



Are Girls Behaving Like Boys?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the issues that have given rise to the perception of an increase in aggressive behaviour by females. It asserts that merely comparing girls' behaviour with that of boys, especially the claim that "girls are behaving like boys", trivialises the very real issues associated with females and aggression. This paper will refer to recent research into girls and aggression and will also propose that the prevailing discourse of gender dualism contributes to the lack of early identification and support services for girls at risk of severe aggression at adolescence.

Research Paper

Keywords

Adolescents, aggressive behaviour, gender differences, girls, sex roles, stereotypes, youth justice.

CONTEXT

There is general agreement, across a wide range of disciplines including developmental psychology, social psychology, psychiatry and criminology, that in most cultures males far outnumber females in terms of anti-social or aggressive behaviours (Baillargeon et al., 2007; Batchelor, 2005; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter & Silva, 2001). However, over the past 20 years, there has been a growing perception that females are becoming more aggressive and that this aggression is becoming more violent and overt (Batchelor, 2005; McKnight & Loper, 2002; Pate, 2002; Ringrose, 2006). This perception is supported by court statistics which indicate an actual increase in the number of females charged with serious offences of aggression, and over the past 20 years countries such as England, Scotland, Canada, United States of America, Australia and New Zealand have reported a significant increase in convictions (Batchelor, 2001; Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000; Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002; Pate, 2002).

Whereas historically, academic studies, journal and other media articles about aggression have focused almost exclusively on males and male aggression, there has been a significant increase in academic publications, popular stories, media articles, film, television and video games that feature aggressive adolescent females (Pate, 2002; Ringrose, 2006). The media has presented girls' aggression as a growing problem, with headlines such as 'The rising tide of female violence' (Brown, Burman, Tisdall & Batchelor, 2002), 'Pitbull Women: A new breed' (McLeod, 2006) and 'Alarm over rise in violent crimes by young women' (*The Press*, 2004). At the

same time, these publications undermine serious debate of the issue by publishing trivial and sensationalised accounts of "raunchy" teenage girls engaging in sexually at-risk behaviour (see, for example, Mann, 2007). A recent example of this has been a string of diverse articles in the *Dominion Post* newspaper that have focused on adolescent girls and alcohol. These articles do include a serious discussion of the issues, notably a recent research study from Wellington Hospital (Quigley, 2007) which supports anecdotal evidence of a significant increase in the number of young women admitted for alcohol-related difficulties. However, these articles also include trivial and sensational front page headlines such as 'Blokettes told to behave like ladies' (Nichols, 2008). The latter article was published alongside a photograph of anonymous, apparently drunk, barely-dressed young women, staggering along Courtney Place. Additionally, serious media stories of child abuse and death remind the public that New Zealand has the highest level per capita, in the developed world, of mothers who kill their children. However, this issue is frequently sensationalised by publications such as the June 14th, 2003, issue of *New Idea* which featured a shallow and sensational article entitled 'Women Who Kill', ironically presented in its "good read" section (Ramsland, 2003).

In addition to the sensationalised media coverage mentioned above, the perception of an increase in adolescent female aggression has also been fuelled by popular culture and the increasing availability of technologies such as the internet chat rooms and mobile telephones, with their capacity for sending text messages and images rapidly to a large number of people (Raskauskas, 2007). Several popular books have been published over the past few years that have highlighted this aspect of "typically female" aggression (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Simmons, 2004; Wiseman, 2002). Television reporters, like the newspaper and magazine reporters noted earlier, have a tendency to embellish their news stories with unrelated sensational images, as in the story about female adolescent bullying behaviour that was presented by Television New Zealand news recently. It related the individual account of a young, Auckland female victim of bullying being escorted home by a security guard. This story was given additional background visual titillation, with mobile telephone film footage of a gang of unidentified, female adolescents fighting. The fact that this was American footage and these were American girls and the story completely unrelated to the Auckland teenager was not mentioned.

With such powerful promotion, the perception of a tidal wave of adolescent female aggression is hardly surprising. However, statistics are notoriously unreliable and media stories all require further investigation (Batchelor, 2001). Many academic studies into the topic bemoan the lack of understanding of female aggression, particularly the assumption that females who behave aggressively are behaving like boys (Batchelor, 2001; Pate, 2002; Pepler, 2003). As 'most explanations of violence are based on studies of men's violence ... female violence is either "masculinised" or seen as a manifestation of madness, hence the view that violent women must be either trying to be men or just crazy' (Brown et al., 2002, p. 1). These researchers challenge the assumption that more girls are behaving more aggressively and call for further research into the aetiology and social contexts specific to female aggression. They point out that the denial of female potential for aggression and the historical lack of academic interest on the topic has meant that there is a severe shortage of gender-specific early intervention and support strategies for those few girls at risk of serious aggressive behaviour.

GIRLS AND AGGRESSION

As previously stated, severe aggressive behaviour is far more common in young men than in young women. However, it is the contention of this paper that there have always been a small number of girls whose behaviour could be described in this way. In 1974, Maccoby and Jacklin wrote that:

We have been emphasising male aggression to the point of allowing females to be thought of, by implication, as either angelic or weak. Women share with men the human capacity to heap all sorts of injury on their fellows. And in almost every group that has been observed, there are some women who are fully as aggressive as the men. (p. 247)

For a number of reasons, including male dominance of historical studies of aggression (Miller, 2000), aggressive girls have been seen as "other" (Ringrose, 2006) and those who have been acknowledged have been variously demonised, pathologised, or both (McKnight & Loper, 2002). In other words, because female aggression challenges stereotypical notions of femininity, historical studies of aggression and violence have simply ignored females. The result of this bias is that the descriptive vocabulary and understanding of female violence is limited and so females who do behave aggressively have been described as "unfeminine", "unnatural", "unhinged", "hysterical" and "pathological" (Brown et al., 2002). Throughout history, characters such as Myra Hindley, the notorious British "moors murderer" and New Zealand baby killer Minnie Dean, have been depicted as the epitome of evil, at once feared and despised. Girls who do display physical or overt aggression are frequently rejected by their peers (Arnott, 1998) and tend to drift out of school early and into mixed sex relationships with deviant males. 'Without a vision of their career potentials and a sense of their rights for safety, aggressive girls may default to a trajectory of early pregnancy and victimisation at the hands of a deviant partner' (Brown et al., 2002, p. 48). Many studies, including the Dunedin longitudinal study (Moffitt et al., 2001), highlight the ongoing difficulties experienced by young

women who behave aggressively. They point out that, as adults, these girls are more likely than boys to experience internalising disorders such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (Pepler, 2003). They are also far more likely than males to select antisocial partners; increasing the likelihood of ongoing aggressive interactions (Leschied et al., 2000). These alliances frequently result in teenage parenting, domestic violence and female depression, creating a poor outlook for the next generation (Moffitt et al., 2001).

In 2001, findings from the Dunedin longitudinal study of 1000 males and females (Moffitt et al., 2001) were published. These findings identified two main causes of anti-social behaviour: the first being a relatively rare, life-persistent, early childhood onset, neuro-developmental disorder most commonly experienced by males; and the second being adolescent-limited of short duration, as common in females as males and emerging in the context of social relationships. The study emphasises the similarities between males and females who experience this latter form of anti-social behaviour, claiming that:

sex differences with this form are negligible; for example, the anti-social activities of males and females are especially alike when alcohol and drugs are involved, near the time of female puberty, and when females are yoked with males in intimate relationships. (Moffitt et al., 2001, p. xvi)

A Canadian review of the literature regarding female adolescent aggression (Leschied et al., 2000) partially supports this theory of similarity, but suggests that 'it is in the emerging set of differences that the implications for these findings reside' (p. 36). These writers point out that the degree of female aggressiveness has been underestimated in previous studies, largely because the particular forms of aggression relevant to girls' peer groups have not been assessed. Referring to studies by Crick and Dodge (1994, 1996) and Pakaslahti, Spooft, Aplun-Peltola and Keltikangas-Jarvinen (1998), Leschied et al. (2002) state that 'aggression with girls is more likely to be reflected in indirect or relational as opposed to overt forms' (p. 37). Batchelor (2001) expands on this argument, stating that:

A common understanding of violence is of an intentionally harmful, interpersonal physical act such as punching or kicking ... (a notion) challenged by many of the girls that we spoke to, who maintained that verbal behaviours (such as name calling, threats and intimidation) were often intended and experienced as potentially more hurtful and damaging than physical violence. (p. 1)

Girls more than boys are socialised in the culture to value and define themselves within relationships (Artz & Nicholson, 2002), therefore girls who manipulate others to attack the victim or, by other means, make use of social structures in order to harm another person are seen as acting in aggressive ways (Leschied et al., 2000, p. 37).

Moffitt et al. (2001) suggest that females are more likely to express their aggression "behind closed doors" or in the confines of family and close relationships (Pepler, 2003).

It is only recently that the extent of female-instigated domestic violence has been reported and acknowledged (Connor, 2002; Fergusson, Horwood & Ridder, 2005) and most studies now indicate that women initiate violence at least as often as men (Goodyear-Smith, 2004). For example, in 2003, an Auckland University of Technology study claimed that 50 per cent of the 1400 Pacific Island women surveyed 'admitted to violent behaviour in the home, with nearly 50 per cent saying they had attacked their partners by kicking, biting, strangling or using a weapon' (p. 1). Much publicity has been given to the suggestion that females are just as likely to be perpetrators of domestic violence. Websites have been established to support the "new victims of domestic violence" (see, for example <http://www.batteredmen.com/>). There is, however, considerable correlation between female victimisation, both physical and sexual, and adolescent aggressive behaviour (Pate, 2002). Studies indicate that aggression for these girls is adaptive, and may be viewed as a means of avoiding subsequent abuse or victimisation. Artz and Nicholson (2002) suggest that these females see themselves, and all females, as less important than males, and view other females as competition for the attention of "their" male partner. Similarly, Ayduk, Downey and Kim (2001) suggest that aggression in females is frequently linked to fear of rejection and Hennessy and Wiesenthal (2005) note that fear, anger and perceptions of provocation have been found to heighten the potential for female aggression.

Research from the field of neuropsychology emphasises the biological differences between males and females, but also indicates that aggression in both sexes is due to a complex interaction between genetic predisposition and known environmental risk factors (Ridley, 2003). It appears that early puberty is particularly significant as this not only sets girls apart from their peers but also exacerbates the gap between biological, cognitive and social maturity (Gluckman & Hanson, 2006). 'Without the ability to reason, plan and understand long term consequences, those experiencing early puberty are especially vulnerable and in both boys and girls, early pubertal development has been linked to increases in deviant behaviour including more norm violations, sexual precocity, contact with the law and truancy' (Magnusson 2000, cited in Miller, 2000, p. 21).

ARE MORE GIRLS BECOMING MORE AGGRESSIVE?

Despite the media hype, many recent studies challenge this assumption, noting that, despite the increased publicity and awareness, there is still considerable misunderstanding of both the aetiology and social contexts for adolescent female aggression and a consequent lack of early identification and intervention for girls at risk of developing seriously aggressive behaviour (Leschied et al., 2000).

As indicated earlier, statistics can be misleading, and may be skewed by factors such as changes in legislation, in priorities within the justice system, in social expectations and in demographics. For example, because the number of young females apprehended for aggressive behaviour is very small, any numerical increase will appear as a very large percentage increase (Batchelor, 2001). Pate (2002) recounts a story from a Canadian provincial newspaper which cited a 200 per cent

increase in female crimes of aggression. On investigation she found that there had only been an increase from one case to two cases over a period of three years. In New Zealand, despite an apparent increase in the number of young women apprehended for serious offences, the Ministry of Justice statistics summary states that 'When the population increase is taken into account, the apprehension rate for both young males and young females actually declined over the period' (Chong, 2007, p. 2).

Many researchers now suggest that the increase in convictions reflects a sharp increase in the criminalisation of young women's survival skills (Pate, 2002; Ringrose, 2006). Pate (2002) cites inequalities in support systems for young women and systemic bias in the judiciary system as further factors to be considered. She claims that the relaxation of traditional social controls has led to increased use of the juvenile justice system as a way of managing the "unmanageable" behaviour of adolescent girls. Lashley (2002) notes that an increase in the number of females with authority in the judiciary and the police has recently led to women being treated as 'fully functioning adults who are responsible for their behaviour' (p. 90) and that the female prison population is growing as a result. A study from Kansas State University reports that the judiciary in the United States of America is 'cracking down on women' (*Dominion Post*, Friday 2nd December 2005, B2) Other studies claim that media responses to women's violence have increased dramatically since the 1970s, with a "new mythology" linking feminism and the women's movement to violent offending by women (Phillips, 1999). Following a spate of reports of female violent offending in the United States of America, Fox News reported that, 'the gender equality efforts over the last twenty years – coupled with a general increase in mean-spiritedness – have pressured girls to become more aggressive to the point of violence' (Beaucar, 2001).

Ringrose (2006) blames a backlash against feminism for the current "moral panic" about adolescent female aggression, claiming that 'The dual dynamic of both fear and repudiation of feminism (painted by McRobbie) is indicated by the enormous panic girls' aggression incites' (p. 419). In discussing the unprecedented media attention to girls' aggression, she states that the 'vulnerable girl has recently been replaced by the "mean girl" in public consciousness' (p. 406). Chesney-Lind (2002) states 'As young women are demonised by the media their genuine problems can be marginalised and ignored. Indeed, girls have become the problem' (cited in Pate, 2002, p. 5).

GENDER DUALISM

This article contends that historical denial of females' potential for aggression stems from the belief that such behaviour is biologically unnatural, challenging the gender stereotype of females as naturally gentle and nurturing. Many studies have demonstrated that boys' aggression is not only indulged but may be actively encouraged (Gross, 1996) and the statement "boys will be boys" used to excuse such behaviour. Little girls, on the other hand, are encouraged to be good, quiet, and compliant (Middleton & Jones, 1997). There are certain types of characteristics usually associated

with males and females (Ridley, 2003). In general, males are associated with adjectives such as adventurous, determined, opinionated, rational, serious, and tough, whereas women are more likely to be described as cautious, emotional, fickle, modest, frivolous and weak (Williams & Best, 1994). Gender stereotyping increases between the ages of 5 and 8 years and continues to increase throughout adolescence whilst the diversity between cultures decreases as children get older; that is, stereotypes become more similar across cultures with age (Williams & Best, 1994). This gender dualism pervades all aspects of life across all cultures, and 'The seduction of binaries such as male:female, boy:girl often prevents us from seeing the full range of diversity and differentiation existing in one gender as well as between categories of male and female' (Reay, 2001, p. 159). Girls at risk of serious aggression at adolescence, particularly those who have been physically or sexually abused, are known to internalise their difficulties until puberty and do not come to the attention of teachers or other authority figures until that time (Arnott, 1998). It is the contention of this article that the girls who are noticed prior to puberty are the physically active and challenging "tomboys" who deny the stereotype and enjoy the rough and tumble games of their male counterparts (Reay, 2001). This opinion is informed by the personal experience of the writer.

As a child, the writer certainly did not fit the gender stereotype for little girls. She was boisterous – bigger and tougher than the other girls and her best friend was a boy. Together they made up fantastic role play games, took her sister's dolls apart to see how they worked, climbed trees, played cricket and made models from Meccano. At school, teachers found this behaviour challenging and she was frequently blamed for behaviour that she did not commit. Her extended family called her a tomboy; described by the Oxford Dictionary as "A bold or immodest woman" (Fowler & Fowler, 1979) and by the Penguin Dictionary as "A girl who behaves like a boy" (Garmonsway, 1979). However, in common with most tomboys, she became a confident and flexible adult, able to 'reap important benefits in adulthood, such as better psychological adjustment, and higher self esteem' (Van Volkom, 2003). In adult life she worked at a residential therapeutic community, where she witnessed severely aggressive adolescent female behaviour which bore little resemblance to the rough and tumble physicality of the "tomboy" that she had been. These girls had such severe emotional and behavioural problems, expressed as aggression towards other people, objects (usually windows) and themselves, that they were unable to live safely at home or in the community. In accordance with the theory of victimisation discussed earlier, these girls all had histories of childhood sexual abuse yet had not been identified as in need of help until they reached puberty. On the contrary, they had internalised their difficulties, indulging in acts of self-harm and self-medication, such as cutting of arms and legs, inhaling substances such as butane gas lighter fuel and aerosol propellant, and sexual promiscuity.

The behavioural patterns of these girls support the theory suggested by Moffitt et al., (2001). Their aggressive behaviour did not become apparent until puberty, from which time the severity increased dramatically. They regularly abused

alcohol and other substances and all of them created strong attachments to older, deviant males. Many of the girls developed such extreme psychiatric difficulties that they were committed to secure accommodation for their own and others' safety. There is an enormous qualitative difference between the behaviour of these girls and the raunchy "ladettes" portrayed by the media. This article contends that the current media focus on "mean girls" and "ladettes" does nothing to inform understanding of female aggression but only serves to entertain and titillate a mainly male audience.

SUMMARY

The suggestion of a dramatic increase in the number of girls behaving aggressively is based on perception, and not empirical data. This perception is influenced by a range of factors including the historical denial of female aggression and the sensational manner in which the various media currently represent adolescent females (Ringrose, 2006). Relational aggression has been identified as a gender-specific form of violence and has spawned a whole industry of films, publications and parental support groups for a predominantly white, middle-class audience (Ringrose, 2006). Reported incidences in the number of young women convicted for crimes of violence have increased, but, for a number of reasons already discussed, are unreliable as a gauge of the actual increase in incidence. What is apparent is that the circumstances that have been identified as likely to correspond with adolescent female aggression have become more problematic. Puberty is the time when serious aggression is most evident in females and this is occurring at an increasingly early age (Gluckman & Hanson, 2006), increasing the potential gap between physical maturity and the cognitive ability to make sensible decisions. Alcohol abuse is another major contributing factor and several studies report an increase in hospital admissions of girls as young as 13 for alcohol poisoning (Needham, 2005; Quigley, 2007). This issue has become particularly noticeable since the lowering of the drinking age and the introduction of sweet "alco-pops". Party pills and the easy availability of cannabis in New Zealand exacerbate this issue. The physical changes that occur at puberty conspire to make girls look older than they are, increasing the differences between them and their age peers. It also increases the opportunity for access to drugs and alcohol and the likelihood that girls will become involved in relationships with older males; another indicator for aggressive behaviour. As Moffitt et al., (2001) state, 'the social stimulus consequences of females' puberty for their peer relationships, the opportunities and contextual motivations that promote illicit activities surrounding drugs and alcohol, and the special situation of abusive intimate relationships and assortatively mated offender relationships are of key importance' (p. 405).

For most young people, adolescence is a time of optimum health, fitness and energy as well as emerging intellectual capability, and these individuals maintain close and warm relationships with their parents (Dahl, 2003; Gross, 1996; Lerner, 2002). However, young people who already experience risk factors for aggression when they begin puberty, those for whom there is a wide gap between

their physical and sexual maturity and their cognitive development (Lerner, 2002; Moffitt et al., 2001) and those for whom the combination of developmental factors occurs simultaneously are more vulnerable (Leschied et al., 2000). It is this relatively small group of at-risk young women that contributes to the 'soaring rates of serious accidents, suicide, homicide, aggression and violence, use of alcohol and drugs, emotional disorders and health consequences of risky sexual behaviour' (Dahl, 2003, p. 17).

As previously mentioned, the prognosis for young women who behave aggressively is grim and it is more likely to be grim for their offspring and so on into the next generation. Earlier identification and intervention for such young women may help to break the cycle of aggressive behaviour because 'Avoiding the issue of women's violence represents as much of a threat as we previously felt talking about it did' (Miller, 2000, p. 7). Helping teachers and other authority figures to recognise and understand the particular circumstances of young women at risk of seriously aggressive behaviour is the first step. Keeping these girls in school and offering early intervention and support to them and their families, may help avoid the ongoing cycle of aggression and abuse.

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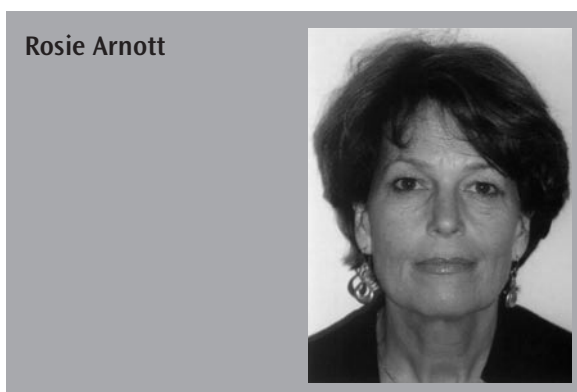
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RELEVANT WEBSITES

- <http://www.batteredmen.com>
<http://www.dana.org/cerebrum>
<http://www.gla.ac.uk/girlsandviolence/publications.htm>

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