as indicated in the next example.

LEANN: when someone messes with their man.
LEANN: well like this one time at North this girl was like play flirting with a guy and this girl got all in her face and stuff and then like...I dunno harsh words were exchanged and ruined a perfectly good friendship and stuff.

The female discussion group did not describe verbal aggression as an action of being angered as frequently as the male group but they did describe it.

These girls described personal experiences in which they had been picked on in school by other girls:
LEANN: I used to be made fun of all the time...even my "best friend" made fun of me.
LEANN: cause I didn’t have "cool" clothes.
[How do females make fun]
LEANN: or if they're just walking by or something.

Situations where students are picking on other students provokes anger. This is important to understand because these girls are drawing on their own experiences as factors of action. For some students they may not be angered when students pick on each other, but for these girls they have life experiences which allows them to place themselves in others’ shoes. This again indicates that there are a variety of factors that are integral to the aggressive actions of students.

As indicated above, verbal aggression does have significant affects and it is present in female behavior. The females also described what is most likely a common verbal aggression occurrence, in which girls become angry at each other and they say things quickly to each other in passing times in the halls. The verbal aggression incidents are not lengthy or retaliated against, but instead are quick jabs at each other in passing.

Again it appears that verbal aggression is found in both male and female behavior. But the situations described appeared to be different and involve different factors for males and females.

Instead of direct verbal aggression the female group and the male group did discuss situations where they did respond verbally to being angered in what may be better termed verbal assertiveness. This is our 4th and final theme.
Theme 4: Verbal Assertiveness

Verbal assertiveness was present in situations where students were angered and confronted those who angered them verbally through non-harmful statements. These confrontations were not meant to harm those who were angering the students and were not aggressive. Instead verbal assertiveness was meant to make a point or to simply let another student know they were angering someone and their behavior, or statements were perceived to be wrong, out of line, or harmful to someone. Students involved with verbal assertiveness were verbally confronting students not in a dialog or discussion but instead they were literally voicing their opinions and perceptions of having witnessed or experienced personally a perceived wrong or harm-doing to themselves or someone else.

Females and Verbal Assertiveness

An example of verbal assertiveness was presented during the female’s discussion group. The following example describes how these girls confront others who are picking on fellow classmates.

JENNY: oh...well once, I told the boys to grow up because if they were doing it to be mean...they were acting very immature

An addition example of verbal assertiveness was discussed involving a different student who was also being made fun of.

LEANN: I just turned around and was like enough is enough.
LEANN: he hasn't done anything to you, leave him alone.
JENNY: normally I do stand up for them
JENNY: even if it's like a little comment like that's so mean or stop or something
JENNY: then at least people can realize
JENNY: but most of the time...I say something
JENNY: because any hurtful thing.. whether sarcastic or not...has some thought behind it, so it can deeply hurt someone.
As can be seen through this discussion these girls are likely to verbally confront individuals who are angering them, and this verbal confrontation does not have to always be aggressive and meant to harm. But these girls did report that they don’t always react, and that they must understand what is occurring in the situation before they act.

**Males and Verbal Assertiveness**

The male group only discussed one situation where they were involved in verbal assertiveness when they were targets of verbal aggression. This makes it difficult to conclude that this manner of response is typical of these males or an emerging theme. This group of males described how some other male students were challenging their abilities to perform particular tasks in choir and band. The challenges were against the discussion groups ability to be the best at something. Challengers created accusations that they were better at certain things than the discussion group members which angered the discussion group members.

An example discussed was as follows:

BOB: there is something that makes me kind of mad
BOB: some people boast that they are so much better than you at something and that they could "destroy" you at something in particular
BOB: and they are not really joking either
BOB: it kind of angers me
DAN: that makes me angry too?
DAN: and then when you try to get them to prove it, they always just chicken out and never live up to their words
DAN: I say "well then, lets go"
DAN: and I try to prove them wrong

As evidenced in this discussion, these male students challenged people to live up to their accusations. This verbal confrontation was not harmful or aimed at hurting those
students who were using verbal aggression against them. Instead this was a verbal
response that was constructive and assertive. It appears that when these students feel
threatened in their abilities, it is enough to cause them to retaliate constructively through
words. But these students are able to evaluate the factors in the situation, and if the
individual challenging them is better than them they know to ignore the accusations.

Physical and Relational Aggression: Was it Really Gender Normative, and Present
During Discussion?

The final theme development to be discussed involves physical and relational
aggression as discussed by the males and the females. For both the male and the female
discussion group physical aggression was discussed very little. Instead students reported
that they tended to react in non-aggressive manners or in verbally aggressive manners.

Are Males Really Primarily Physically Aggressive?

The male group only discussed two rather weak incidents of physical aggression.
These two incidents did not involve significant physical aggression. One incident
involved a male student honking his horn at another student while driving,

JACK: so I honked my horn to get his attention and he looks up all angry and
flips me off

and the second incident involved a student shoving another student in the lunch room,

which was discussed previously.

JACK: maybe a few shoves but nothing beyond
JACK: like "love pat"
JACK: shove would probably be too strong of a word even VERN: flick

The male group, when asked if they witness physical aggression or fights,
reported that they have not seen any fights at their school in a long time.
RESEARCHER: have you ever had a physical fight at NU.
VERN: not really
JACK: I assume so over the years there have probably been a few
JACK: but nothing I remember

The group did discuss one incident that happened a few years previously, where a student got into a fight at a basketball game.

JACK: our AAU basketball teams got into a fight a few years ago after a basketball tourney.

Some students reported that they had never even seen a physical fight.

VERN: we never fight at our school

These findings are extremely interesting and conflict with previous literature reports that males are more likely to react in a physical manner when angered.

The male group did discuss instances where they were involved in what could be deemed verbal aggression or possibly relational aggression. These instances were actually more commonly discussed than physically aggressive behaviors. An example of a verbally aggressive or relationally aggressive male behavior was discussed earlier when the male group talked about having rumors spread about them. For purposes of this study this behavior was determined to be verbal aggression, but if the male participant had indicated that this behavior was meant to damage someone’s reputation indirectly then it could have been deemed relational aggression. The male group reported that they are angered when others spread rumors about them. In response, one group member reported that he confronts the person who started the rumor by threatening to start rumors about them.

JACK: and if it is a really harsh thing I tend to go after the person who started it
JACK: and
by go after I mean just going and talking to them and asking them why they did it
JACK: and how they would like it if I did the same thing
JACK: and sometimes I threaten to do it

Also, the male group reported that they make fun of the person who started the rumors
with their friends. This is a better example of relational aggression, where slander or
“making fun of” someone behind their backs to peers is enacted to harm that person.

VERN: well I make fun of them
VERN: like we have all been together for so long that there is no one I don’t
know something about
RESEARCHER: do you make fun of them to their face or do you make fun of
them to your friends?
VERN: a combination of both
VERN: starting out to them
VERN: then my friends

In another earlier discussion, the males also said they would indirectly make fun
of a person who was a hypocrite. They said they would not come straight out all the time
and tell the person straight up that they were being hypocritical. Instead, they would
insinuate verbally that the person who was being hypocritical did not have behaviors that
matched their reports. These situations discussed thus far have been demonstrated in
previous sections and this is why examples have not been provided. It seems that
physical aggression is not a common occurrence in this group of males and in the school
environment.

Are Females Really Primarily Relationally Aggressive?

Female Physical Aggression

The female discussion group did discuss two instances of physical aggression.
The first instance described involved girls fist fighting.
LEANN: I’ve seen fists fights over guys/girls.
RESEARCHER: girls fighting?
LEANN: yup.
LEANN: over guys.
LEANN: quite often actually
LEANN: more than the guys do.
LEANN: I’ve seen blood drawn.

This example provided important evidence that girls do physically aggress against their peers. This example provided interesting factors that may lead to female physical aggression. The factors described here which may have an impact are school size and diversity. The female student who has only attended a smaller school which is fairly homogeneous has never seen a physical fight involving a girl. The girl who recently transferred from a large diverse high school reported seeing girls involved in physical fights, possibly indicating that there are important factors to consider. An additional factor which may also play a role in whether a female physically aggresses is race (Julie Bettie, 2003).

One interesting finding of this study is presented below. To introduce this next dialog I would like to note that although physical aggression has been identified to be an act against another person caused by anger, the following does not meet the criteria. Although this next piece does not meet the specified criteria set forth at the beginning of this paper, it may be physical aggression, but the physical aggression has been directed inward.

The following physically aggressive act was enacted by two females separately, involving different situations.
LEANN: I used to hurt myself.
LEANN: that was way back in the day though.
LEANN: before I had a brain.
JENNY: did you cut yourself or...
LEANN: yea.
JENNY: honey, I did too
RESEARCHER: what situations would make you want to hurt yourself?
LEANN: just everything...my mom, my dad, my grandparents, aunts,
uncles, cousins, school, life...
LEANN: just everything.
JENNY: when I fought with my parents and couldn't deal with my
emotions
JENNY: yeah, pretty much everything at times
JENNY: I also had an eating disorder so that added a lot of just like
emotions that I couldn't deal with

The discussion above is extremely significant to the aggression literature. Cutting
(or self-harm) has become a more prevalent problem in recent times and more prevalent
in the literature (Evans, Hawton, Rodham, 2004; Simpson, 2001; Web4health, 2004).
This example demonstrates that girls may actually be involved in physical aggression
more frequently than believed if self harm is considered to be physical aggression. This
type of physical aggression inflicts harm upon the individual who is angered instead of
those who are causing the anger. Unlike suicide self-harm is continually visible and done
to create and experience harm physically to express emotional pain. Whereas suicide is
meant to stop emotional or physical pain completely (BBC Health, 2006). These two
girls both described the feelings of anger that accompanied the self-inflicted physical
harm. The issue of cutting is a serious problem that has the potential to become trendy
and be ignored by others.
The female discussion indicated that appropriate mental health services, such as counseling, may help to alleviate harmful self-injurious behaviors which are caused by anger. This factor may have implications for the development of student assistance, intervention, and program development.

Female Relational Aggression

The belief that girls are relationally aggressive was somewhat confirmed through this discussion group. The girls did describe instances where they witnessed or were part of relationally aggressive acts. These acts were not mentioned as aimed at damaging relationships, but the behaviors described were meant as a reaction to being angered. An example provided by the discussion implies relational aggression.

JENNY: and then the girl being talked about just talks about whoever was talking about her to her friends
JENNY: and then it's a whole vicious cycle
JENNY: yeah, it's quite stupid actually
LEANN: I agree.

Additional situations also imply relational aggression, such as one girl described a situation where she felt like a “third wheel” when she would go places with her friend and the friend’s boyfriend. This angered the female participant and in response she would ignore the other two people and “mind her own business.” This behavior was done while she was with the other two friends. This behavior was most likely done to invoke a reaction from the other two people, and to alert the two friends that this student was feeling left out.
The girls in the discussion did state that girls are more likely to make fun of each other and talk negatively about someone they don’t like behind that person’s back. The reasoning behind why girls may be more likely to aggress relationally was described by one student.

RESEARCHER: do you find that girls talk about each other behind the person's back or too their face?
JENNY: hmmmm...well I guess it's either they do one or the other, but commonly, I'd say behind the back
JENNY: just because I think most girls are afraid of confrontaton
LEANN: yea...I'd say behind the back.

The female group did not describe many situations involving relational aggression. This topic was difficult to discuss, as it was less visible through direct discussion of behavior. Relational aggression often involves what is said and how what is said hurts a relationship or someone's feelings. The female participants did mention that they talk about others behind their backs and that girls do talk about them behind their backs. To classify this as relational aggression or verbal aggression is difficult.

A final observation, outlined below, described by one of the female students brings an additional possible factor of influence to view on whether these females are relationally aggressive.

LEANN: can I say something without sounding completely like racist?
LEANN: from what I see....the African American girls are more confrontational than the white girls.
RESEARCHER: confrontational how?
RESEARCHER: verbal or physical or both
LEANN: both.
LEANN: from what I saw...the white girls are more likely to talk behind each others' backs.
RESEARCHER: verbal to someone's face or verbal behind their backs?
LEANN: to their face.
LEANN: and to get physical.
Importantly, it appears that relational aggression is mentioned more infrequently than other aggressive behaviors. Relational aggression does seem to be present at some level, but not at a significantly higher level than physical aggression when school size is not an issue.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the aggressive acts of males and females in the context of real life situations. The goal was to look more authentically at whether or not there tends to be gender normative aggressive styles. This was accomplished by using independent focus groups composed of one group of males and one group of females. This format allowed students to discuss with a researcher and amongst themselves real situations that caused them anger and in some cases elicited aggression. The discussion participants were able to interact and create dialog in a way that promoted anonymity and in a medium they were comfortable with. Authenticity was facilitated by discussing real life situations and discussing how real life situational variables impacted students’ reaction to being angered.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework used to conduct and interpret this study proposed that anger causes aggression. Thus males and females who were angered should have aggressed in gender normative manners according to previous literature. Aggressive responses to being angered were to be interpreted as relational or physical in hopes of determining whether males and females do aggress in gender normative manners. The original purpose of the study changed due to the dialog developed by the participants and the lack of gender normative aggressive responses provided by the group during discussion. The new question is: how do students respond to being angered, whether it be aggressively or non-aggressively?
Previous research suggested and reported that by high school males were primarily physically aggressive and that females were primarily relationally aggressive. This study investigated whether these findings could be replicated in a qualitative study when context was the foundation of discussion and dialog was exchanged in a focus group where the setting could be analyzed.

Two independent groups were formed; one group composed of all males and one group composed of all females. These separate groups discussed what made them angry and in-turn how they responded to being angered. In the end, four significant themes developed. These themes are not considered to be physical or relational aggression, but relational and physical aggression were discussed briefly during the discussion.

The most commonly discussed behavior by males and females in reaction to being angered was ignoring the person or situation that was angering. This theme is important because it demonstrates that students have the ability and do cognitively choose not to aggress, and again it indicates that students do not operate in a robotic gender normative aggressive manner. Males and females both discussed how they were angered but did not aggress against those who had angered them. Instead they chose to not act out behaviorally.

The male and female group both discussed factors that were mutually effecting their decisions to act out. The main factor influencing the males’ and females’ behavior was their perceived or actual ability to make a difference by acting out. If they perceived that their efforts may be rewarded they were more likely to aggress outwardly, but if not, they did not respond.
Much of why the males and females did not respond to being angered outwardly was not presented by the discussion group. Members simply stated that they just ignored/did not respond to being angered. The male group did mention that they did take into account the person’s popularity and ability to react when deciding to react themselves. If the person was popular and looked up to in social status, they were less likely to aggress against that person and more likely to just ignore the person who was angering them.

Recent literature by Rose, Swenson, & Waller (2004) provides an explanation as to why students may chose not to react when angered when the angering student is seen as more popular or higher in social status. Adolescent students who use verbal and physical aggression are seen as more popular by their peers. In addition, female adolescents who are seen as popular are more likely to use relational aggression against their peers than non-popular girls. This indicates that these students may be less likely to aggress or react towards others when they are angered because their popular peers are more likely aggressive and may respond aggressively. Peers who are more aggressive are seen as socially dominant, superior, and popular during adolescence (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002, as cited in Rose, Senson, & Waller).

The male group provided a more thorough description of the factors which influence males to ignore what angers them. Ignoring what angered them was the most commonly discussed behavioral reaction by both the male and the female groups. It appears that males and females place a significant amount of cognitive consideration on how they respond to being angered. The study’s convenience sample selection may have
influenced why these students were able to “think through” their reaction to being angered. These students did not discuss a high frequency of aggressive acts, and they were not aggressive students, whereas research demonstrates that students who participate in aggressive acts frequently may have difficulty cognitively processing angering situations and responding appropriately (Crick & Dodge, 1994). This group of students may have the ability to process cognitively angering situations well, and they may be able to respond more appropriately than more aggressive students. These students may have been less likely to be impulsive or predisposed to react in an aggressive manner as research suggests may influence aggressive responses (Solomon Asch Center, 2000). Also, these students may have been less aggressive as research suggests that aggressive individuals often aggress habitually because of goals in instrumental nature (Solomon Asch Center), which were not demonstrated during much of the discussion.

Whether these students feel reacting will produce a desired effect or if they realize that aggressing outward is inappropriate, these factors all contribute to the growing realization that males and females may not respond to being angered always in what has been deemed “gender normative aggression.”

As demonstrated through the second theme this group of males preferred to talk with the person who had angered them in discussion format manners. Not once did a male student say they wanted to, or even had physically aggressed against someone who had angered them. The literature is lacking in understanding how often males and female students in high school confront those individuals who anger them in a discussion format,
where they simply express their points of view and try to repair rifts, misunderstandings, and those situational variables that anger students. This should be a focus of future study.

Unlike the males, the females discussed much fewer incidents of directly confronting someone through discussion who had angered them. A single incident was described by the female group that involved confrontation through discussion when angered. This situation was affected directly because the person who angered the female participate was a friend. This probably indicates why the angered girl chose to talk about why she was angered instead of behaving in more drastic or devastating aggressive manners.

The third theme that developed through this study was the finding that males and females do verbally aggress. This is the one theme that developed that confirmed the anger aggression hypothesis and previous literature. Verbal aggression in this sense is not in the form of relational aggression where the intent is to damage a relationship. Instead to goal is to cause harm directly. Again the male group discussed that they consider the variables involved in retaliating. This male group discussed that they tend to verbally aggress against someone who challenges their abilities at school and who is not perceived as being better than them at the challenged task.

The male group also discussed that they tend to verbally aggress against other students who are hypocrites. Again, these male students are choosing to aggress against someone who they see as not being able to overpower them in some sense or to have enough clout to sway opinion in their favor when confronted with being a hypocrite. The
male group discussed how they did verbally aggress against other students for a variety of reasons, but the most common influencing factor that seems to determine if they verbally aggressed was the angering person’s social status and the relationship the angered student had with the angering student. If the angering student was more powerful in social status, verbal aggression was highly unlikely. Previous research supports this finding that males tend to be involved with direct aggression such as verbal aggression when angered (Buntaine & Costenbader, 1997; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Not all of the males in this group did verbally confront those who angered them, even when these males were in the same situations. Important variables that were mentioned as influencing reactions to being angered that could be the focus of future research focus were: who the angering person was; did the angering person have authority over them, were they friends, or was it a student with social power? These were all factors mentioned as influencing the males’ behavior. Additionally, the male students were influenced by personal factors such as mood and the type of day they were having. These factors which were discussed indicate that a variety of aggressive responses are possible within the male group when considering the same angering situation. These factors of influences could be the focus of future study.

The female group described similar influencing factors on their decision to verbally aggress against those who anger them. Cognitive processing is again important to the decision to aggress. Again, the angering person’s social status is important, but a new influencing variable emerged. If these females could place themselves in the position of the person who was being picked on, they felt compelled to intervene through
verbal aggression. This indicates that compassion or possibly transference may also influence whether a female chooses to aggress verbally against another student. The finding that females do use verbal aggression confirms previous research (Buntaine & Costenbader, 1997; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004).

The forth and final theme that developed during this study was that of verbal assertiveness. Both males and females participated in this type of reaction to being angered. Both males and females directed verbal feedback to those individuals who angered them that was not meant to be hurtful or to develop a conversation/debate. These verbal assertions were to simply let those individuals know who were angered both males and female discussion group members that they had angered that person.

As evidenced in these four themes, the data suggest that males and females do not aggress in mainly gender normative manners when angered. Below is a discussion of the limited findings of physical and relational aggression found in this study and the possible reasons for these findings.

The male group did not significantly discuss any instances that could confidently be considered physical aggression. The males did not participate in nor did they witness physical aggression by other males. These findings are contrary to what the literature proposes (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). According to previous literature males should aggress against their peers in physically aggressive manners when angered and this was not the case.

The female group did not describe any situations where they witnessed or participated in physically aggressive acts at this school. A few instances of female
physical aggression were discussed by the female group as being witnessed at a different school. This provides some support for the idea that these females may actually be involved in more physical aggression than is proposed by the present research. This finding goes against what is proposed by the literature (Crick & Grotpete, 1995). Females according to previous study should aggress when angered in relationally aggressive manners, but the data did not suggest this to be the case in this study.

An interesting finding that appeared during this research was that the male group did not participate in or know of any significant instances of physical aggression, but they did discuss instances where they did participate in what could loosely be considered relational aggression. The male group discussed instances where they would spread rumors against others and that they would make fun of others to their friends. Whether these instances were meant to damage social structures or relationships is unknown, but this is quite possible. The male group did discuss one instance where they did indirectly aggress towards someone who was angering them by indirectly (mocking) making fun of them to their face. This is important because relational aggression is enacted through indirect means.

Research demonstrates that males do participate in relational aggression but not at a high rate. The males who do participate in relational aggression are at higher risk of having negative social outcomes and more problems in school (Crick, 1997).

The female group did discuss that they believe females do tend to react when angered in relationally aggressive ways, such as talking about someone behind their back, or trying to damage friendships. However, few situations were actually discussed where
relational aggression was present. This is contrary to what previous literature proposes. According to Crick and Grotpeter (1995) females should aggress against their peers the majority of the time in relationally aggressive manners. This was not present in the discussion.

The observation of relational aggression in discussion and in behavior is extremely difficult and may be a reason why it was not presented often in discussion. Although it is hard to detect through discussion, few situations that were discussed as angering were retaliated upon in any direct manner. This leads the researcher to believe that these females are more likely to ignore, or possibly directly confront the angering person through direct verbal aggression. No specific instances were directly presented or discussed that involved relationship damaging, talking about someone behind their back, or the deliberate attempt to socially sabotage a relationship. Although the females did imply that relational aggression may be a manner that females use to aggress, but they did not discuss specific instances.

Although relational aggression is hard to detect, physical aggression is more obvious. In both groups, the males and females very seldom discussed these avenues of reaction to being angered. This leads the researcher to doubt the suggestion or even the previous findings that males tend to be physically aggressive and females tend to be relationally aggressive.

The construct of relational aggression has begun to be questioned by researchers in recent literature as to the validity of its prevalence and possibly the validity of its high prevalence (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). A study conducted by Rys and Bear (1997)
tried to replicate Crick and Grotpeter’s (1995) findings that males were found to be physically aggressive and females were found to be relationally aggressive. The study discovered that males did tend to be physically aggressive but there was not significant difference between males and females in the prevalence of relational aggression. Additionally a study conducted by Espelage, Holt, and Henkel (2003) found that there were no significant sex differences between males and females and the prevalence of relational aggression.

The findings of the current study and the findings of emerging studies, which provide quantitative data, suggest that there may actually be no significant differences in the ways males and females aggress. Relational aggression, although studied heavily over the past 8 years (Espelage & Swearer, 2003), is still a new construct. Relational aggression may have just been a catchy new idea without real validity. Even if relational aggression is a valid construct, drawing a definitive conclusion in stating females are more likely to exhibit relational aggression may be a hasty decision.

Limitations of This Study

The main influencing variable that could explain why the results from this study found that these students do not aggress in gender normative manners as predicted by previous research is this study’s sample. The school in which this research was conducted is a small suburban school composed of students from grades kindergarten through the twelfth grade, with a high school population under 300 students. Additionally the majority of these students are Caucasian and would most likely not qualify for free or reduced lunch (Northwest Iowa Foundation, 2006).
These students are in small classes and have, many times, progressed through their schooling with the same classmates. The results of a larger school and a more diverse cultural setting may influence the findings of this study as indicated by one of the female group’s discussion members. Having come from a larger school with a more diverse cultural setting, this student witnessed more physical aggression by females, and these acts were most often perpetrated by minority group students. The school this student came from has near 50% of its students on free and reduced lunch (Northwest Iowa Foundation, 2006). School population stratification may have an impact on how females aggress, further investigation should be undertaken on this variable of possible influence.

The relationship between race and aggressive behavior indicates that African American students are more likely to be nominated as aggressive by their peers than other students in urban schools (Graham & Juvonen as cited in Espelage & Swearer, 2003), which lends support for the female groups comments on race influencing more aggressive behavior. Additionally, a study by Buntaine and Costanbader (1997) found that white students (88%) in a suburban school experienced significantly less anger levels than students who attended an urban school composed of 57% African American students. In addition students in the suburban school composed of a high percentage of white students were less likely to be involved in physically aggressive behaviors than the students from the urban school. The lack of diversity and school size may have had an influence on these students' reactions to being angered. Again, further investigation of this variables influence should be conducted before coming to a conclusion.
Unique Findings Discussion

This study adds to the aggression literature a unique finding. During the female discussion a topic that has recently begun to draw attention was the finding that these females were participating in cutting. Cutting is an act of self-mutilation in which students cut or burn themselves intentionally. This self injurious behavior is difficult to understand but is reported to be increasing in recent times (Liberman, 2004).

These female students were involved with cutting as a result of being angered and frustrated. Cutting is physical aggression directed against ones self instead of someone or something else.

The purpose of cutting is to create harm through an external focus of pain, just as physical aggression is intended to harm someone else as a result of being angered. The function of cutting serves a multitude of purposes from externalizing internal pain and anguish, to releasing internal emotional and physical tensions, to self-punishment, or it can even be a way students stabilize their bodies after experiencing dissociative episodes. What is important to understand is that these students are not trying to commit suicide or draw attention and sympathy from others. Instead these students are physically manifesting their emotions which they are unable to verbalize or understand. The act of cutting themselves externalizes their pain and allows them to feel that they can take control of their emotions, circumstances, and their body (Lieberman, 2004).

Emerging research indicates that females are more likely to be involved in cutting than males, where 70% of cutting is performed by females. In addition, the numbers
suggest that, nationwide, between 150,000 and 360,000 students are currently involved in cutting behaviors (Suyemoto & Kountz, 2000 as cited in Lieberman, 2004).

The fact that two females in a small group were both involved with cutting behaviors in separate incidents and during times when they did not know each other, demonstrates that cutting may be a common problem. Both of the females who discussed cutting talked about how they felt like they were the only ones doing it and how they felt like they were not in control. Both have since stopped cutting. One female participant said she just stopped because she realized that is was not a wise choice, and another female student said she sees a private therapist. It is important to recognize that aggression may be direct inwardly in females and that with cutting becoming more available through media presentations and common culture it may grow as a problem aggressive behavior in females.

As approximately 160,000 students are cited as skipping school each day because of aggression related causes (Coy, 2001; The National Education Association as cited in Trautman, 2003), it would be expected that some students in these groups have skipped school. No group member discussed any situation in which they skipped school because of a fear of physical or relational aggression. The causes as to why these students did not skip may lay in their school dynamic. Again, the participants attend a small school with little diversity, where most students would most likely not receive free or reduced lunch. This is an atypical school or school setting. But the students in this school did not discuss aggression related behaviors in which they felt threatened or needed to escape by skipping. This school represents a good portion of students in America and the types of
aggressive and non aggressive behaviors that are related to being angered that are prevalent. Why exactly these student do not feel threatened enough to skip or why these students do not participate in “gender normative” aggressive styles is not totally clear, but this study may shed light on factors influencing aggressive acts.

The conceptualization of aggression that has been proposed by Espelage and Swearer (2003), in which aggressive behaviors are dynamic, where males and females aggressive behavior tendencies lay on a continuum dictated by circumstances is promising. This study in combination with the findings of emerging quantitative studies provides evidence that males and females do not tend to aggress in gender normative manners when angered, and questioning the validity of relational aggression should be considered.

Summary

This qualitative study aimed at investigating whether males and females tended to aggress when angered in gender normative manners, by investigating how students reacted in authentic situations. What was found provides evidence that the construct of relational aggression may not be valid or that these females do not tend to react when angered through relationally aggressive means. In addition, males in this study tended to also not react in a physically aggressive gender normative manner. There were a number of more frequent non-aggressive responses to being angered. Males tended to confront individuals who angered them in a discussion format, while the females tended not to utilize this method. However, both males and females often tended to ignore the people and situations which were angering. This was the most common response to being
angered. Also, both males and females in this study were verbally aggressive towards those who angered them. Finally, both males and females also responded in verbally assertive manners to being angered.

What this means is that males and females in this study tend to react to being angered most often by *not reacting*. When they do aggress when angered, they tend to verbally aggress towards those who angered them and they are less likely to aggress in manners that are reported as “gender normative.” A final finding which may be the most important finding in this research is that of cutting. Females who are angered may tend to aggress against themselves in self-injurious manners.

In closing, it appears that these students in authentic situations did not tend to react to being angered which is a high motivation to aggress in gender normative manners. Instead they participated in other behaviors that may not be considered to be aggressive.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

CHAT DIALOGUE SAMPLE

BOB: alright I got one
DAN: lets hear it
BOB: well...just recently, as in today...our #2 tennis player discussed possibly
going out for soccer when it's crunch time at the end of our tennis season and we
really need him...he said he was going to do both
BOB: but it just pisses me off that he all of a sudden just kinda ditches out on
us
BOB: I mean he isn't ditching out %100, but I know, definately from bob,
that if someone did that from his football or soccer team, he'd be pretty upset too,
am I right sean?
DAN: well football, it's basically all or nothing
DAN: so football, definately
DAN: but soccer, it wouldn't be as bad because it doesn't take as
much time
DAN: but i know how you're feelin
BOB: yeah, but still, so late into the season
JACK: that is kind of what like someone did last year with soccer
and track...i'm sure sean remembers that
JACK: a certain someone
DAN: ?
JACK: who was really good and then just quit
DAN: oh
DAN: yes
JACK: yeah
BOB: oh, bill?
DAN: yeah
JACK: no
DAN: ?
JACK: i mean last year
JACK: jack
DAN: oh
BOB: oh yeah
DAN: well
JACK: he was good
DAN: that made me angry because he had an ego the size of
california
JACK: well that is a different story
JACK: lol
BOB: ha, ain't that the truth
DAN: and he didn't play as a team, which also made me angry
JACK: yeah
BOB: true dat
JACK: i have one if this discussion is over?
DAN: so i was kinda relieved that he quit, but also mad that he
RESEARCHER: okay. You guys were also talking about someone who left soccer or
track last year. how did their team mates respond then?
DAN: i know when that happened in soccer, i just talked about it to
see how everyone else felt
BOB: I mean, he's only lost 2 matches...his personal record is 7-2
DAN: everyone just kinda talked to each other as a team
DAN: to feel out how everyone felt
DAN: but we didn't like beat him up or anything
DAN: we told him how we felt
DAN: but that's about it
JACK: he didn't take it well
JACK: so he quit
DAN: no
DAN: that's right
BOB: yeah, well with the tennis player thing...he hasn't even played soccer in
like 4 years atleast
RESEARCHER: how did he respond?
BOB: and he's just planning on going out again
DAN: basically just voiced how he felt
JACK: he was kind of shocked
BOB: yeah, bill is like that...he thinks no one will ever talk down to him
APPENDIX B

CODING SHEET

Aggression Study Data Interpretation

Gender: M or F

Meeting: 1 or 2  Page #  Column #

Situation described causing anger

Aggressive action taken:  Physical  Relational  None Taken  Other

Description of action taken:

Individual Student Response or Group Response:

Additional Important Details: