Riding the Middle Ground: Adolescent Girl Bullying and the Pressure to be "Just Enough"

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ABSTRACT

KRISTA ANDERSON: Riding the Middle Ground: Adolescent Girl Bullying and the
Pressure to be "Just Enough"
(Under the direction of Julia Wood)

Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 20 college undergraduate women who

talked about a past experience of being bullied by another girl(s) demonstrate how

adolescent girl bullying may serve to reinforce norms of femininity and race. Participants

reported one overarching theme of the importance of being "just enough. " This primary

theme was elaborated by sub-themes of appearance, sexual development, and

intelligence. Though many of the black and white women who were interviewed

reported bullying as enforcing similar norms, a second theme specific to the black

respondents emerged. This theme had to do with the importance of responding directly

and usually verbally to their attackers. This study highlights the importance of beginning

to understand the ways in which adolescent girl bullying may enact disciplinary power

regarding gender and race norms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For the past year I have researched adolescent girl bullying, a topic that has only recently received attention from the media and scholarly researchers. My initial interest in the topic developed from my own experience of being bullied by other girls in middle school and questioning how this experience may have contributed to my current conceptions of self and relationships. After researching the topic I began to talk with other women and ask them about their own experiences of being bullied by other girls. Without exception, they were eager to share their own adolescent "horror stories" and were interested to find out more about the work I was doing. It was at this point that I realized I had struck a chord with many women who vividly remembered a past bullying experience but had not been given a forum to talk about this experience at length. This piqued my interest even further and drew my attention to the fact that this issue is just now gaining a vocabulary so that women are able to talk about it, and with that social visibility.

As I formally studied women's narratives about past bullying experiences, an unexpected theme emerged that drew both my curiosity and concern. Throughout the accounts of their bullying experiences, women repeatedly cited a need to conform. While this is not particularly unexpected during adolescent development, what interested me about these accounts were the ways in which many women reported bullying as a means of disciplining the body and conforming to conventional notions of femininity. In other

words, many women felt that a primary reason they were bullied in the past was because they didn't conform to certain idealized standards of femininity. Beyond this, many women reported feeling that to avoid being bullied by other girls they had to adopt certain feminine characteristics that were deemed "acceptable" by other girls. These acceptable "feminine" characteristics included not speaking up, dressing a certain way, playing down their intelligence, not being athletic, being athletic, not standing out in any way, and many more. As one woman I interviewed in my pilot study put it, "You had to be a little slutty and a little dumb." In light of these findings it is especially important to learn how bullying among girls may attempt to normalize certain notions of femininity.

I was also intrigued by an interview I conducted with an African American woman in my pilot study who reported how other black girls bullied her because she had lighter skin. This was the only black woman that I interviewed in the pilot study, but I thought it was important to talk with other black women in order to explore how certain notions of race may also be normalized through adolescent girl bullying. Though race issues have not been excluded from past research about adolescent girl bullying, there is little, if any, research that examines how bullying may operate to reinforce gender norms that may differ according to race. In this study, I take the perspective that it is problematic to talk about gender norms without recognizing that these norms may differ among races.

To build on my pilot study, this study seeks to explore the implications adolescent girl bullying may have for reiterating certain understandings of femininity and race. I am interested in understanding the stories women have told themselves over time about the

experience of being bullied and what these stories can tell us about societal expectations of gender and race.

Literature Review

The expectation society has placed upon girls to be "nice" and to "be friends" is key to understanding girls' social aggression. In her book, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Girls Aggression,* Simmons (2002) concludes through her research that girls do not necessarily have an aversion to anger/aggression they just express it in different ways than boys. Given this understanding, why is it that girls' expression of anger often takes on more indirect and covert forms than boys' expression? In 1992, Bjorkqvist, Osterman., & Kaukiainen conducted a study that found that girls are not necessarily opposed to aggression; however, they express anger in different ways. Bjoerkqvist et al. were some of the first to theorize that cultural rules against overt aggression led girls to enact more covert, nonphysical forms of aggression. Simmons (2002) expanded upon these findings by asserting that the societal expectation for girls to "be nice no matter what" contributes to the way that bullying takes place among girls. She argues that girls have no culturally acceptable ways to express and deal with conflict openly, so they are forced to more covert and indirect forms of aggression. This is reinforced by the approach many adults and teachers use in addressing bullying among girls, "Don't do it, be nice" (Simmons 2002, p. 5).

Research on adolescent girl bullying is best understood within the larger context of knowledge about female socialization and the role of relationships in that process. As Gilligan's (1982) Brown & Gilligan's (1992) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule's (1986) past research has shown, girls' relationships are central to their social

development. This helps to explain why, as Belenky et al. articulate, "women often silence themselves in relationships rather than risk open conflict or disagreement that might lead to isolation or to violence" (p. 3). Understanding that many women are socialized to use communication may also help explain why some women may avoid open conflict and direct verbal confrontation within their relationships. Researchers (Hall & Langellier, 1988; Johnson, 1996; Wood, 2007) have explicated how people who are socialized within feminine speech communities tend to view communication as a primary way to maintain relationships. According to Wood (2007), even from an early age, a majority of girls use communication to: 1) create and maintain relationships, 2) establish egalitarian relations with others, 3) include others, and 4) show sensitivity to others and relationships; whereas boys more typically use communication to: 1) assert ideas, 2) solve problems, and 3) attract or maintain others' attention. This may help to explain why some girls tend to avoid direct communication strategies when dealing with conflict in their relationships and instead opt for more indirect/covert forms of aggression that sometimes take the form of bullying. Consistent with this, Simmons asserts that girls are generally not taught ways to deal with aggression and conflict in open and constructive ways, but are instead encouraged to just get along and silence their emotions.

Though this may generally be the case among white middle class girls, it is important to recognize research that articulates the different ways that girls from other racial backgrounds, particularly African American backgrounds, may deal with aggression. Past research (Parker, 2001) notes black women's tendency to communicate in more direct and assertive ways than white women has led to ''Black women's communication be[ing] viewed as deviant or not feminine. Thus, the subjective meanings of

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communication in Black women's experiences are typically left undervalued or unexamined" (p. 45). As previously stated, this study takes the perspective that it is important not to judge all women according to a "white standard" and to explore the different ways black women may articulate their past bullying experiences. For example, Simmons, (2002) points to the idea that for some black girls, assertiveness may be a more attractive alternative to silence in dealing with bullying. Simmons attributes this difference in the way some black girls may negotiate their relational conflicts to socialization, particularly socialization within the family. Simmons argues that Black girls are in some senses shielded from a view of "idealized relationships" absent of conflict and aggression since parenting styles within the African American community are more likely than their white counterparts to urge their daughters to "confront the realities of human behavior, especially aggression" (p. 186). By viewing aggression in this way, some African American girls may not have the same aversion to conflict as white girls and therefore be more willing to confront it directly. This opposes the common tendency among many white girls to shy away conflict and to view aggression as a threat to relationships and therefore something to be avoided. By viewing assertion and conflict as a unavoidable component of relationships and confronting it directly, both black and white girls may be more able to stay connected to their "authentic selves" (Simmons, 2002; Brown & Gilligan, 1992) and resist the pressures of conformity that bullying may reinforce.

Currently, there is almost no research that explores how adolescent girl bullying may serve to reinforce notions of race and gender. Much of the past research on bullying has focused specifically on boys' bullying and has defined bullying as physical

aggression. Only recently have researchers begun to recognize and address social aggression among girls as a form of bullying. As the title of her book suggests, Simmons (2002) devotes her book to "telling the stories of perpetrators and victims of what I call 'alternative,' or unconventional aggressions" (p. 8). Though Simmons discusses how the social pressures to "have it all" while simultaneously having to conform to particular norms of femininity may result in girls enacting indirect forms of aggression, she neglects to address how bullying may actually serve to *reinforce* particular feminine norms. This study goes beyond past research to examine the ways in which bullying among girls may go to sustain notions of normative femininity.

One of the only sources of information that I found that highlighted the way that adolescent girl bullying may operate to enforce codes of femininity was a book authored by Leora Tannenbaum (2000).   In her book Tannenbaum questions how notions of sexuality are reinforced through adolescent girl bullying. Through her work, Tanenbaum is particularly interested in how the term "slut" is used among girls to ensure conformity to idealized feminine characteristics. Tanenbaum claims that, "in truth, the 'slut' label doesn't necessarily have anything to do with sex" and that instead "the label is a stand in for something else: the extent to which a girl fails to conform to the idea of 'normal' female appearance and behavior." (p. xv) Tanenbaum cites examples from her interviews where girls reported they were deemed "sluts" by other girls as a result of earlier physical maturation, spending time with a boy in a non-sexual manner, or even after they were raped. Regardless of the reasoning behind it, Tanenbaum argues that the use of this label in these ways reinforces patriarchal notions of what it means to be feminine and is ultimately harmful to women.

As a theoretical framework for understanding how bullying may operate in ways that reinforce notions of femininity, I draw on Foucault's (1980, 1982, 1984) theory of power. In his work, Foucault argues for a more complex understanding of how power operates in a society. Foucault critiques exclusive reliance on the sovereign model of power by asserting that it ignores the subtle operation of power in local sites to discipline individuals and groups. In his view, power cannot only be characterized as central, homogeneous, and exploitive, but should also be seen as operating in many of the subtle practices of everyday life. Similarly, Foucault recognizes that this disciplinary power does not necessarily operate from the top down, but rather operates from the bottom up in order to support larger structures of power. Although Foucault argues for a broader understanding of power, he by no means rejects the sovereign model's notion of juridical power operating at the institutional level. Instead, Foucault emphasizes that both juridical and disciplinary power operate in tandem to support one another. This understanding helps to explain how the macrostructures of power in a society (institutions, laws, political structures, etc…) are reinforced through everyday systems of micropower. Foucault also contributes to this work by articulating how the body may become a site of resistance for those who find themselves within a dominant power structure. According to Foucault, "There is no relationship of power without the means of escape of possible flight. Every power relationship implies…a strategy of struggle" (p. 225).

I find Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power and resistance particularly useful to this project. It is important to begin to understand adolescent girl bullying in terms of power and to explore how the everyday interactions girls have among each other

may serve to reinforce larger macro structures of power, particularly patriarchy, and how those structures may be resisted. Specifically, Foucault provides a framework for understanding how adolescent girl bullying may operate in their small everyday interactions as a form of disciplinary power to support the construction of normative femininity. Though not the primary focus of this study, Foucault also provides a way of understanding how some girls may enact forms of resistance in their everyday encounters with other girls.

This study makes available a discourse that recognizes the multiplicity of girls' emotions, regardless of race, especially in reference to their close relationships. In this way, it recognizes and gives voice to the ways in which women from both black and white racial backgrounds may experience discipline in the form of bullying. It also gives voice to the ways in which some women may enact resistance in particular to this form of discipline.

<div align="center">Research Questions</div>

Like Tanenbaum (2000), I think it is important to examine the ways in which patriarchal notions of femininity are perpetuated through such labels. However, in my work I was interested in looking beyond a single label girls may use among each other and exploring how the experience of adolescent girl bullying may serve to perpetuate notions of race and gender. Therefore, in this study I sought answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: In women's accounts of past bullying experiences, what, if any, themes reflect respondents' perceptions of discipline that targeted departures from peer-endorsed standards of femininity and race?

RQ2: Are there differences in black and white women's recollections of peers'

perceived disciplining of departures from standards of femininity? If so, what are

these differences?

Pilot Study

My first step toward understanding adolescent girl bullying was to conduct a pilot

study with a group of self-selected women who agreed to talk about a past experience of

being bullied by another girl(s). The rationale behind exploring the way women

remember the experience of being bullied was drawn from several influential works

(Pollock, 2005; Shank-Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Wood, 2000; Mead 1934). For this

study, I took the perspective that regardless of what happened in the actual event, the way

women remember a significant experience such as bullying has much to do with how

they respond to it in the present. Therefore, the emphasis was not on the "facts" of the

significant event, but rather the person's memory and interpretation of it. Duck and Pond

(1989) made a similar argument for the validity of retrospective accounts by stating that

such accounts represent what an event has come to mean to an individual and therefore

constitutes what "happened" in that particular moment.

The pilot study included interviews with nine women who attend a large, public

university in the southeastern United States. Prior to the conducting the interviews, I

received IRB approval and recruited women to participate in the study from various

communication studies classes at the university. The women who chose to participate

voluntarily contacted me through e-mail and then we decided on a time to meet for the

interview. They were given no compensation for participating in the interview. The

shortest interview lasted 25 minutes and the longest lasted about one hour. I asked each woman to recount her experience and asked a number of follow up questions about her interpretation of the experience. I also asked each woman about her interpretation of bullying among girls in general, in order to determine if there were any themes regarding the experience of bullying as a whole. The specific interview questions are provided in Appendix A. Once the interviews had been conducted, each interview was transcribed and the personal identifiers of the participants were and changed in order to protect their privacy. Each interview was then coded and analyzed using thematic analysis (Owen, 1984, 1985; Shank-Krusciewitz & Wood, 2001; Wood, 2001, 2004). Sub-themes were named and categorized under larger broad themes in order to conceptualize results.

<center>Pilot Study Results and Current Project</center>

The pilot study yielded several specific themes and sub-themes. Specifically, a theme of long-term consequences emerged. What was interesting about this theme was the extent to which many of these women saw their bullying experience as a defining moment after which they developed shyer personality, a lower self-esteem, or began trying to please the people around them in order to avoid being bullied by other girls. However, the second theme, "Explanations for why they were bullied," provided the most insight for the present study. Within this theme women reported that they were bullied for not conforming to certain physical, sexual, and personality ideals. After closer examination of these themes, I noticed how many of the women consistently cited a need to conform to certain notions of race and gender in order to avoid being bullied by another girl. Others reported that they felt a primary reason they were bullied by another girl was because of they did not conform to particular race or gender norms. As a result

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of these findings, my focus in the present study shifted toward beginning to understand how adolescent girl bullying may operate as a form of disciplinary power that reproduces normative femininity.

Method

After receiving IRB renewal, I continued to use the method used in the original pilot study for recruiting and analyzing participant's interviews. However, this study limited the interview participants to only those who self identified as black or white. This particular research was interested in understanding how these specific populations remember a past experience of bullying especially in terms of how they may have received pressure to conform to or acknowledge certain gender and race norms. This specific interest in race was primarily due to the results of my earlier pilot study in which issues of race were specifically raised in the account given by my only black participant. Whereas I was only able to interview one black woman in the pilot study, this study was able to include more black women in order to see if other black women recount a similar experience. Although it is certainly important to understand how bullying among girls may operate within other races to reinforce specific gender norms, I limited this particular study to women who identified themselves as either black or white.

In this study, I again used thematic analysis to identify gender and race themes that emerged within the narratives of my participants. Specifically, my work was informed by Owen's (1984), Wood's (2004), and Shank-Krusiewicz & Wood's (2001) thematic analysis methods. From Owen I drew a method for identifying themes based on recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Owen (1984) described *recurrence* as "when at least two parts of a report had the same thread of meaning, even though different working

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indicated such a meaning" (p. 275). ***Repetition*** is present when key words, phrases or sentences are explicitly repeated throughout the discourses. While the first criterion simply requires a recurrence of *meaning*, the second requires a recurrence of explicit wording. Again, a word will be considered a theme after being repeated at least two times. ***Forcefulness*** refers to, "…vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances from other locutions in the oral reports…" (Owen, 1984, p. 275-276).

In addition to Owen, I also drew on Wood's (2004) and Shank-Krusiewicz & Wood's (2001) thematic analysis methods. In Wood's (2004) study of narratives given by perpetrators of intimate partner violence, a theme across participants was determined when the theme surfaced within at least half of her interviews. In this same way, I considered a theme to have emerged across my participants when the same theme was recognized in at least half of the narratives. I also relied on these methods to address issues of verification. For this study, I adopted Shank-Krusiewicz & Wood's (2001) perspective that thematic analysis is an interpretive method where reliability is not established by intercoder agreement, but rather through a constant comparative process (Straus & Corbin, 1990; Shank-Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Through this process, when new themes were recognized, previous interviews and interpretations were revisited in order to verify the theme and to identify other locations in which it surfaced.

Study Participants

For this study I analyzed the narratives of 20 women. Of these twenty women, fifteen self-identified as white and five women self-identified as black. Each responded to an e-mail I sent out and volunteered to participate.

The ages of the participants ranged from 18-30 years. All of the participants were undergraduates who attend a large public university in the Southeastern United States and ranged in classifications from first year to senior. The women recounted experiences of being bullied from a variety of school levels including: elementary school (Kindergarten-5th grade), middle school (6th-8th grade), high school (9-12th grade), and three women recounted experiences from their first year in college. All of the women described an experience of being bullied in a school setting, though some of their experiences continued outside of the school setting as well. Most of the women's experiences happened in a public, co-ed school. Three women recounted experiences that occurred while attending a public charter school, one while attending a public magnet school, two while attending a private school. Most of the participants also reported that their schools were predominately middle to middle-upper class, while two reported their school was predominately working class. The majority of the schools where participants reported they were bullied were located in the Southern United States. However, four were located in the Northeastern United states and one school was in the Western United States.

Results and Discussion

The results of the interviews yielded one primary theme and three sub-themes across all respondents and a second theme specific to black women in this study. The main overarching theme that emerged from the data was the importance of being "just enough." This theme manifested through the sub-themes of appearance, sexual development, and intelligence. These sub-themes are visually articulated through Table I and discussed at length in the following section. The second theme, specific to my black

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participants, was the theme I entitled, "Speak Up!" This theme emphasized the importance of responding directly and usually verbally to attackers and the importance of not being shy in order to avoid being bullied by other girls. This theme also explicated how some women may resist the expectation to conform to certain gender and race norms. In the following analysis, I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

Just Enough

What was initially intriguing regarding the analysis of these interviews was the extent to which a theme emerged around the importance of being "just enough." All of the participants noted the importance of conforming to certain race and gender norms, however, they also recognized different degrees of conformity, that is, the women reported that it was not only important to conform to these norms, but to do so in the right *degree*. Some of the women I interviewed reported feeling like the bullying they experienced was a result of not measuring up to particular feminine or racial norms. In other words, these women felt like they were "not enough." Interestingly however, for others, bullying ensued as a result of their *exceeding* some of these same feminine and racial norms, or, being "too much."

For example, Jackie talked about how she felt she was bullied for not fitting into what she described as an expectation to be mediocre.

> Mediocrity *really was important*...If you weren't too pretty, weren't too smart, weren't too talented, then you were good enough. But if you were too pretty, too talented, or you wanted to be smart, or you showed that off too much where people knew, it was bad.

Celine also described how other girls bullied her for not measuring up to similar acceptable standards.

There's so much like…it's almost like…*measuring*…like whether or not you're a good person or not based on, whether or not you measure up. It's like, if you don't look like them, then you're just not good and you're not as good of a person…

Some women described being bullied for not being "just enough" even in regards to aspects that they had not control over. Specifically, many women discussed how they were bullied for not being "too much" or "not enough" in regards to their physical development. In her interview, Kristy articulated this expectation.

You want to go through puberty at just the right time, when everyone else does, you don't want to be too early or too late. Like for guys there's nothing bad about maturing early, but for girls…it's better to be right at the right time.

It became evident that in this way, disciplinary power was being enacted through the "tiny, everyday physical mechanisms" (Foucault, 1984, p. 211) of girls' everyday interactions. In their adolescent bullying experiences, many of the women I interviewed felt conformity to certain feminine and racial norms was expected among their peers at a level that was "just enough." If they failed to enact this level of conformity, many of the women described how they would face "disciplinary action" from other girls in the form of bullying. As I continued to analyze these interviews, paying particular attention to how women described how they experienced this kind of disciplinary power through bullying, several sub-themes began to emerge. These themes further articulated how bullying may operate to discipline women to conform to certain idealized feminine and racial norms. The following is a discussion of these findings.

Look good, but not *too good.*

What does it mean to be feminine in 21st century Western Society? One of the most prevalent themes throughout Western society, Wood, (2007) and others (Greenfield,

2002; Haag, 2000) have found is that, for women, appearance still counts. The results of my interviews overwhelmingly supported this assertion. In 100% of the interviews I conducted, women reported at least one instance where they were bullied for either not measuring up to certain appearance norms or for going beyond certain appearance expectations. Specifically, the women reported having to look good, but not too good. This most often had to do with clothes, hair, make-up, or other aspects of outward physical appearance. Again, this demonstrates how disciplinary power may operate within girls' relationships to reinforce normative femininity. Mary, a white woman, remembered an instance where she exceeded the norm by buying more expensive, designer clothes instead of those that everyone else was wearing.

> I have always liked to wear different kinds of clothes; I liked fashion labels and brands by designers, always kind of *funky* stuff. I wasn't wearing Abercrombie and Fitch like everyone else was, and I wasn't wearing the exact same jeans that everyone else would, I kind of had different stuff. So she would always make it a point to make it stand out and ask like, "Oh, how much does your sweater cost?" and she would say it in front of a lot of people which *really* made me uncomfortable. I've just always like to be different, and….I don't know what it was, she had a problem with me doing that.

Similarly, women also reported how bullying was used as a disciplinary mechanism if they were judged to be "too much." Celine talked about a girl in her sorority who she witnessed being bullied for being "too much."

> There was this one girl in our sorority, she was the nicest girl in our sorority, she was like, *a great human*. She was really sweet and loved other people and really gave a lot of herself and she was *gorgeous* and all sorts of people in our sorority used to find things wrong with her and pick on her and attribute malice to her when it just wasn't true….it was because they were scared of her, because she was so much prettier and had such an advantage on them that they were trying to take her down.

Three women specifically reported an instance where they watched another girl be bullied because she matched what it meant to be the "ideal." Though these are not accounts of being *directly* bullied, witnessing such events could go to indirectly reinforce the norm of being "just enough" by seeing others disciplined for overstepping that boundary.

Unlike Mary's and Celine's stories, other women reported feeling like they didn't meet accepted appearance norms and were bullied as a result. Jasmine, a black woman, talked about the way that other girls would bully her because of her appearance.

> I had cut my hair short and no one else had their hair short. I was trying to look grown up. And then those girls were like, "Look at her hair, it's not even *cute.*" And, like, I didn't wear make-up or anything because…I just didn't.

Another appearance norm had to do with size and weight. Deana, a white woman, discussed how she didn't match the "typical size" for someone her age.

> I used to get made fun of because I was 6'2 and 175 pounds in high school. I mean, that's not the *typical size* for a 14-year-old girl. So I used to get made fun of because of my weight and my height.

Like Deana, many women talked about weight as a reason for being bullied. Interestingly, no one reported being bullied because they didn't weigh *enough*, but many women talked about being bullied because they weighed *too much. Also,* many more white women than black women talked specifically about weight as a reason they were bullied. The prevalence of a thinness norm for white women is consistent with previous research (Wood, 2007; Kilbourne, 2004; Nichter, 2000; Brumberg, 1997; Franzoi, 1991; Northrup, 1995). Seeing bullying as a disciplinary power that serves to reinforce such codes of femininity helps us to understand why more white women than black women reported being bullied because of their weight. Previous research also gives insight into

why black women may not have been as concerned with the thinness norm as white women. Vilarosa (1994) states that since many traditional African societies admire full-figured bodies as symbols of power and wealth, those African American women who identify strongly with their ethnic background are less vulnerable to pressures to be thin. This would also explain why more African American women tend to be satisfied with their bodies and are less likely to pursue unrealistic physical ideals than white women (Wood, 2007; Henriques, Calhoun, & Cann, 1996; Levinson, Powell, & Steelman, 1986; Powell & Kahn, 1995; Root, 1990).

Several critiques of Western appearance ideals also gives insight into how certain appearance norms may operate among women of color. Past critiques (hooks, 1995; Garold, Ward, Robinson, & Kilkenny, 1999; Haag, 2000) have pointed out that many Western appearance ideals reflect a "white standard" that many women of color may be unable to live up to. Though this may be the case, many women of color may continue to feel pressure to fit into these cultural and societal expectations. In response, bell hooks (1995) offers a critique of the "white standard" of feminine beauty among black women by articulating a color caste system through which black women may come to see lighter skin as more desirable than dark skin. She states that some black children may even learn to devalue their dark skin and see lighter skinned or biracial women as the ideal. However, in her interview, Arianna talked about how she was bullied by other black women for obtaining this "ideal."

> I realized that a lot of it [bullying] had to do with me being fair-skinned in the black community and, they [other black women] hate that. The reason that girls couldn't *stand me* was because I was light skinned.

By taking hooks' (1995) position that many black women see having lighter skin as the ideal, Arianna was disciplined through the act of bullying for being perceived as "too much" by other black females. Though operating in different ways, this is similar to how white women reported being bullied for exceeding certain appearance standards.

Not too early, not too late

Another sub-theme that emerged emphasized physical and sexual development. Eight white women and two black women reported being bullied as a result of not conforming to a certain level of sexual maturity, or not conforming to certain standards of sexual development at the right time. Respondents consistently separated this theme from other themes making it necessary to report it as a distinct theme within this study. Specifically, this theme had to do with a number of different aspects including: breast development, body development, and starting menstruation. This was one of the most interesting themes that I found given that for most, if not all girls, controlling this aspect of their physical maturity is impossible. Nevertheless, half of my participants reported being bullied by other girls for stepping outside the bounds of what was considered "normal" physical development. Jackie recounted her experience with early sexual development:

> Basically, when I was nine, I started getting boobs. And um, obviously
> that's a lot younger than other people, but by the time I was 13 I was a full
> C cup…So we were these huge nerds and um, I ended, up…my body
> started changing you know, and a lot of people still didn't have anything
> and I was this really big *nerd*, but guys started to like me in middle school
> and that posed a big problem for the really popular girls…So I would go in
> the hallway and the guys would start yelling stuff at me and girls started
> yelling stuff at me and laughing at me and then there were these jokes
> about me and my body.

Celine also talked about how she and other girls bullied a girl in their group because she developed too soon and stepped outside the norm. Even though this girl was Celine's "friend" and within the same clique of friends, Celine recalled the "torture" she and the other girls put her through.

> We were all little, scrawny, skinny, kids and she was the first one to go through puberty. And we just gave her *unbelievable hell* about it, things we used to come up with were *so terrible*. I just remember that she got pubic hair really early and we used to bring it up almost every single day at school. Like, we'd call her a carpet, and all sorts of things in front of the boys and we turned against her and almost became vicious towards her. It was terrible. We would just do things to highlight her chest and like do all sorts of things to draw attention to it and make her feel badly about it.

In the end, Celine said that this girl left the school as a result of this kind of bullying. Although this is not Celine's story of being bullied, it is consistent with the stories other women told and may also serve to reinforce the norm of appropriate physical development among girls who participated in the bullying.

Conversely, other women talked about bullying as a result of not developing quickly enough.

> And of course you have these girls that could pass for 18 at 13…just simply because genetics developed them faster so they looked like women at 13 years old. I was sort of on the other end…it took me awhile to catch up so I sort of *paid for that* in essence which, biologically, was completely out of my control. (Ally)

The need to conform to particular norms for "coming of age" in order not to be bullied was articulated in many of the interviews. Several women even reported not recognizing these norms at first, but quickly being educated into their importance.

> I remember my first day of middle school and every girl in my homeroom looked at me like, *you don't shave your legs?* And I didn't know I was supposed to shave my legs…and so girls deal with, the first one to get

their period, the first one to grow breasts, the first one to shave their legs, and that's all very…public. And that all has to conform, like if you get your period early, if you get your period late, if you don't wear a bra, if you do wear a bra, if you do shave your legs if you don't shave your legs, it's very…girls know those things. (Amelia)

In these examples, it is clear how bullying among girls may act as a disciplinary force to reinforce certain norms of sexual maturity. What is interesting about the way these norms are reinforced is how it seems to happen through the everyday interactions girls have with one another. In the last sub-theme I identified, intelligence became the emphasis of further discipline.

The Achievement Gap

Although appearance norms were by far the most reported reasons for being bullied, more than half of the respondents also talked about being bullied for achieving too much or for being too smart. For example, Jackie talked about being bullied because she achieved too much.

> I mean, I wanted to go to a good school, I got good grades, I loved to sing, I loved to be in plays, I loved to you know, do shows, it was fun. And it wasn't quite normal, you know everyone there was mediocre, it was what you had to strive to be. Get your B's and your C's, be on the soccer team, go to Girl Scouts, that kind of thing. And that was what was cool, but I never did any of that.

Ally had a similar experience where the girl who was bullying her admitted she was doing it because she exceeded the norm.

> She told me…she came over to my house once with a mutual friend of ours and she told me that she was jealous because I was the one who made all the friends really easily and was better than her at school and she was just really jealous about that.

Being too smart was also something that several girls talked about. Specifically,

Nina talked about not wanting to be perceived as smarter in order to avoid being bullied

by other girls.

> I guess, I didn't really want to act like…I didn't want to show that I was
> smarter than them. Like in class I would definitely hesitate to answer
> questions and try to dumb down in everything that I did…really until high
> school, because I didn't want to like, stand out at all.

> However, in Celine's instance, she was bullied not because of something

she did herself, but because she was associated with someone who stepped

outside of the norm.

> One of my good friends that we had always grown up with started
> becoming more of a bookworm…like more of an academic type. So they
> sort of turned on her and started calling her a nerd, but we were like best
> friends, we were really close and I didn't want to turn on her, I wanted to
> stay friends with her. So they started making fun of *me* and telling me that
> I was a nerd and why was I hanging out with losers and all of that stuff.

Again, though these girls had all been "friends" at some point, because Celine and her

friend would not conform to the norm, other members of the group ostracized them.

Other women, like Brenda, talked about how they were bullied directly by other girls for

being smart.

> I got picked on for being smart all the way up until middle school
> probably. When I was 10, I remember a group of girls who I remember
> being pretty intelligent themselves, but when the boys were around they
> would choose not to be smart. And I would choose not to be that way, so
> they would pick on me for getting good grades and they didn't want me to
> show off my grades…I think a lot of that dynamic came from how girls
> thought that other boys were looking at them.

> Interestingly and perhaps sadly, my finding that young women are pressured to

appear to be not too smart is consistent with past research. Holland and Eisenhart (1992)

have examined how women may be expected to conform to certain norms that may have

implications for their academic and career pursuits. In their book, *Educated in Romance,* Holland and Eisenhart report on a 10-year study of what they term a "culture of romance." Within this "culture" Holland and Eisenhart found that many college-aged women begin to view being attractive to men as more important than academics or career development. Although there are several factors that go into creating this "culture of romance" within the academic setting, one of the main factors that Holland and Eisenhart found was that women feel intense peer pressure that emphasizes being attractive to men over anything else. Athough Holland and Eisenhart's research focuses on college-aged women, there are certainly similarities between this "culture of romance" and the discipline through bullying Brenda experienced because she was too smart and not willing to compromise that in order to be attractive to boys.

<u>Speak up!</u>

As previously mentioned, it is problematic to talk about women's experiences without recognizing the differences that may exist due to race. As I analyzed the women's interviews, I was intrigued to find that there were few differences between black women and white women in the reasons for bullying. Appearance norms, sexual development norms, and intellectual norms were all themes the women I interviewed acknowledged regardless of race. However, I found one theme that was specific to the black women I interviewed. Whereas both white and black women talked about being bullied because they were shy, the black women I interviewed more often placed emphasis on the importance of not being shy in order not to be bullied by other girls. Additionally, all of the black women I interviewed reported responding directly and usually verbally to their bully as opposed to three of the 15 white women I interviewed.

This is consistent with past research (Johnson, 2000; Parker, 2001; Simmons, 2002; Houston, 1992, 1997) that expresses the value black women place on using assertive and direct communication. For example, Jasmine, a black woman, talked about how she enacted resistance by talking back to her attackers.

> I mean, I'd call them names back too, I mean I can't lie, I'm not one of those people who would just sit there and take it…I made smart remarks back…I guess they just though I would sit there and take it but I am *not* that kind of person.

When I asked Brenda, also a black woman, how she responded to the girls who bullied her because she was "too smart" she said,

> I would confront them, especially if they were my friends, I would say, 'Why are you making fun of *me* for being smart when you're just as smart as I am?' And I ended up losing a couple of friends because they couldn't answer me or because it would be like me throwing it in their face that they were doing that for a boy…

In contrast, white women were more likely to not say anything and use indirect and/or passive means to cope with the bullying. For example Linda, a white woman, expressed her frustration with not being able to do anything about the bullying she experienced from her "friends."

> Honestly, at the time I know I was kind of unhappy, but I guess I just thought it was something…that this was *how life was*. That these girls would get mad at you and you couldn't do anything about it. These were the people that the world was made up of and there wasn't anything you could do about it except just live with it.

Other white woman reported that they tried to ignore the bullying or used avoidance to cope with the situation.

> I really did keep to myself. Because, you know, when you're in a room with a bunch of books and art supplies, who can hurt you? (Amanda)

> I guess I just tried to be nice to them and hope that they wouldn't do it again. I guess that was just the best way to deal with it, because if I had

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tried to retaliate against it, then they would just get more angry at you and make you an outcast so you basically had to just win them back. (Kristy)

Although my data do not allow me to generalize about how all black women and all white women respond to bullying, these responses from black participants in my study can be more fully understood by looking at past research different races. According to Johnson (2000), within the black community there is a distinct value placed on language that is not found in most of white America. This primacy of the Word places particular emphasis on "orality and the significance of what is said by individuals" (p. 127). Johnson states that this underlying cultural theme goes to support the importance of "songs, stories, and folk sayings as well as the emphasis on lively, verbal interchange and expressiveness between people" (p.127). This understanding of the importance African American culture places on verbal expression may help to explain why many more black women than white women responded more verbally and directly to their attackers.

Other research (Simmons, 2002; Brown & Gilligan, 1992) has articulated how these responses may serve as a form of resistance in the Foucaultian sense, allowing women to resist conformity and remain connected to themselves and to authentic relationships. Though this form assertion and direct confrontation may not always lead to higher self-esteem in dealing with bullying (Simmons, 2002; Brown & Gilligan, 1992), it is important to recognize this response as a form of resistance to the indirect aggression many girls enact within their close relationships.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide further insight into how bullying may operate as a form of disciplinary power that reinforces certain norms of femininity as those intersect with notions of race. What is particularly interesting about how bullying may operate in

this way is the extent to which it happens through the everyday interactions girls have with each other. This is consistent with Foucault's (1980, 1982, 1984) theorizing of how larger structures of power (in this case, normative femininity) are supported through "tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms" (1984, p. 211). The themes of appearance, sexual development, and intelligence all emerged within the interviews to suggest that bullying may operate in ways that reinforce these particular feminine ideals. Additionally, these themes manifested within the theme of being "just enough" and all the women I interviewed a need to not only conform, but to do so in the right degree. Although it was somewhat less clear from the results of this study how racial norms may be disciplined through adolescent girl bullying, the theme entitled, "Speak Up!" surfaced only in the remembrances of black women as opposed to white women. However, this theme articulated a way that conformity to normative femininity may be resisted through direct verbal confrontation in girls' everyday interactions.

Women and Conformity

Though this study focuses specifically on women, it is problematic to say that gender conformity is only issue that affects a particular gender. The need to be included and to belong is a basic human desire that transcends biological sex and gender (Maslow, 1998). Similarly, the requirements for belonging may vary among groups such as males and females, blacks and whites. For example, past research has shown that male bonding in peer groups reinforces masculine identification in most boys as young boys enter adolescence (Gaylin, 1992; Kerr, 1999; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Messner, 2001; Wood, 2007). Given this research, it is plausible to theorize that boys bullying may go to reinforce certain notions or normative masculinity. Similarly, Greenfield (2002) and

Reay (2001) note that groups of female peers reinforce femininity in most girls. During

adolescence, peer acceptance becomes so important that many girls (as well as boys) will

do whatever is necessary to gain approval from their peers. (Wood, 2007) As Kristy put

it,

> I think it's just that desperate need for…the desperate need for people to
> like you, even though you don't necessarily like everybody else. You
> can't have someone specifically not like you, but it's Ok to talk about
> somebody behind their back…that's not seen as aggressive as it is.
> For both men and women, gendered norms can start in early childhood with the

way they use communication. In the games that girls play as children, communication

tends to encourage cooperation, egalitarian relations, and inclusion whereas boys'

communication encourages control, problem solving, and assertion of ideas (Wood,

2007). For girls it is also important not to outdo or criticize or put down others, and if

you must criticize it should be done gently. This particular emphasis on egalitarian

relations and not outdoing others gives insight into why some girls may use bullying to

discipline others in order to maintain a status quo.

Limitations

Although this study expands our understanding of adolescent girl bullying and

how it may operate as a form of disciplinary power, it is not without limitations. The

primary limitation is the population I choose to study.

First, the emphasis of this study was on gender, specifically, how normative

femininity may be reproduced through adolescent girl bullying. Though this is certainly

an area worth of study, this emphasis does not allow for the exploration of how

adolescent girl bullying may reinforce other norms that go beyond gender. It also does

not allow for the exploration of boys' bullying and how boys' bullying may operate in similar ways to reinforce normative masculinity.

Second, by only examining only black and white women's experiences of adolescent girl bullying, the present study excludes the experiences of women from many other racial backgrounds. As a result, this study does not be able to explore how normative femininity may be reproduced in different ways among other racial groups through adolescent girl bullying. It is also not able to discuss how other racial groups may interpret the experience adolescent girl bullying differently. However, this limitation was necessary for the present work in order to more fully examine how adolescent girl bullying may operate within these two particular races. This study was also limited by the fact that I was only able to interview five black women. Future studies should include a larger representation of black women to determine if these results remain consistent.

With regard to my population, another limitation to this study is the fact that a majority of participants were Southern. This may mean that the results of this study may not represent the general experience of adolescent girl bullying, but may only tell us about the experience of bullying in the Southern United States. Though the women I interviewed from other regions of the U.S. reported similar experiences to those who were from the South, it is still important to conduct future studies with women from a more representative sample of different regional backgrounds.

Another limitation of this study is that I only interviewed women within the University setting. However, I was pleased to find that I had a relatively diverse sample of women from a number of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The women in the

study had attended both public and private schools, and had experiences in both co-ed and all-girls schools. This diverse sample is partially due to the fact that the university where I am conducting my research is a large public University with a diverse population of students. The University accepts students from a broad range of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds thus allowing the population for my study to reflect this range. Nevertheless, this research was limited in that it did not reflect the experiences of those women outside the university setting.

Finally, this study only focuses on the experience of adolescent girl bullying within the Western United States. Little, research has focused on how adolescent girl bullying may operate differently in countries outside the West. Since adolescent girl bullying has only recently emerged as an important topic of scholarly research, there is still much more we can learn about how adolescent girl bullying operates among girls in the West.

Future Research

This study suggests a number of areas for future research in the area of adolescent girl bullying. Specifically, future research should focus on other groups such as men and other races in order to determine how bullying may reinforce different other norms within these groups. For example, in her interview, Brenda articulated the importance of solidarity among black women and how she was bullied by other black women for being perceived as not wanting to be a part of the black community because of her behavior.

> I think that there's a definite sense that there needs to be a solidarity between black women, whatever that solidarity means, I mean, there's just this sense that you have to stick together because you're stuck in this sort of double bind by being black and female…It was like, you're *betraying* a racial boundary. And then basically being like, 'you think you're better than us because of that.'

Brenda's assertion about the importance of solidarity is consistent with past research that describes community, harmony and connection as one of the one of the most dominate themes among many African Americans. (Johnson, 2000) Though this was not identified as a theme among all the black women I interviewed, it would be interesting to explore how bullying may operate to discipline specific norms and create solidarity among different racial communities.

Second, future research should examine the implications adolescent girl bullying may have for women's future relationships. What was interesting to me as I analyzed my participant's interviews was that almost all of the women I interviewed talked about not being able to trust women in general or in groups as a consequence of being bullied. It was also interesting to hear how many women reframed their bullying experience. Many women maintained that although their experiences were initially hurtful, they also had been beneficial in their overall development. Although consequences of bullying were not the focus of this study, future research should examine how bullying may influence women's future relationships to themselves and others.

Regardless of the direction future research may take, it is important to continue to address adolescent girl bullying and the implications it may have for women's lives. I close with a quote from Ally, who articulates the severity of the problem and the need for increased knowledge and action around this issue.

> What they [people] need to know is that for girls, it's really *psychological torture for years.* And like now, I still consider that girl my mortal enemy…I don't know that I'll ever forgive her. I don't know if I'll ever be able to be in the same room with her and not…*react.* Even if I'm 80. It's traumatic, and I think that people need to acknowledge that and act appropriately.

Appendix A
Interview Questions

1. Where did you go to school?

2. Was it public or private? All girl or co-ed?

3. What were the predominate races and socioeconomic classes?

4. From talking to and reading about other girls' experiences with bullying I've found that there are numerous ways that bullying can take place. Is there one experience of being bullied by another girl that particularly stands out? What happened?

5. How long did this experience last?

6. Can you describe the kinds of behaviors the girls who bullied you enacted? What did you do exactly and how did you feel about it?

   o Can you tell me more about how you felt pressured to conform?

   o Can you tell me more about what sorts of things girls had to do *in order to not be bullied* by other girls?

   o Were things ever resolved between you and the other girl(s)?

   o Was there anything about this experience difficult to deal with?

   o Were you surprised that these/this girl(s) bullied you?

7. Did you ever seek support from teachers, parents or peers when you were bullied? What was the response? Did this change the situation?

   o What helped you most to deal with this situation?

8. As you recount this experience, how does it make you feel?

9. If you had a chance to go back to this experience is there anything you would do differently?

10. How did being bullied in this way make you feel at the time? How does it make you feel today?

11. In your opinion, why do you think girls act this way?

   o   Do you see this going on now that you're older?

12. How do you feel about girls who act toward each other in this way?

13. Do you think your relationships with other girls have been affected by being bullied in the past?

14. Do you think girls have always acted in this way or is it a recent development?

15. Does the larger society influence the desire for girls to act in this way? In what way?

16. How do you think your experience compares with that of other girls/women? How is it the same? How is it different?

17. How do you think your experience compares to how boys are bullied?

   o   Do you think boys are pressured to conform by other boys in similar ways?

Appendix B
Themes & Sub-themes

	Appearance	Sexual Development	Intelligence/ Achievement	Speak up!
Black Women (5 total participants)	5	2	3	5
White Women (15 total participants)	15	8	9	1

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